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WRITING HISTORY:

NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ANDRÉ BRINK'S POST-APARTHEID FICTION

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor

aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam

op gezag van de Rector Magnificus

prof. dr. D. C. van den Boom

ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties ingestelde
commissie, in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Aula der Universiteit

op woensdag 28 oktober 2009, te 10:00 uur

door Saskia Theodora Lourens

geboren te Port Elizabeth, Zuid Afrika

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Saskia Lourens

20 August 2009

Introduction: Remembering and Forgetting in Present-day South Africa

“What is this thing you call a book?”

“It is a man’s life.”

“You can eat it?”

“You can do nothing with it.”

On the Contrary (352)

While growing up in South Africa during the final years of Apartheid,¹ nothing struck me quite as much as the tortuous relationship that South Africans had with their national identity. In spite of all the weekly flag ceremonies and daily sessions of singing the national anthem enforced at schools, the people surrounding me seemed discomfited and jittery about being South African, more than they were comfortable with it. When I began my studies in English literature at the University of Cape Town in the early 1990s, I, too, found myself wanting to avoid all things “South African,” as I was less interested in the literature written in South Africa than in the work that came from Great Britain. Held up to be an example as the “motherland,” the one true authority on the English language and the sovereign of our commonwealth, anything from Great Britain (or from anywhere else “overseas,” for that matter), was thought to be vastly superior to what our own country, at the “butt-end of Africa,” as nineteenth-century South African poet Joseph Campbell so eloquently put it, could produce. This inculcated sense of discomfort and inadequacy exhibited by white (English-speaking) South Africans was paradoxically accompanied by an unwavering feeling of entitlement, a complicated identity whose complexity (and irony) I only began to appreciate after I moved away from South Africa in 1997. Once I became intrigued by the conundrum of South African identity, however, it never left my mind, aware as I was that it would always influence the way I think about myself, in the same way that it makes an impact on the way that South Africa is represented, and continues to represent itself, today.

Remembering and Forgetting in Present-day South Africa

Ironically, the uneasiness of identity constructions noticeable within South African societies appears today to be a direct result of earnest attempts at stabilising these under apartheid. Under the regime of apartheid, South African races were classified and stratified according to a hierarchical scheme. All identity was presented as distinct and immutable.

The narrative recorded by the country’s ruling minority was endorsed as the official history of the nation and naturally excluded the experiences and histories of a large section of the South

¹ I was born in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in 1975, one year before the Sharpeville riots, and lived there during the mid-eighties, when the State of Emergency was declared (1985), and the early nineties, when the referendum was held (1990) that, aside from a breakout of violence, also launched the interregnum government and, eventually, made way for the first free and democratic elections on 27th and 28th of April 1994, in which I voted for the first time in my life.

African population. With the collapse of the apartheid regime from 1990 onwards, South Africans had to uncover the hidden history of their population and forge a new national identity out of this. In his article, “The Problem of Identity: South Africa, Storytelling, and Literary History”, Michael Chapman defines the issue as follows:

there is...a need in societies of sharp inequalities for a humanism of reconstruction, in which damaged identities are reassembled, silenced voices given speech, and causes rooted close to home in the priorities of the local scene examining itself as it examines its relations to any international counterpart. (93)

Chapman’s “humanism of reconstruction” points to a solution for the divisions within South Africa that complements, if not surpasses, the implementation of appropriate judicial measures by means of a “narrative” with which all South Africans can identify. A paragraph later, however, he recognises that this need for self-critique and analysis as a way to “fill out” the picture of what comprises South African identity involves only one side of the predicament. The other consists of the attendance to what he calls “a hermeneutics of suspicion,” which mistrusts any and all attempts to define, and thereby dictate, what national identity should look like in post-apartheid South Africa.

Especially in light of the complicated history of identity construction, a summary superimposition of characteristics or experiences that pretend to comprehensiveness disregards the anguish of division wrought by a system of rigorous classification. The mission of critiquing a trouble-free semblance of unity Chapman sees as the more important task of literature. I would like to argue that this uneasy alignment between reconstructive and deconstructive impulses within South African historiography and literature distinguishes the works I have undertaken to study, and makes them worthy of contemplation in the context of considering South African identities. The official dissolution of imposed segregation has deep implications for the maintenance of social identity and the creation of a new sense of community among South Africans. For this reason, my study will examine questions of identity and community in post-apartheid South Africa and will consider the ways in which history and memory are mobilised as means of accessing a new and inclusive identity for the divided population.

The historic change that took place in South Africa in the last decade of the twentieth century has made issues of national identity and history topical in both a South African and a larger, international context. To paraphrase the Afrikaans poet and journalist Antjie Krog: South Africa’s past has become front-page news. Krog dedicated an entire novel to the workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which convened from 1995 to 1996 and formed part of the official attempt to reconcile South Africa’s past with its new national identity. The TRC encouraged

people who suffered the atrocities of the Apartheid system to tell their story in a public setting. The perpetrators of Apartheid rule who were accused during these narratives were also asked to come forward and give their account of past events. In this way, the Government of National Unity hoped to empower the narrators by allowing them to reclaim their past and ask for retribution for wrongdoings. The Government justified the establishment of the TRC by identifying it as a collective aid to South Africans who needed to come to terms with the country's past in order to progress to the future, and, in the process, re-establish their identity as South African. As an initiative that emphasised the importance of a national identity based on the sharing of narratives of experience, the concerns of the TRC were closely aligned to those of the country's writers.²

Much of South Africa's literary output can be said to parallel the procedures of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in attempting to accomplish a "reconciliation" as well, but not (only) between the country's different social or political factions, but, also between each person and their position in relation to the imaginings of the nation of South Africa as a whole. By confronting the process of telling stories it may be possible to read the features that are taken as typical of the postcolonial, postmodern novel, such as their a-chronology and deliberate inaccuracy and contradiction, in terms of a purposeful repositioning or even reshuffling of individual and national histories, so that the one no longer needs to exclude or displace the other. In order to launch this confrontation, it may be helpful to determine which of the aims and procedures of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, held between 1996 and 1998, can be characterised as useful for such an understanding.

"This land was told into existence": The Role of Literature

Creating a dialogue with the past, that is, engaging the past not by trying to reproduce, correct or improve it but by means of challenge and provocation, appears to be the aim of both the TRC and Brink's (post-1990) novels. The procedures of the TRC, although much contested and critiqued for being insufficient in achieving what it set out to achieve, namely the "healing" of a nation, had a unique status. The hearings concerned themselves with the stories of individuals that could be told and, perhaps more importantly, could be heard without restriction or requirement from "above." By viewing the Commission as an initiative that narrativised and revised personal and national histories, it can be considered a qualified success. Some South African writers have regarded the

² Many critical studies have been written on the effects of the TRC. See, for example, the edited volumes by Posel and Simpson (*Commissioning the Past*, 2002); Wilmot and Van de Vijver (*After the TRC*, 2000) and Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd (*Looking Back*, 2000) for some excellent treatments, both positive and negative. The inevitable creation of a South African community in terms of the "community-as-object," aware of its united identity in the face of media scrutiny from around the world, made for an interesting side-effect of this initiative. For an in-depth analysis of the implications of such community formation outside of a specifically South African context, see, for example, Laine 2007, especially 65-76.

official measures to achieve national reconciliation based on respect for the historical record as inadequate by themselves, and have taken up the challenge of expanding on them (Kok in Nuttall & Coetzee 58).

When being interviewed as a candidate for the TRC, poet and playwright Adam Small, for example, expressed his doubts with regard to the efficacy of the committee's methods: "Only literature can perform the miracle of reconciliation" (Krog 18). André Brink phrases his reservations about public healing by suggesting that "unless the enquiries of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are extended, complicated, and intensified in the imaginings of literature, society cannot sufficiently come to terms with its past to face the future" (Nuttall & Coetzee 30). Literature is the medium in which the debate on the role of history for formulating a cultural identity will be sustained most productively. Precisely because the utilisation of memory and history in South Africa's literature reflects that used by the country's cultural and political initiatives, I believe an examination of contemporary literature contributes to the debate in a significant way.

The current belief that the narration of experience contributes to the restoration of a sense of self in society is widely and variously discussed. In *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*, Nicola King proposes that, in most narrative accounts, "the 'I' of the present has been constructed out of, but also continues to rewrite, the 'I' of the past" (2000: 40). The construction of identity out of narrative serves to explain the self to oneself, as well as to others, by conferring meaning on experience that creates a bridge from the past self to the present self. In the mid-twentieth century, French psycho-analyst Jacques Lacan identified a split between the self who tells the story and the self who is presented in the story (as found in *Death and Desire*). This bequeaths all speakers with an identity that is of necessity discontinuous. By incorporating later knowledge into a (reconstructed) past, a sense of continuity is created between the self of the present and the self of the past, which is necessary to our survival because it creates a continuous identity. In this way, narrative plays a central role in (subconsciously) sustaining our sense of self.

It is not by coincidence that South Africa's writers in particular have taken up the debate surrounding a new and inclusive cultural identity for the nation. The professional regard that writers feel for language and storytelling qualifies them to examine aspects of a nation's narratives as a comprehensive expression of its cultural identities. At the same time, the medium of literature is particularly well suited to tangling with complex social discourses. Martin Trump, in his introduction to *Rendering Things Visible*, postulates that "[l]iterary works and their study offer particularly complex ways of describing society," because "...[t]he hybrid, polysemic discourse of literature includes and might even be said to enlarge the epistemological realm of other discourses" (1990: x).

In addition, the heterogeneous nature of the novel makes it a suitable medium to represent the gaps, silences and dislocations experienced by the restrained subjects of an oppressive government, a fact to which a number of post-colonial novelists have attested. African-American author Toni Morrison claims that “the consequences of slavery only artists can deal with” (King, 2000: 153), suggesting that the reintegration of history into society be achieved more successfully by the imaginings of literature than by other channels. It is in the literature of André Brink that I choose to trace the meanders of these attempts.

Looking on South Africa: André Brink

André Brink’s work provides an apt example of the way in which social and political values are represented in South African culture. Not only is Brink a critical author who has written extensively on the significant political role of literature in both the “old” and the “new” South Africa, but one of his earliest novels played a substantial role in the opposition to apartheid.³

His 1974 *Looking on Darkness* (originally published in 1973 as *Kennis van die Aand*) is a novel ostensibly about the forbidden love between a “coloured” theatre-producer and a “white” literary scholar, and had the dubious distinction of being the first novel in Afrikaans to be censored by the country’s Publications Advisory Board. Much critique has been levelled at this work, ranging from accusations that it was “too political” and not literary enough, to claims that it was not sufficiently political.⁴ Regardless of this, the way in which this work engages with the South African political context asserts a role for literature as participant in the country’s power debate. For this reason, I feel it may be informative to use this watershed novel as a prism through which the motifs and images in later novels can be seen, in order to study the difference in the pre- and post-1991 conceptualisations of South African national identity.

Several themes touched upon in Brink’s early novel *Looking on Darkness* return in his later works. *Looking on Darkness* is characterized as a typical “early” work of Brink’s, marked by a head-on confrontation with the injustices of the apartheid system on the one hand and a fascination with existentialist ideas of finding freedom, while fully acknowledging the hopelessness of this desire, on the other.⁵ The figure of the tragic (or even “absurd”) hero desperately opposing a totalitarian force that this and other early novels established, was abandoned in Brink’s later novels

³ “Old” and “new” has come to stand for “pre-” and “Post-Apartheid” South Africa in the national imaginary. The introduction of Attridge and Jolly’s *Writing South Africa* makes mention of the importance of Brink’s contribution in this context, as does Nuttall and Coetzee’s *Negotiating the Past* (both published in 1998).

⁴ See, for example, Nadine Gordimer’s discussion in “English-Language Literature and Politics in South Africa” in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2. (Apr., 1976). 131-50.

⁵ This tendency of Brink’s early novels to idealize a resignation to the hopelessness of fighting a totalitarian system has been subject to much criticism. See, for example, Isidore Diala.

in favour of figures who were less straightforward in their interaction with their South African context.⁶

Joseph Malan, the coloured protagonist in Brink's famously-banned work, confident enough as he is imprisoned and awaits the death-sentence after a long career of opposing the country's censors, asserts that he has arrived (and remained) at "a final, possible glimpse of truth" (8). Through his commitment to the South African situation, Malan is able to bear any hardship that the oppressive government subjects him to, because he perceives himself as answerable to a higher, moral authority that supersedes the transience and ignobleness of the apartheid machine. At the same time, there is a split in his perception of "South Africa" as a state that is oppressive and keeps its people segregated; and as a country whose almost-sublime geography binds people together as "true" South Africans in their participation of the "South African experience." This frequent split in conceptualising South Africa by Brink's protagonists, I argue, is what gives rise both to their feelings of alienation from the country and their determination to belong. On the one hand, the practices of repression in the colonial- and apartheid-eras fosters an attitude of renunciation, whilst, on the other, the inherent "magic" of the country makes it impossible to disown. The duality inherent in national identification with which Brink's characters struggle, is engaged differently in each of his works. The reverential attitude towards South Africa as a land fosters, for example, the Gothic sensibility of the sublime. This link with the Gothic in perceptions of the individual's place within the landscape in Brink's *Imaginations of Sand* will be more fully explored in chapter two.

The difference between the two conceptions of South Africa with respect to language in *Looking on Darkness*, makes use of a Nietzschean distinction between the conceptualisation of a culture as a system of codes and as a collection of aphorisms.⁷ Aphorisms represent the "wisdom" of lived experience rather than (book) "knowledge"; and they oppose the longevity of understanding gained from practice to the fleetingness of imposed (and thus unnatural) laws. The opposition between the two, in which the former ultimately, and romantically, gains the upper hand, plays a central role in Brink's *Rights of Desire* (2000), which I will discuss in chapter five. Malan, in Brink's pivotal resistance novel, sees a different conceptualisation of the use for language as a "code." The phrase "on the contrary notwithstanding" that closes the novel expresses resistance as

⁶ "Absurd" refers here to Camus's conceptualization of the resigned hero as one who is not so much resigned as exhilarated at finding purpose and strength in ostensible meaninglessness. In his "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1955, from the French "Le Mythe de Sisyphe" published in 1942), Camus discusses in the final chapter how Sisyphus is a hero that is absurd, in the sense that he is dedicated to a hopeless undertaking, yet nevertheless content, because "[h]is fate belongs to him." Sisyphus, Camus states, realises that "[t]he struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart," and that therefore "[o]ne must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123).

⁷ In *Human, All too Human* (1878), Nietzsche makes use of the aphorism as a means of critique for the first time, a method he subsequently adopted in many of his later works. For Nietzsche, the aphorism, as a one-off that does not operate by means of classifying and fitting in with existing categories of thought, could point to new ways of thinking instead of building on existing thought patterns. For an enlightening account of Nietzsche's use of aphorisms, see Daniel Fidel Ferrer's *Philosophical Aphorisms* (2004).

well as relishes the beauty of words. This delight carries political implications, as a common interpretation sees it as making a case for oppression and censorship as finite, and art as enduring. Literature is given the burden of reinforcing the durability of the human spirit, even in the face of physical persecution. This juncture of aesthetic delight in language with an awareness of its (politically) liberating qualities returns in Brink's 1993 *On the Contrary*, which, in a way, takes Malan's departing phrase as its starting point and runs off with it, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter one.

Delight (and faith) in language, particularly in literary language, recurs in all the post-1991 works that I focus on in this study. The forthright assurance of conviction evident in Brink's early heroes, however, is absent in all of Brink's subsequent protagonists. *On the Contrary*'s Barbier is a self-confessed colonial liar and opportunist. Kristien and Ouma Kristina in *Imaginings of Sand* are equally uncomfortable in laying claim to the role of "rightful heirs" to the land, and, instead, frame their perception of themselves as "true South Africans" as the assumption of a Gothic anxiety and uncertainty. Similarly, *Devil's Valley*'s Phillip Lochner is portrayed as outright stubborn in his refusal to endorse his rights to a South African identity by painting an overly flattering picture of himself, and Ruben of *The Rights of Desire* abdicates all significance by losing himself in citations while criticizing this practice for being spiritless. It is maybe only with *The First Life of Adamastor*'s T'kama, or the Cupido Cockroach of *Praying Mantis*, that a Brink protagonist is represented as confident in his South African identity. Intriguing in this regard is the noticeable distinction between these and the less self-assured protagonists with regard to their racial identification. T'kama and Cupido are Khoi characters, and their ethnicity appears, at least, to safeguard them from supersedence by other interest groups present in South Africa. The way in which the question of national identification is problematised in all non-Khoi characters, however, in both these and the other works, suggests that it is not simply the question of origin and primacy that is implicated in here. One larger element that is involved is the relationship between South African "authority" (whether it be the colonial administration or the Apartheid government) and the South African individual. It is this arduous relationship in particular that is explored over the course of Brink's prolific literary career.

J. M. Coetzee, in his essay on Brink in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (1996), identifies the difference between Brink's early and later literary responses to government control as a move from the antagonistic to the dialogical (205). In the first model, so Coetzee argues, the oppressive state is depicted as an insurmountable evil force, against which the literary hero is inevitably powerless but morally victorious. The "greater power" of the moral high occupied by the hero is represented as lasting but ultimately materially useless. Isidore Diala, in an article on Brink's use of the "tragic" in his early works, concurs with Coetzee's analysis, and relates the sense

of triumph that is nevertheless reached at the end of novels such as *Looking on Darkness* to the “exhilarating optimism of tragedy” (2003)⁸ Diala appears to conflate this sense of the “tragic” with that of Camus’ absurd hero, who revels in the insight that the meaninglessness of life makes for better living. His critique of this conception of the hero opposing apartheid as a tragic one, lies with its perpetuation of the idea that the apartheid system is precisely that: a “system” that is impersonal, and therefore blameless, and unyielding, and therefore invincible. The only victory in this scenario is a moral victory, and all hope for political change is negated.

Both Coetzee and Diala perceive a difference in the way the South African situation is framed in Brink’s earlier and later works. In *On the Contrary*, the first novel published under the country’s interregnum government, Brink’s concern is still with the silences inherent in South Africa’s texts, but now he looks at the tension that exists between what is said and what has been left out. In his article in Attridge and Jolly’s 1998 publication *Writing South Africa: Literature, apartheid and democracy, 1970-1995*, Brink discusses the silences in the South African master-narrative in terms of what they offer to the South African author:

I recognise the regenerative powers of South African literature: not simply to escape from the inhibitions of apartheid but to construct and deconstruct new possibilities; to activate the imagination in its exploration of those silences previously inaccessible. (27)

“Those silences” refers to those “other forms and ways of living,” that “different kind of reason” that Barbier, in *On the Contrary*, considers employing in trying to make sense of the South African land and its people, acknowledging that existing (Western) modes of reason prove inadequate in describing the South African situation (268).

In both his fictional and theoretical work, Brink advocates a multifarious approach to the past that allows for a re-imagining of history in terms of the perceptions, stories, beliefs and experiences of all South African people. The majority of South Africans witnessed the exclusion of their stories and experiences from the nation’s master-narrative during the apartheid years. Paradoxically, the previous exclusions of the official record has made it possible to freely imagine what could have filled those silences as it has become impossible to recover exactly what has been left out of the country’s history. This negates any obligation to accuracy with regard to historical fact. The silences inherent in the official record embody the potential for allowing these stories to be, not merely re-inserted into the national narrative, but freed from the necessity of fitting in with anyone’s specific idea of truth.

There is no single model narrative that could complete or correct the biased records composed under South Africa’s colonial or apartheid rule. The idea propagated by André Brink, and

⁸ See Isidore Diala’s “André Brink and the Implications of Tragedy for Apartheid South Africa” (2003).

authors like him, is that such correction of the narrative of apartheid should not be the goal of contemporary writers at all. Any new text that is produced should engage with existing texts and interrogate them in an imaginative way, but should not set itself up as a new improved master narrative that would merely repeat the hierarchical ideology of the past, as Chapman warned earlier. In her introduction to *Negotiating the Past*, Sarah Nuttall echoes Chapman in her statement that:

The task of memory should...not be to reconstitute and make whole, a whole which needs to lie about the fracture; instead the task of memory is to reconstitute turbulence and fragmentation (1998: 5).

National identity as cultural artefact: approaching the topic

In analysing the way in which the trajectories of South African identity construction are imagined in Brink's recent works, I make use of the approach of cultural analysis. Cultural analysis takes off from the assumption that the cultural artefacts produced within a community reveal much about the ideologies upheld within that community. A critical reading of such artefacts therefore often provides clues with regard to the inconsistencies of presumptions made by these ideologies. The cultural artefact that I unpack in this study is that of South African identity represented in (a distinct and limited corpus of) South African literature.

In the following chapters, I frame the conceptualisation of South African national identity, and that of "the nation" of South Africa, from the point of departure supplied by Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities: On the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (first published in 1983). This not only because his work has been generally regarded as the standard text on the topic of the nation and nationalism, and his definition of the nation as the one most commonly used when considering these concepts, but precisely because he conceives of the nation *as* a cultural artefact. Anderson often joked in interviews that he was probably the only person writing about nationalism who did not think it was a bad thing. In comparison with numerous critiques that positioned nationalism as an ideology, and therefore a form of aggressive imperialism thinly disguised as nationalist sentiment, Anderson conceives of the nation and of nationalism not as an ideology, but as an experience, or a phenomenon.⁹

By treating South African national identity as a cultural artefact that came about because of certain historical forces, it becomes possible to contribute to a cultural inquiry into its workings by looking at the way that is conceived of in the public imagery. Anderson's conceptualisation of the nation as an "imagined community" frames it in terms of the imagination and, in particular, in terms

⁹ This comes close to the way in which George Orwell thought of nationalism in his famous *Notes on Nationalism* of 1945, where he states that: "The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them – he abandons his moral faculties and places the nation beyond good and evil" (7).

of a public imaginary, as personified in, for example, the print media. The nation is “imagined” in the sense that it is invented - it does not depend on face-to-face contact or even previous acquaintance of others, but functions on an awareness of absent others that nevertheless goes together with a sense of being part of a larger whole. This larger whole has to be imagined because it cannot be perceived through direct experience. The act of imagining, for example in literature or in newspaper discourse, therefore brings the nation into being. In this regard, literary representations of South Africa become more than an expression of national identity and serve as the condition for its existence. For this reason, an inquiry into how South Africa is imagined as a national community simultaneously examines its very existence.

As Mieke Bal explains in the introduction to her *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, revealing something is, at the same time, an act of performance, the putting forward of one’s own argument (2). This puts the subject of the argument on display as much as it does the object, and allows for an investigation into the dialogue held between them. This dialogue, in the form of narrative discourse, is the true subject of my analysis. In my analysis of the various post-1991 novels of André Brink, I do not only look at the image of national identity that they present in terms of the historical or social context in which it is framed, or the feelings that are engendered towards it, but I also examine the structure of the narrative that performs this image.

In using narratology as a tool for analysis, I pay close attention to the narrative’s formal aspects, such as the structure of the narration, its language-use, temporality or spatial indications. In this way, the relationship between what is told and how it is told is laid bare. This makes it possible to interpret the paradoxical correlations between these two layers of the narrative and find out how they operate in investing the text with meanings that exceed its apparent subject. Because stories are strategies that help humans make sense of their world, narratives form an important resource for structuring and comprehending experience. It can therefore be assumed that the study of narrative has a bearing on the study of the cultural and social framework by which lived experience is interpreted.

The conceptualisation of South Africa as a nation takes on a particularly complicated and paradoxical form, and it is easy to detect how difficult it still is for the nation to imagine itself as properly united. In spite of the fact that it could officially be considered a nation from the nineteenth century onwards, the divisions enforced by apartheid saw the subject of a truly united cross-national community only appear in South Africa after the end of apartheid in 1994. This makes for a continued complexity in discourses that imagine a South African national identity, both in the country’s literature and in popular media discourses.

An example is provided by the “start imagining” campaign devised by the First National Bank, as sponsors of the World Cup Soccer that will be hosted in South Africa in 2010. This

campaign gives a telling example of the complexity of imagining South Africa as a community that is not divided. Yet, it appears in a “black” version and a “white” version. One would think this alone defeats the purpose of imagining a joint nation, and clearly shows how “imagining” is taken as working differently for both populations. In one of the clips, the black population is presented with the glorious image of opportunity for success and hope in the future. A little boy is seen signing the soccer ball of a famous soccer player with his own name, handing it back to the soccer star with the promise that his name will be worth a great deal in the future. In the other version, a South African is queuing in an airport and complaining about inefficiency, speculating out loud that an efficient organisation of the World Cup by South Africans will prove impossible. An Australian reprimands him for his negativity and reassures him that, in spite of public misgivings, the Australians managed just fine in organising the Olympics and South Africa may even beat their country at cricket one day. The white segment is offered reassurance that things are not as bad as they fear, and that there may even still be opportunity for enjoying what used to be seen as the national sport (predominantly played by white people), cricket. The by-line of both versions of the advertisement show that the “community” that is imagined does refer to the nation of South Africa (it reads: “help South Africa shine”), but the execution of the clips reveal that South Africa is still not imagined as a joint community.

Nevertheless, I believe it is useful to take Benedict Anderson’s concept of a nation as a starting point, and perceive the nation of South Africa as a political community that is constructed by means of the invisible ties of the imagination and distinguished by the style in which it is imagined more than by its history or demographics. In this way, one can productively question to what extent an analysis of how the history of power struggles inherent in moments of contact shaped these imaginings in the first place, and how it continues to influence our perception of the South African community (Anderson, 6). Anderson fruitfully explores inconsistencies within the concept of nation by insisting on the impossibility of solid and factual descriptions of the nation, and by locating the fundamental condition of possibility for the nation, something he calls the “homogenous empty time” of the nation, within the disorder created by the continuous movements of mass migrations and other changes. Anderson is concerned with the framework of a new consciousness that literature makes possible, providing a paradigm that enables the imagining of a community, rather than with any particularly nationalistic content of specific novels.

A special issue of *Diacritics* published in the Winter of 1999 was dedicated to the implications of Anderson’s work.¹⁰ In this volume, Jonathan Culler, in an article entitled “Anderson and the Novel,” undertakes a challenge of Anderson’s ideas of what activities and imaginings have

¹⁰ I am referring to the *Diacritics* issue 29, volume 4 of the Winter of 1999, entitled “Grounds of Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson” by special editors Pheng Cheah and Jonathan Culler.

gone into the creation of nations in their present-day form. He focuses on three aspects of the novel which he identifies as important in Anderson's theory: the formal structure of narrative point of view, the national content of fictions and the construction of the reader (22).

The exterior narrative point of view, which supplies the idea of the synchronicity of events, was, for Anderson, the most important analogy between the novel and the nation in terms of their similar creation of a world of simultaneous events in the understanding of the reader. Culler notes, however, that this contradicts Anderson's discussion of particular novels. These do not really represent analogues of the nation, but fuse the world of the novel with that of the reader in a representation of its social space (23). Critiques of Anderson's theory that rest on content seem misguided. The accusation that his vision of the novel as belonging to an anti-imperial national culture ignores the fact that novels have the power to disenfranchise alternative voices within a multi-voiced national narrative.¹¹ Novels that embody the idea of nationness in content include those of star-crossed lovers that represent particular facets of the nation's population that seek to join within the terms of a national community, representing the desire for a nation in which they could possibly come together. These novels, Culler states, "share the project of national reconciliation," the desire to "cast the previously unreconciled parties, races, classes or regions as lovers who are 'naturally' attracted and right for each other" (25). This aspect of imagining the nation I will be looking at in closer detail in the third chapter of this study.

According to both Anderson and Culler, the novel does not hide internal differences within a nation but turns it into a story. Culler believes that Anderson's theory on the way in which time is organised in novels is too general to stand up to scrutiny (25). Homi Bhabha, whose contribution to the debate is also published in *Diacritics*, sees nationness as a form both of "social and textual affiliation": a narrative strategy as well as a tool for power (292). The nation shows itself as narrative at the moment when one becomes aware of the "double-time" that it inhabits: the time of historicity, which lends it authority, and that of modernity, which gives it its contemporary character. An image of "progress" thus fights with that of "timelessness". Bhabha also questions whether a certain sameness is required in order to embody the unity in diversity that the concept of nationhood seems to require and, if so, what the effect is of the effacement of specificity that it requires (296). This also calls up the idea of an authority that enables identification or membership of the nation. As with any ideology, experience and knowledge are generalised. People are contained within a national discourse. From the margins of a society indications of disruption are most clearly seen (302). Within these groups, the struggle inherent in the inevitable double-identity of nationals makes the narrativising or even mythologizing of the nation necessary in order to make

¹¹ For a discussion of this notion, see David Lloyd's article "Nationalisms against the State"(1997).

nationness coherent.¹² The notion of a nation being performed in terms of myth is explored in the last chapter of this work, in which I discuss the impact that such a performance of a national myth has on the relegation of certain populations to its margins.

Bhabha also takes Anderson's idea of homogenous empty time to task for ignoring the presence of what he calls an "all at once" time of the sign, which in its arbitrariness signifies disruption and breaks through Anderson's "meanwhile" as lived by numerous anonymous lives. The "all at once" is performative and embodies a will to nationhood. This will to nationness is what Bhabha sees as unifying historical memory by joint consent, as exemplified in Anderson's acts of "national forgetting". Anderson's theory on the necessity of forgetting is elaborated on in his second edition of *Imagined Communities*, in a chapter entitled "Memory and Forgetting". Anderson recognises that some "national" tragedies, such as Saint Bartholomew's for the French, need to be forgotten in order for a sense of community to exist. Bhabha, in *Nation and Narration*, comments on Anderson's supposition that this act of forgetting constitutes a performance of communal amnesia by stating that "[t]o be obliged to forget – in the construction of the national present – is not a question of historical memory; it is the construction of a discourse on society that performs the problematic totalization of the national will" (311). Both in chapter four, which analyses Brink's *Devil's Valley*, and chapter five of this study, which deals with *The Rights of Desire*, such attempts at (voluntary or enforced) forgetting take centre stage. The problematic inherent in national identification that result from forgetting, is something that I will unpack further in all the chapters that follow. With the help of such an analysis, and an examination of the use and understanding of the role of language in transforming a sense of South African identity, the chapters combined will strive towards a conception of post-apartheid identity as imagined in Brink's fiction.

Please note that the use of racial categories such as "white", "black" and "coloured" in this discussion, while they appear to reflect those instituted by the South African government under apartheid, do not imply approval of such classifications. Rather, they reflect the continued use of such classifications both as a matter of expedience, and as a strategy for addressing the imbalances of the past by refusing to subsume them within inadequate generic misnomers that ignore the fact of their past imposition.

¹² In his "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation" published in *Nation and Narration* (1990), Homi Bhabha discusses the social structures and hierarchies that operate within the modern nation-states and are produced in narrativising the nation from the standpoint of those on the periphery (291). Like Anderson, Bhabha focuses on the way in which the nation is imagined in order to oppose the presumption of objectivity in historiographical accounts of the nation.

Chapter 1: *On the Contrary* and the Impossibility of Text

“There is so much darkness in the people of this land. Can it be that the light is too hard for them, forcing each to retreat into himself?”¹³

André Brink *On the Contrary* (88)

The quote above, from the pen of Estienne Barbier, the central narrator and focaliser in André Brink’s 1993 *On the Contrary*, raises numerous questions concerning South African identity. Who does Barbier, a Frenchman newly arrived at the Cape Colony of the eighteenth century, regard as “the people of this land”? Why does he see a problematic “darkness” in these people, and why does he attribute this to the peculiarities of South African light? And what is the significance of Barbier’s accreditation of the land with possession of its people (if “of” is read as a possessive) when it is usually the other way around? Questions like these, which pertain to the nature of and criteria for national identity, have been complicated ever since the franchise was secured for all citizens of South Africa in 1994.¹⁴

On the Contrary, like many of Brink’s previous works, engages with the problem of South African national identity. Unlike his works published before 1990, however, this and subsequent novels express the potential for an entirely new conception of “South Africans.”¹⁵ Isidore Diala, in his 2003 article “André Brink and the Implications of Tragedy for Apartheid South Africa,” attributes this transformation in Brink’s work to his abandonment of the aesthetics of “tragedy” after the fall of apartheid. According to Diala, Brink’s apartheid-era protagonists were represented as tragic heroes fighting an invincible and inherently evil system that was depersonalised to the extent that both the apportionment of blame and the potential of prevailing were ruled out (903). In an interview held with Baghat Elnadi and Aadel Rifaat in 1993, Brink acknowledged that the end of apartheid opened his work up to the possibilities of a more “playful” exploration of identity. This no longer needed to take place in the context of a direct (and ultimately hopeless) individual opposition to a larger force, but could start the process of affirming and imagining “South African-ness” instead (8).

Following Diala, I argue that Brink’s post-1990 works represent the relationship between the individual and the state in a more dialogical manner in imagining a South African identity. This replacement of interrogation with dialogue seems to resist an unequivocal and straightforward interpretation. Instead, the way is opened for a reading of these works in terms of cultural analysis, examining and understanding representations as a performance of culture.

¹³ All page numbers in this chapter, unless stated otherwise, refer to: André Brink’s *On the Contrary* (London: Secker & Warburg), 1993.

¹⁴ See, for example, articles by Michael Chapman (1998) and W. James Booth (1999) on this topic.

¹⁵ I (and many others with me) use 1990, the year in which the ANC was unbanned and Nelson Mandela released from prison, as a watershed date that marks the beginning of the end of Apartheid.

In her 1996 work *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, Mieke Bal proposes that cultural analysis is informed by what the subject of inquiry contributes to the object under investigation (289). For this reason, it is important to acknowledge that the object of any investigation will be inevitably “contaminated” by the subject that it is investigating. Bal goes on to suggest that the most productive way to analyse a cultural object, therefore, is to go beyond the assumptions made about the object and let it raise issues for itself via the indicators that seem to unbalance the logic at the core of its ideology (293). Brink’s *On the Contrary* makes numerous references to the systems of logic that are at the heart of eighteenth century colonialism in South Africa. Patterns of imagery or behaviour consistent with western, and particularly colonial, thought can be traced clearly throughout Barbier’s narrative. They create the backdrop for what I consider to be the novel’s central proposition, that identity formation is dialogical in nature, and that it comprises an unceasing cycle of usurping and abdicating authority. If Bal’s method of investigating that which is deviant or unsettling in order to arrive at a productive analysis of a cultural object is to be applied to Brink’s novel, it is Barbier’s contrary remarks and not the novel’s consistent patterns that ought to be examined. For the sake of clarity, however, I will first turn towards the systematic representations of colonial perception in the novel. By weighing the one against the other, the different conceptions of “authority” explored within the novel can be related to a transformation in the conception of South African national identity.

In this chapter I will interrogate the concept of authority in the narrative of *On the Contrary* with regard to the implicit connections it makes between language and authority, and the narration of identity and race. The interdependence between language and authority (also evident in the problematic relationship that exists between naming and power) emphasises the impossibility of a complete and consistent narrative. This is a characteristic of narrative about which Brink’s narrator, at first, appears to be concerned but which he ultimately recognises as an asset.

In the sections below, I first examine authority in relation to the novel’s narrative format. By looking at the narrator’s perception of himself as an authority and at the way in which he positions himself within the story, I unravel the connection between reliability and authority and relate it to a specific understanding of identity. Subsequently, I take a look at the narrator’s representation of “the other” and examine the extent to which his perception of himself is dependent on identification with, and separation from, this other. Lastly, I place the struggle for authority over identity formation in the context of a conception of “the land” as ultimate authority. Such an exploration of the novel’s opposition between self-narration, the narration of the other and, finally, the inescapable fate of being narrated within the context of the language and authority of the land, will hopefully demonstrate how Brink’s narrator moves towards the realisation that all identity is defined not by the self or by an overbearing other but, instead, by the relations between the various identities.

“A contrary life”: the narrator’s authority

On The Contrary is André Brink’s eleventh English novel and was published in 1993, a year before South Africa’s first free and democratic elections and three years after the revocation of a number of apartheid laws and the commencement of preparations for an interim government. The changes occurring in South Africa at this time and the ensuing debates with regard to the reconstruction of national identity have clearly informed Brink’s eighteenth-century story. Current discussions about the extent to which a country’s texts (for example, its constitution and its history) can and should be rewritten, are explored and developed in Barbier’s narrative. The format of the narrative and the conception of its narrative authority as inconsistent, clearly invites careful consideration of the inevitably subjective nature of text.

Before examining the representation of textual authority in this work, I briefly relate the main outline of the story. Then, I examine the representations of language in Barbier’s narrative, which appear to oppose the inadequacies of official colonial terminology to the possibilities of fantasies, fictions and memories, in relating to the South African landscape. After this I examine some examples through a close reading of a number of the novel’s episodes concerned with representing others, and with expressing one’s own position in relation to foreign people and places, an expression which appears to necessitate “a different kind of reason” (268). I conclude by returning to the role of language and propose that an acknowledgement of interconnectedness between people and places, and between people among themselves, plays a large role in transforming the adoption of “a different kind of reason” into national identification.

Brink’s novel opens on Barbier as he is incarcerated in the Dark Hole of the castle at the Cape of Good Hope in the year 1739, and ends with his execution in that same year. The intervening pages consist of Barbier’s account of how he came to be imprisoned in the Cape castle. The bulk of his account centres on three journeys that he makes into the interior of South Africa before he is imprisoned. In the lengthy “Part the First” (as it is called) Barbier joins a group of colonial officials on an expedition to the hinterland to map and measure the regions unknown to the colonials. On this first journey he meets Rosetta, a slave woman who is part of the expedition. Although his contact with this woman is minimal and appears insignificant, Barbier’s subsequent narrative is addressed almost entirely to her. In the shorter “Part the Second” of the novel, Barbier joins a group of befriended Afrikaner farmers who journey into the country to trade for cattle with the native tribes of South Africa. The final and briefest “Part the Third” of *On the Contrary* sees Barbier, an outlaw at this time, resume his trek into the interior by himself. This time his reason is more nonmaterial: he is trying to find Rosetta and, with her, to seek redemption for all the damage that has been done to the country in the name of colonial advancement. Interwoven with the account

of these expeditions are Barbier's stories about his youth in France, his tales of womanising on the European continent and in the colony, and his chronicling of the legal proceedings initiated against him in the colony.

The narrative of *On the Contrary* is presented in the form of an extended letter composed by Estienne Barbier, who is described by the subtitle of Brink's novel as "a famous rebel, soldier, traveller, explorer, reader, builder, scribe, latinist, lover and liar". If the epistolary format of the narrative does not tip off the reader to the obviously subjective, and therefore fallible, nature of the narrated account, then the description of its central narrator as "liar" would appear to fulfil that task. There are also repeated declarations with regard to the impossibility of the letter in question, an impossibility with which the reader is confronted in the narrative. Barbier's account has the feel of a letter in terms of both content and appearance. The format of the text sees a mention of the place of writing at the top right hand side of the opening page, as well as a salutatory use of the words "Lectori Salutem" that heads the first chapter, and a hand-written signature at its end, prefaced by the words "[c]oncluding herewith, and persisting in the same, imploring the noble benignum officium judicis, exhibitum in juditio" (373). The body of the letter is easily perceived as personal correspondence due to the numerous personal interjections Barbier directs at his ostensible addressee, Rosette. "I address myself, Rosette, to you" (3), Barbier clarifies in the opening pages of the novel. Sporadically he returns to addressing Rosette in statements such as: "at last, Rosette, I could begin to trace your steps into the interior" (98), and "Rosette, Rosette. What have I done, what was I going to do?" (144). He even asks her questions, in the knowledge that they will never be answered: "Who in God's abused name first called you 'Rosette'?" he asks, "...[d]o you have a real name?" (5). The format of the letter is undercut, however, by Barbier's subsequent attestation to the unfeasibility of such a letter. The reliability of the letter is therefore questionable, both in terms of its existence and in terms of the trustworthiness of its narrator.

The presence of an "I" telling a story immediately warns readers that all experience described in that story is filtered through the subjective perception of this "I". In spite of this, however, the epistolary format also gives the reader the impression of instant access to a narrator's "true" nature. In his standard work on literary criticism, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983), Wayne Booth states that "...a prolonged intimate view of a character works against our capacity for judgement" (322); where "our" refers to the reader's judgement. In spite of the inconsistencies and impossibilities that are present in Barbier's narrative, the feeling of being given an insight into his reality serves to justify that reality to the reader or at least make it appear sympathetic. A reader is likely to expect the narrative to provide a redeeming insight or perception regardless of the narrator's obvious lack of credibility.

In the classification that Booth employs, Barbier is both a “narrator-agent,” who has an effect on the course of events that are narrated, and a “dramatized narrator,” who is himself a character in the novel. In addition to this, he is what Booth calls a “self-conscious narrator,” who is aware of himself as a writer. Like Booth, I am interested in how these narrator positions reflect on the perceptual qualities of the narrator and of the narrative of *On the Contrary* rather than in literary technicalities in and of themselves. Barbier’s position as a narrator who is the hero of his own story and, simultaneously, aware of his power as the author of that story, influences the tale he is telling us.

The bulk of the novel consists of fabricated events and dialogues through which the author responds imaginatively to the enticement represented by the silences and blanks in official texts. Barbier’s letter, his address to Rosette, is established from the onset of the novel as an impossibility. Barbier’s prison is dark and he has no pen or paper with which to write. The opening line of his narrative is: “I am dead: you cannot read: this will (therefore) not have been a letter” (3). The peculiarity of the statement, with its combination of tenses and obvious incongruity, characterises the rest of Barbier’s narrative, which is filled with contradictions and impossibilities. These contradictions remind the reader again and again that a text is never objective or comprehensive. In spite of the fact that Barbier constantly changes his story and admits to telling lies in his narrative, he is not what Booth would classify as an unreliable narrator. According to *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, an unreliable narrator is one who does not speak for or act “in accordance with the norms of the work” (158-159). Although Brink’s novel is set in the eighteenth century, the norms of the work approach those of contemporary South Africa. Barbier appears to fit the role of the non-African inhabitant of South Africa who both criticises the “colonial” (or read: apartheid) system and is complicit with it. In this way Barbier functions as a convenient catalyst that allows Brink to tackle the relationship that exists between language and power.

Barbier, as the “self-conscious narrator” of Brink’s *On the Contrary*, appears to empower himself by appropriating the task of narrating and defining both the self and the other. This attempt at empowerment is eventually opposed by his inability to define either himself or others as he is forced to take on the passive role of follower of the South African narrative. In this way the novel expresses a post-colonial concern with the crisis of (national) identity.¹⁶ Its narrating protagonist, Barbier, is the perfect postmodern example of an identity continuously under construction and constantly at odds with itself. This is illustrated most clearly by the inconsistencies of Barbier’s narrative. On narrating his arrival at the Cape, Barbier variously refers to being welcomed by “No less a luminary than the governor . . . , [because] I was a very important person, having been dispatched as their personal representative by the Lords Seventeen” (5), and to being “a stowaway,

¹⁶ For a discussion of the features of this crisis, see Ashcroft, et al: 1994, 9.

crouching under the tarpaulin" (62), who was too "sick unto death" (77) even to be "aware of our arrival in Table Bay" (57). Considering Barbier's assertion that "only by allowing the possibility of the lie ... can [we] grope... towards what really happened, may yet happen" (27), however, it can be argued that Barbier's multiple stories serve as an attempt to construct different identities for himself to help him cope with the different roles and positions imposed on him by the dominant discourse. This authorisation of various imagined versions of events stands in direct opposition to South Africa's official history which, as all history, comprises the story of the victors and excludes the viewpoints of individuals on the margins.

It is difficult for the reader to understand Barbier's stories. In telling his life story, Barbier creates an identity in the process of changing as he invests his experiences with meaning through different versions of the same events. According to Nicola King, developing a personal history is of great importance for the culture in which one lives. Self-definition organises the subject's knowledge of herself and explains who she is, pointing to the empowering qualities of narrative and the ability to control identity through the use of narrative. King warns, however, that "the construction of the self is a provisional and continuous process," which makes it impossible for a single version of one's life story to contain the truths of all of one's various experiences (17). Barbier shows his awareness of the power to create identity and life for himself through his incessant recreation of the experiences that befall him. The reader is not asked to take any of the "stories" that Barbier offers as an explanation for how he came to be the way he is as the ultimate truth, least of all by Barbier himself. "I think that it does not little contribute to the discovery of truth in a history to know the temperament of the man who wrote it"(27), Barbier admits to his reader, through his internal reader, the slave woman Rosette. This assertion puts forward not only the proposition that history and narrative are unstable and therefore undependable, but also that the identity of its narrator or narrators is inevitably inconstant as well. Barbier bears out the instability of identity in his narrative by means of his manifold characterisation of himself.

Barbier's temperament appears to range from the over-confident - which allows him to assert that he is in control of his own destiny by means of the versions of reality he creates for himself - to the insecure. "I am not really sure that it was like that" (61), Barbier interrupts his own narrative, and he sometimes even goes so far as to admit of his story that "[i]t could not possibly have happened" (72). Since his variegated emotions and his changing sense of self pose a challenge for the narrative we are reading, Brink's novel does not encourage its reader to inhabit a comfortable position but instead encourages readers to question the text. This stimulus is compounded by the immaterial nature of Barbier's narrative.

As mentioned earlier, the narrative we encounter in Brink's novel is a replay of events recalled by Barbier in his mind. Although he speaks of "writing" his story down for Rosette, the

permanent nature of actual writing makes it impossible to record a truth that changes with every new interpretation. The only place where Barbier can write and rewrite his “truth” is in his mind. The format of the imagined letter to Rosette, whom, realistically, Barbier doesn’t believe he will see again, allows different versions of events to exist side by side: “[t]his fascinates me: how each story displaces others, yet without denying or ever entirely effacing them,” he states. (134) The imagined letter frees Barbier from the restrictions of a fixed truth. He can now converse with the absent Rosette “without a single impediment... I do not write, you cannot read; the flow is perfect,” Barbier exults (147-148). The ability to freely represent the variable nature of “truth” and “reality” also allows Brink’s narrator to represent his changing identity without encumbrance. The novel emphasises that it is in language that this freedom can be accomplished.

Barbier states at the beginning that his whole life “has gone into writing”. This could be interpreted to mean that he has been busy with nothing but writing his entire life, a statement that would appear to rest on an exaggeration. When considered in terms of identity formation it may, however, contain more than a kernel of truth. In his book *How our Lives become Stories: Making Selves*, Paul John Eakin writes repeatedly that “[w]e know perfectly well that life certainly isn’t a story ... and we also know that a person isn’t a book”(99). Instead, he claims, it is the performance of narrative, of a story that explains our life, which forms our identity. By accounting for experiences through the construction of stories, we create a continuous identity for ourselves. This, Eakin asserts, is a fiction, “the primary fiction of all self-narration.” As our consciousness, memories and bodies change over time, the uninterrupted identity that links our past self to our present experience of identity is nothing more than an invention born out of the need to pretend to a full command of knowledge of ourselves (93).

But this fiction serves a function. Aside from a means of creating flexible identities equipped to take on all eventualities, Barbier’s employment of various versions of his experiences can also be read as a gradual attempt to come to terms with the identity he already possesses. “You may have noticed that I do not particularly like myself” (245), Barbier mentions at one point in his narrative, making it conceivable that his presentations of events contain versions of how he would have wanted to behave in certain circumstances in order for him to like himself. The following episode offers an example of this ambiguity.

Narrating his escape from the Cape Castle with the drummer Nic Wijs, a man he has described as “the only true companion I’d had through those many years of wandering” (214), Barbier presents a sequence which make him the unwitting victim of Nic’s capture, rather than the Judas he actually seems to be. “Even today I do not know for sure what happened on that dark deck,” he recalls when describing how Barbier hears Nic shout as Nic climbs on deck of the ship that should have sailed them away to safety. “How could anyone but Nic’s trusted accomplices have

known beforehand of our plans?" (213). This question, at first reading, genuinely appears to puzzle Barbier. It would seem to be a rhetorical question posed by Barbier to indicate the impossibility of a betrayal by a "trusted accomplice".

Towards the end of his narrative, however, we find that Barbier's question is posed rather to emphasise the extent of his own contrariness and perversion because he himself betrayed his friend Nic Wijs. "In this confessional rage, let me add my betrayal of the poor drummer Nic Wijs," Barbier confesses. "It was so easy, really," he begins, but ends by saying that "[i]t was the only way, I swear" (360). Barbier's "confessional rage" may have been spurred by an attempt to redeem himself, but he is understandably unwilling to forgo entirely the likeable identity he has created for himself. Out of an apparent sense of self-preservation Barbier wants to come clean on certain distortions and lies, but wills other versions of his reality to stand. "I am willing to acknowledge that I may have been mistaken about the unicorn," (360) he concedes, but insists that "the hippogryph was real. You saw it with me" (361).

This appeal to Rosette for verification of his experiences touches on another aspect of identity formation explored in the postcolonial context of the novel. Just as Barbier's identity formation is conflated with his narration of others, he appears to depend on these others to validate his own identity. For this reason, Barbier appears to choose very particular role models with whom to identify during his travails, namely characters that reflect the qualities that Barbier would most like to possess. His travelling companion Jeanne d'Arc, for example, appears to represent steadfastness in the face of adversity, as well as a staunch idealism that Barbier wants to perceive in himself. At the same time, the impossible presence of the Maiden of Orléans, who, logically, can be no more than a figment of Barbier's imagination, forms part of those aberrations within the narrative whose examination gives rise to productive cultural analysis. In the next section, I briefly examine how this operates in this particular case, and then turn to a more general consideration of Barbier's definition of others and, by extension, of himself in relation to these others.

"Beyond the reach of my male definitions": identifying the other

Within the first few pages of the novel it becomes apparent to the reader that the "Jeanne" that Barbier refers to as his comrade is the Jeanne d'Arc of history and legend. This makes the physical presence of the fifteenth-century Frenchwoman in eighteenth century South Africa not unlikely but clearly impossible. Barbier's conversations with her, his descriptions of how she looks and acts, all are confirmed as products of his own imagination. Jeanne's presence in the novel is therefore entirely dependent on Barbier. Everything that Barbier describes her as saying or doing reflects on his own motives and intentions. By investigating what significance Jeanne holds for Barbier it should consequently be possible to figure out what the motivation is for his invocation of her.

The traditional interpretation (entrenched in dictionaries and encyclopaedias) of the figure of Jeanne d'Arc is as a symbol of French nationalism in the face of foreign military aggression. As a Frenchman from Orléans who is among foreigners in a foreign land, Barbier's choice of the Maid of Orléans as "imaginary friend" could be taken to reflect a desire to evoke the familiar and express a national identity. It can also be assumed that, as a soldier, Barbier's identification with Jeanne d'Arc would extend to her position as a military leader who was particularly concerned with the hardships endured by common foot soldiers and who managed to inspire the men under her command to heroic deeds. Barbier's representation of Jeanne, however, contradicts this hypothesis. For he does not describe her in terms of military prowess or leadership but, instead, harps on Jeanne's status as a woman, a victim, and, finally, as an impossible presence. Each of these considerations of the significance of Jeanne to Barbier reveals something more of Barbier's *modus operandi* in the novel.

The first occurrence of Jeanne as a person rather than just a name in *On the Contrary* sees Barbier concocting a titillating scenario, in which Jeanne is squatting by the fire after a day's travel with Lieutenant Alleman's company. Barbier notices, during this episode, that her breeches are split at the crotch. He stares at her, transfixed, "in a surge of both of desire and horror" (9), but when he imagines another member of the party, sergeant Kok, staring at Jeanne's exposed crotch as well, he becomes angry with the man and builds up a lasting resentment towards him. Barbier's conduct during this episode suggests that he regards Jeanne as his imaginative and sexual property. The progression from visual availability to sexual availability is not illogical, and his reaction to Kok's gaze can only be interpreted as sexual jealousy. By emphasising Jeanne's womanly qualities over her qualities as a military leader or hero, Barbier appears to make her, the historical legend, subservient (or at least non-threatening) to him, the lowly French soldier and adventurer, on the basis of gender.

In the same way the vision which appears to Barbier the first time that he is imprisoned of Jeanne dressed for his visual delight in flowers and colourful scarves (67-68), hints at lecherous fantasy and self-glorification more than the respectful commemoration that he claims is at the root of his relationship with Jeanne. In this context, his insertion of Jeanne into situations in which she exposes herself to him would seem unsuited to her historical importance, but the inappropriateness of his self-aggrandisement does not occur to Barbier. He does eventually repent of treating Jeanne as sexual object, but his remorse is not related to a recognition of his presumptuousness but to his fervent desire to represent her as "cool and chaste; a maid, truly" (47). For this reason, he assures his reader that the episode of the split breeches represents "[o]ne of the only occasions in my whole life when the mere thought of her body possessed me" and that, on the whole, he regards her more as a sister than a lover. The position of (unmarried) sister, however, remains one of submission to Barbier and continues the portrayal of Jeanne as subordinate. At the same time, his insistence on

Jeanne's status as a virgin appears to stem from his wish to ensure the exclusivity of his access to her charms, and again points to a sexualization of the French saint for the purpose of asserting authority over her. In this way, Barbier uses the imagined presence of Jeanne as a way to boost his confidence and convince himself of his importance within history.

In compliance with his projection of exclusive availability onto the imagined figure of Jeanne, Barbier's various ruminations on Jeanne as victim also contribute to his representations of her as his underling. At the same time, the emphasis on the Maid as a martyr who is misunderstood and persecuted in her own life-time also aids Barbier's identification with ultimate exaltation. The reconsideration of Jeanne's indictment as a heretic a mere twenty-five years after her execution can be assumed to bring Barbier hope of a similar reconsideration of his own persecution. The appeal for Jeanne's canonisation, prevalent in Barbier's time, led to her beatification in 1869 and possibly convinces Barbier of the prudence of emphasising the similarities between his and Jeanne's conditions. This inevitably induces Barbier to compare their suffering at the hands of people in powerful positions, because a comparison of the actual brave deeds of Jeanne d'Arc with his own trivial acts and selfish rebellions would place Barbier in a decidedly unfavourable light. For this reason, it is Jeanne the tormented victim of political intrigue who is recalled by Barbier, and not Jeanne the leader of armies, in an attempt to gloss over the differences between them that would stand in the way of identification. In a later section of this chapter I will come back to Barbier's attempts to pose as a martyr in relation to other historical and literary figures with whom he identifies.

For all his attempts to identify with Jeanne, Barbier comes to suspect an easier identification with Jeanne's persecutors as the novel progresses. Towards the end of the novel, Jeanne talks to him about the moment of her death and describes how her executioner kicked away the burning logs at her stake in order to offer the watching crowd "the ultimate evidence of my death and of my sex" (173) and expose "all those things in a woman which are, and should be, secret" (174). This final act of violation is committed in an attempt to reconfirm the "natural order" of things in which men of authority have power over peasant girls. The episode roughly corresponds to the one previously described by Barbier, where Jeanne allows him to look at her exposed parts by the light of a different fire. Barbier recognises the similarity between the two situations when he conflates them in his later reflections on "[a]n imagined girl in a sudden flare of the fire, exploding sparks, revealing the secret flesh which had centuries ago been mercilessly exposed – then charred, forever inaccessible – by an executioner to a jeering crowd" (200-201). This rumination would appear to indicate a grasp of the violence committed by these double acts of exposure; both seek to reduce Jeanne to the features of her sex in order to refute the accomplishments she attained in spite of it.

Both gazes present the irrefutability of her sex as sufficient proof of the impossibility and, by extension, non-existence, of her impact on national politics. Barbier's gaze, however, is not only injected with the desire for mastery but is also informed by history. He knows that Jeanne d'Arc's significance has grown beyond that of a great military leader and his comments on the charring of the "secret flesh" which made it "forever inaccessible" may be interpreted in various ways. It could express a regret that responds to Jeanne's perpetual virginity, either from her point of view (she never grew up to enjoy the pleasures of womanhood) or from Barbier's point of view (she was killed before anyone had the chance to enjoy what she had to offer). It could also, however, be interpreted as a declaration of victory: Jeanne was subject to harassment and torture while alive but in death her body is inaccessible and therefore free. This last interpretation conforms to Barbier's appreciation of the one quality that he finds most appealing in Jeanne: the impossibility of her presence.

Barbier comments on Jeanne's non-existence at diverse moments throughout the novel, but never in a lamenting or regretful way. On his first journey into the interior he notes that Jeanne's presence was "never officially acknowledged" (8) and whenever an outsider interferes in one of his conversations with Jeanne he has her "flicker... like a shadow, out of sight" adding: "she might never have been there" (9). Barbier's assertions do not try to make Jeanne's sudden appearances and disappearances seem natural in an attempt to disguise the fact that she does not exist in the physical world. They are made matter-of-factly and do not appear to seek to convince anyone that she does exist. He frequently mentions that Jeanne's presence is imagined, and even has her remind him of it when he tells her, in an attempt to console himself, that "I have you. I have Rosette". "You have neither of us," she answers him bluntly, "I am dead. She may be too" (319). To Barbier, Jeanne represents "a flutter of the impossible" (216), whose flexibility he appreciates more than the unyielding inadequacy of official truth. In a later section of this chapter, which will deal with the shortcomings of traditional, western modes of thought in encountering the South African landscape, I will explore more fully Barbier's predilection for the impossible as a possible antidote to the limitations experienced by colonists in facing an unfamiliar world.

The absence of Jeanne in the physical world gives Barbier the opportunity for moulding her image to his liking and imagining what she would say to encourage him in his conduct without being restricted by the workings of reality. In this same way, Barbier appropriates Cervantes' literary character Don Quixote, and uses him to his own ends. Barbier admires Don Quixote's devotion to chivalry, and he intermittently refers to Don Quixote's exploits as a guide for his own actions, for which purpose he carries the book of Cervantes wherever he goes. He even goes back into the castle to fetch it after he has achieved his initial escape from the garrison, risking his capture in the process. The emphasis that Brink's narrator places on the parallels between his own

life and that of Jeanne d'Arc and Don Quixote testifies to Barbier's hope of rising to their level of (historical and literary) importance. At the same time, it testifies to his conviction that he is in control of his own story and entitled to incorporate and modify the stories of others into his life to legitimise his actions. When he attempts to redefine the identities of those around him Barbier first experiences resistance to his attempts. It is also at this point that Barbier is confronted with the complex composition of narratological authority, as he is made aware of the consequences of becoming its object, rather than its subject. When, in the closing pages of the novel, he volunteers the insight that "[e]ach life is a writing", the reader is made to feel that this encompasses both the realisation that we "write", and are thus in charge of shaping, our own lives, and that we are all "written", and therefore shaped, by the circumstances and events that befall us. In order to investigate this more fully, I now turn to a closer consideration of Barbier's use of narrative power to define himself and to his attempts to define others.

In seeking to define those other identities that play a part in his narrative, Brink's narrator initially denies the authority of defining the self to those that inhabit a social position other than his own: women, Afrikaners and the native KhoiSan people. By describing Barbier's struggle in coming to terms with his limitations in defining the other, Brink broaches a subject that is of both historical and contemporary significance in the South African context.

Barbier's attitude towards the native and African people of the colony of South Africa is at first one of unthinking condescension. In keeping with the prevailing attitude of the coloniser towards the colonised, Barbier dismisses the powerless population of South Africa as insignificant. It does not occur to him that the subordinate status bestowed on the coloniser's other is not a natural but a cultural construct, one largely influenced by the mechanisms of language. In colonial record, the inability of the white settler to understand the various languages of the native inhabitants is perversely interpreted as an inability on the part of the native people to speak the language of the colonist. The more a native language deviates from the Dutch spoken at the Cape, the less humanity is attributed to the speaker. "[A]s one distances oneself from the centre," Barbier explains in the early pages of his account, "the hottentot tongue becomes, as far as I can make out, less and less human in sound and in grammar" (22). The colonised, as other, is hereby relegated to the domain of animals.¹⁷

Another practice in the subservience of South Africa's natives by the colonist is the denial of visibility. On telling Rosette of his impression of her at their first meeting, Barbier is made to say, "I had remarked you before, of course, but in the way one notices, and does not notice, a

¹⁷ In Brink's subsequent novel *The First Life of Adamastor*, dealt with in chapter three of this study, the Khoi protagonist is heard to describe the exotic Portuguese seafarers that come to shore in the exact same way – as strange creatures who, although they produced sound, did not appear to speak any detectable language. This comically relegates the colonizers to the domain of animals.

slave” (31). The myth of the invisibility of slaves was propagated during the eighteenth century as a means of disavowing the economic importance of slave labour and the extent to which colonial settlers relied on slave labour for subsistence. This myth is mirrored in the eighteenth century Victorian refutation of female labour, which was relegated to invisibility in order to conceal the economic value of women’s work (McClintock, 1995: 164). Barbier’s disregard for colonial slaves in *On the Contrary* is matched by his initial callousness regarding the female figures in his life. He abandons, in rapid succession, his mother, his fiancée and a girl with whom he fathers four children in as many years. He dismisses these betrayals to Rosette, the recipient of his letter, with the explanation that the continued company of these women would stand in the way of his future greatness. When Barbier changes his attitude during the course of the novel towards the disempowered groups of Afrikaners, KhoiSan and women he meets on his journeys, he achieves this in a way that keeps the myth of his future greatness alive.

Comparative to Barbier’s attempts to identify with the misfortune, and, through this, with the greatness of Jeanne d’Arc as explored previously, Barbier’s transformation after confronting these various indigenous groups takes on the character of humility in the face of suffering, a convention often ascribed to saints and martyrs. A clue to the nature of the image that Barbier’s has of himself with regard to this mutation can be found in the language that he uses in his narrative. Barbier’s period of imprisonment is described as “a preliminary test of strength” and Jeanne admonishes him to “keep the faith” for the “real ordeal” (157) that awaits him. In the same way certain Latin phrases, also used to add scientific authority to Barbier’s descriptions of the landscape, discussed later in the chapter, are inserted into the narrative to promote Barbier’s image of himself as a saint. Barbier calls his final journey into the South African hinterlands a “terrible *via dolorosa*” that takes its toll on him but leaves him feeling exulted (359). He asserts his belief this journey on foot is “earned in joy and pain, filth, fatigue, bliss, bliss”, adding in the tradition of the martyr: “*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*” (360). Barbier’s actions contribute to the image of him as saint as, in an apparent search for redemption, he takes to washing the feet of the native people he encounters on this last journey in imitation of the humble Christ and Mary Magdalene of Christian imagery. These statements and images show a use of the (verbal and visual) vocabulary of Christian martyrdom to characterise Barbier as a devout saviour of people. Barbier represents his predicament as one of wide spiritual importance. “I must see this through” (166) he tells Jeanne, as if a higher destiny, perhaps that of an entire nation, depended on it.

Although Barbier’s desire to champion the rights of the downtrodden appears to be admirable, by defining the objects of his humility as victims of discrimination, Barbier repeats his erstwhile usurpation of their authority to define themselves. In his assumption of a position of humility towards those women “who have suffered more than he ever could” and to those groups of

people he considers indigenous to the country, Barbier takes it upon himself to define the other and relegate them to the position of wronged victim. In this way, he echoes contemporary attempts to manufacture a new national identity based on communal suffering under the apartheid regime within South Africa. The position of victim thus becomes the justification for a legitimate national identity, a view that problematises the integrity of that identity. In the same way, Barbier's growing respect for women becomes questionable as he bases it on his admiration for women's endurance of suffering (what he calls "the eternal assault of the male upon the female", 174) and not on their status as fellow human beings. Barbier relegates the women he encounters to the role of victim without making provisions for their relief from this role – they have been assigned a martyr's role and are offered no escape from it. Barbier appears to relish accrediting women with hardship, because this allows him, once again, to play the part of saviour.

The proof of this is in the way in which Barbier is described as most fervently desiring Rosette, whose welfare he claims to champion, when she inhabits the role of victim. "She had borne so much more than I ever could," Barbier muses in thinking of Rosette and Jeanne, "She; you. You, the women" (157). The Frenchman does not even hesitate in admitting to his own active role in this abuse. "How I abused you. Woman, woman" (172), he relishes in thinking of his treatment of Rosette when she came to him for help. In using the generic singular "woman", Barbier denies Rosette the status of an individual and simultaneously presents suffering as an inescapable condition of being a woman. Barbier apparently regards the mistreatment of women as lamentable and correctly condemned by morally upright people such as himself, but he does not promote or even consider the possibility of an alternative to this mistreatment in his narrative. This appreciation for suffering, which is contingent on the continuation of suffering, darkens his relationship with the women he claims to champion, as it does his relationship with the South African natives to whom he claims to pay tribute in the final journey of the novel.

Barbier's relationship with the slave woman Rosette is not only defined by his preconceptions about women but is further complicated by her identity as a "native" (who is not so native) inhabitant of the Cape Colony. In this way issues of gender and race are conflated in Brink's novel, and emphasis is placed on the fact that identities are multifarious and never consist of just one aspect. Race relations in South Africa are compounded and complicated by a variety of other unequal power relations, among which those based on gender and class. One aspect of discrimination that is prevalent in the contemporary context is bias based on "first claims" to the native land. As topics relating to issues of land ownership are broached, the legitimacy of national identity is conveyed onto those population groups that claim first rights to the South African land. This privileges groups such as the KhoiSan and indigenous Africans above the descendants of imported slaves like Rosette.

Within Brink's novel, the organic nature of the national identities of the indigenous KhoiSan and rural Afrikaners contrasts starkly with the diasporic identity of the slaves in the colonial Cape. Rosette, taken from Bengal and brought to the Cape, has an identity that is in constant flux. The diasporic identity of the South African colonial slave is difficult to grasp, because it has been suppressed in historical accounts of the colonial era of South Africa. During the apartheid years descendants of slaves preferred to lay claim to a Coloured or fictive Malay identity rather than associate themselves with a disadvantaged African population. After the apartheid years it became more fashionable to pretend an indigenous identity than a settler slave status, pushing the identity of colonial slave to the margins of allowable experience. In this way, Rosette can be said not to have existed at all: she has been pushed out of South Africa's history.¹⁸

Rosette, however, refuses to take on the position of victim in Brink's novel. Her penchant for creating a new history for herself from memories and half-forgotten stories prove her to be Barbier's equal in that she, too, refuses to be defined by an official version of her identity. "I was caught in the forest where I hid when I was only a child without breasts," she first tells Barbier of her capture as a slave. "They tell me [in] Bengal My parents, my three brothers, my two sisters all got away. Not I" (32). Later, however, she changes the story. "I come from the House of Slaves on the island of Gorée," she says, "They caught me with my two brothers and my sister" (70). On being confronted by Barbier with the assertion that "That's not what you first told me" she replies: "What does it matter what I first told you?" (70). Rosette thus asserts the same right to self-narration that Barbier has claimed for himself.

Brink makes explicit that Barbier's female companion Jeanne, too, recognises the power of self-narration:

One day, ... I realised that my whole life, the whole of me, existed for the priest only in the words of the confession. I could literally invent myself through what I chose to tell. I could cancel myself by remaining silent. Or I could create whole multitudes of me through different stories. From that moment I had control over my own destiny (191).

The idea that self-narration achieves self-empowerment informs the greater part of South Africa's present-day initiatives to fill out the gaps in the country's officially recorded history by giving a voice to the previously disenfranchised. Barbier comes to recognise that both Rosette and Jeanne "embod[y] something beyond the reach of my male definitions" (303), and are capable of a textual empowerment that precludes them from accepting the inevitable outcome of being a victim. As his narrative progresses, Barbier also appears to realise that his presumptions of power over the women

¹⁸ Discussed in Kerry Ward & Nigel Warden, 'Commemorating, suppressing, and invoking Cape slavery', in Sarah Nuttal & Carli Coetzee, 2000, 201 - 217

in his life, whose lives and motives he undertakes to define and discard without a second thought, have deprived him of a rewarding relationship with a woman.

In spite of this, he is slow to discard his belief in the inevitability of power relations and neglects to look for a solution in the eradication of inequality. The realisation that discrimination deprives both perpetrator and victim of their humanity, as experienced by Barbier, is also reflected in contemporary narratives of the erstwhile victims of apartheid recorded during the sessions of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Cynthia Ngewu, the mother of one of the Guguletu Seven expresses this concept from the vantage point of victim during the proceedings:¹⁹

This thing called reconciliation...if I am understanding it correctly...if it means that this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back...then I agree, then I support it all (Krog, 1998: 109).

Barbier is illuminated by this insight, but it initially results in nothing more than a renewed attachment to Rosette as the recipient of his benevolence.

Brink's narrator extends his failure to recognise the active role that people play in their own destiny beyond Rosette to those groups of people he considers linked to the land of South Africa: the Afrikaners and KhoiSan people. Barbier cites the KhoiSan's mythic union with the land as proof of their innate South African identity. "No one can drive us away," the group of KhoiSan that Barbier encounters towards the end of his journeys are made to say in his narrative, "Can you drive away the wind or the dust? We are here..." (351). This motif of connection with the land is not merely a colonial one. In considering the question prompted at the beginning of this chapter, on who are categorised as "the people of this land", an identification based on association with the landscape cannot be dismissed. In the current Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, initially drawn up in 1993, a provision is made to define the "South African".²⁰ In the preamble of the constitution it states, among other things: "We, the people of South Africa ... Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity". This relates national identity to residence on South African soil, regardless of race, gender, class, parental lineage or place of birth. Aside from an examination of narrative in terms of the ideology of language and the relationship that exists between narration and power, it may therefore also be useful to examine issues of identity in relation to perceptions of landscape. This brings me to the third conception of "authority"

¹⁹ The term "Guguletu Seven" refers to the group of seven young men who were shot and killed by South African policemen on 3 March 1986 in the township of Guguletu, near Cape Town. Two subsequent inquests cleared the police of all responsibility for their deaths. The names of the Guguletu Seven were: Zandisile Zenith Mjobo, Zola Alfred Swelani, Mandla Simon Mxinwa, Godfrey Jabulani Miya, Themba Mlifi, Zabonke John Konile and Christopher Piet.

²⁰ The interim constitution was drawn up in 1993 and the final constitution in 1996.

employed in the novel, namely that of the authority of the land. By examining this notion, I return to the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter with regard to Barbier's conception of the land as owner of its people.

“A land beyond the calculations of space and time”: identification with the landscape

In the introduction to their volume *Negotiating the Past*, editors Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee remark that “South African literature is obsessively concerned with land and the emotional and proprietorial relations one can have with it” (14). When we consider the controversy surrounding pre-colonial land claims put forward by South African KhoiSan organisations in the 1990s, and the 1996 objections to development on land considered sacred by the descendants of Cape Malay slaves, we can deduce that land issues are also important in the context of contemporary South African society.

In Afrikaner historiography, too, landscape imagery plays a prominent part in mythologizing the Afrikaner bond with, and entitlement to, the South African land. In her *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* of 1995, Anne McClintock explains that:

the history of the volk is organised around a male national narrative figured as an imperial journey into empty lands...At the heart of the continent, a historic agon is staged as degenerate Africans “falsely” claim entitlement to the land. A divinely organised military conflict baptises the nation in a male birthing ritual, which grants to white men the patrimony of land and history (McClintock: 1995, 369).²¹

In a variation on this theme, the colonist's entitlement to the land is acquired not only by shedding the blood of hostile “pretenders” but also by grappling with, and the conquest of, the land itself. Just as American pioneers on the western frontier claimed a mythical closeness to their land based on “clearing a path through the wilderness [and]...transforming [their] surroundings into a garden of the world” (Bradbury and Temperley, 1998: 126), the Afrikaner believed he was, by rights, the owner of the South African regions he had “civilised” through hard agricultural labour. This approach to land control, which seems both Calvinistic and emotional, is different from that of the officials of the Dutch East India Company (DEIC) who established the Cape Colony. The Dutch colonials perceived the landscape in a manner less personal and, perhaps, more arrogant, as a possession by right of authorised conquest, lawfully utilised by its conquerors. At the start of Barbier's narrative he adopts this colonial approach in describing the land and he perceives the landscape in terms of the central ideology on which this approach is based. By looking at the

²¹ “volk” is the Afrikaans word for “people” used to denote the Afrikaner community.

incongruities within his representation of the land as conquered property, this central ideology is, however, severely contested.

In the first section of the novel, Barbier is positioned as an outsider, newly come to the Cape Colony from France via Middelburg in the Netherlands. He expressly states his unfamiliarity with the South African landscape but does not describe himself as a stranger or outsider but, rather, characterises the landscape as foreign and strange. In the same way, the Dutch colonists categorise the country they inhabit as foreign to their experience, instead of acknowledging their own alien status in South Africa. Barbier's identification with these colonists appears effortless from the onset, regardless of his dearth of experience in the colony in comparison with the other European settlers. His references to the party of explorers that he joins on a journey into the interior are characterised by familiarity. He speaks of "our progress" (14), "our occupation" (16) and proudly concludes that: "We are truly...a precarious yet invincible trickle of civilisation and noble aspirations moving through a dark interior, rewarding it with conscience and history" (18). Barbier's identification with the colonists can be attributed to his desire to associate himself with the "civilising influence" that the colonists were presumed to convey onto the landscape rather than to any real feelings of rapport. In spite of differences of nationality among the party, as the leader of the expedition is an Austrian gentleman and the remainder of the European crew is Dutch, the colonists are described as forming a united front in their opposition to the indigenous elements they encounter. The European position is put forward as the norm and the South African landscape as deviant because it fails to measure up to this norm.

Because Barbier is an outsider, the observations he makes can focus in an unaffected way on the strangeness of "Africa" and how it is different from "Europe". From describing the physical differences between the two entities, Barbier gradually progresses to an observation of the ideological differences between the two continents, ultimately causing him to posit that "[p]erhaps the nature of this remote land itself necessitated other forms and ways of living, a different kind of reason?" (268). I propose that the "different kind of reason" that Barbier refers to can be used as a key to reading the novel in a way that transforms its discrepancies and untruths into a demonstration of what is possible. This is in keeping with the practice of attending to those things that are deviant or inconsistent in the narrative to arrive at a fruitful analysis of the ideology around which that narrative is constructed (Bal, *Double Exposures*, 293). In the context of the discussion on Barbier's fascination with the figure of Jeanne d'Arc as a representation of that which is "impossible" and therefore capable of sidestepping limitations, I will now consider how Barbier arrives at the above conclusion, and how it can be interpreted as an outcome of his belief in the creative powers of language.

Barbier's championing of a way of reasoning which is "other" to that practised by the colonial authorities at the Cape as expressed in the quote above, may appear surprising to the reader on considering his praise for the precision of colonial procedures in the opening pages of the novel. In his initial capacity of official scribe to the colonial company's journey into the interior, Barbier exhilarates in the knowledge of "contributing in my small way to the accumulation of knowledge" (15) by recording the dates, times, longitudes, latitudes and other particulars of their progress. He appears to revel in the precise recording of details of dates and times ("on that dazzling morning of Tuesday 15 February we set out"), and comes to appreciate that the jargon of detailed specification can be, and is often, used as a method for legitimising fabrications. This realisation sees him embracing the creative possibilities of language ever more firmly. By itemising material and interspersing it with official-sounding Latin terms, for example, Barbier is able to mask fantastical information such as "Item: The lion ... the lion has a horror of the pudenda of a woman and ... the mere sight of them causes him to take flight" (23-24) as fact and enter it into the annals of official data without being questioned. When Barbier's superior, Lieutenant Alleman, eventually seeks to curb his use of associated information in the journal of daily progress, Barbier becomes resentful at being told to suppress what he sees as his personal interpretation. He admits that the compulsory exclusion of "any sign, the merest hint, of the personal disposition of the journalist" (26) from official record may be justified because "the constitution of a man frequently betrays him into falsehood" (27). At the same time, however, he maintains that without the allowance of falsehood, any apprehension of the truth is made impossible.

Barbier's standpoint sees him uncovering the paradox that lies behind colonial attempts at knowing the foreign landscape, through which traditional western methods of garnering knowledge (such as classification, registration and the imposition of scientific terminology) are unsuited to the task and fail to contribute to an understanding of South Africa and its occupants. Only by acknowledging the possible existence of different forms of knowledge and truth, and the necessity for employing different ways of reading these, can the character and temperament of the country be accessed. It is, I suspect, this realisation that has Barbier suggesting that the South African landscape be read on its own terms, according to the "different kind of reason" (268) that it requires. Barbier gives the intended reader of his letter various clues with regard to what he considers this "different kind of reason" to comprise. One of the clearest indicators lies in the speeches that Barbier has Jeanne make every time that he is about to lose hope. At these times, Barbier has Jeanne instruct him on "the terrible confines of the possible" which "fetter the imagination" and "make the world an impossible place to live in" (181-2). Jeanne posits that opening one's eyes to the impossible is the only way to make life possible, and encourages Barbier

to make allowances for the possibility of alternative truths in the form of fantasies, stories and memories.

Such an investigation of the possible connects *On the Contrary*, set in eighteenth century South Africa, to contemporary South Africa. The problem of antagonism, discord and distrust among the various cultural groupings in present-day South Africa, all of them identified as “South African”, has its roots in the South Africa of colonial times as described in Brink’s novel. I purposefully specify that the roots of these issues are derived from those described in the narrative of Brink’s novel, and not necessarily those prevalent in the country’s colonial history in general, because it is impossible to access the country’s history as a whole. As established above, Brink makes use of this uncertain quality of history in his work and provides the reader with an imaginative version of what may have happened, often in opposition to the country’s official or recorded history. In this way, he accords fantasies, stories and memories with the same credibility (or the same incredibility) as official record. The numerous oppositions and inconsistencies in the novel’s narrative appear as cracks in the story that serve to reveal the possible. By analysing these apparent discrepancies it can be imagined how Brink’s “different kind of reason” may be applied to the contemporary South African situation to understand better the issues surrounding South African identity.

One such discrepancy is noticeable in the comparison that Barbier makes between the two continents in terms of their discernible characteristics, which sees an interesting allocation of qualities to each that reveals how the characteristics of “Africa” are viewed as opposed to those of “Europe”. The use of synecdoche, whereby the parts of South Africa to which Barbier is exposed are taken to represent the whole of the African continent, ignores the complex differences between African cultures and appears to collapse Africa into a single territory equally available for observation and annexation by European colonists. One of the images of otherness that is repeated throughout the narrative is that of the “African” light as compared to the light in Europe. The foremost condition required for observation is, of necessity, light, so it is perhaps appropriate that the narrator’s consideration of the differences between “Africa” and “Europe” begins with this element.

“The light. It is the first thing that strikes one in this place,” Barbier begins his account of how he arrived at the Cape Colony. “In Europe the light was attenuated, tamisée. Here it is direct, uncompromising, aggressive, blinding” (7). From the narrator’s description, it appears as if the light in Europe is seen as a reduced and sifted version of an original, stronger light. The words “attenuated” and “tamisée” point both to the existence of an “original” source and to the fact that this is not it, but, at most, a vestige of it. The connotations in terms of western ideology, which has such a high regard for originality, appear to be negative, unless one considers that an extract or

sifted version of something could also carry associations of greater purity or refinement. The light in Africa is equally described in terms that could carry positive or negative associations. Its “direct” and “uncompromising” qualities correspond with esteemed accomplishments such as openness, honesty, determination and resolution.

Whereas the words used to describe the light in Europe are words appropriate to inanimate qualities, those used for the African glare give evidence of increased personification. Words like “uncompromising” and “aggressive” are usually reserved for human subjects in western discourse, and are frequently associated with a particularly “masculine” brand of strength. The same progress from inanimate to animate is detectable when the South African light is subsequently referred to in the novel as “merciless” (94) and “unmerciful” (265). Whereas “merciless” is appropriate to abstract phenomena, “unmerciful” conjures up the image of a cruel despot who is capable of human mercy but unwilling to lend it. This contributes to the image that is developed throughout the novel of colonial South Africa as an entity that is wilfully hostile and antagonistic to its European colonists. The responsibility for the recurring association of “African” phenomena with aggression is placed with “Africa” itself and not with those colonists who respond to the otherness of the landscape with violence.

In examining these different representations of the South African landscape, Barbier is gradually made aware of the complexity of the relationship between colonists and the land they colonise. Barbier’s characterisation of South Africa as “a land beyond date and time” (7) once again points to the inadequacy of the colonists’ method of defining the nature of the country according to scientific measurement, and hints that an enforced identification with the land based on personifying the landscape according to western stereotypes inevitably fosters alienation rather than understanding. One aspect of the personification of the landscape in Barbier’s account is his characterisation of land as female. A closer look at Barbier’s three different encounters with the hinterlands of the country illustrates this tendency.

On the first journey into the interior, Barbier sees South Africa as a “terra incognita” (12), an unknown land labelled in Latin, the scientific, clinical language representative of western civilisation. The irony here is that the country is not a “land unknown” at all if the western viewpoint, which has usurped the universal viewpoint in this instance, is dismantled as partial. The myth of the virgin land to which these statements refer is an idea perpetuated by colonial travellers from the fifteenth century onwards and is, of course, nothing more than a myth. McClintock notes that:

Discovery ... usually involves a journey to a far-flung region, asking the local inhabitants if they know of a nearby river, lake or waterfall, paying them to take one there, “discovering” the site, usually by the passive act of seeing it (30).

The fact that there were “original inhabitants” around when the colonial explorer alighted to land would appear to invalidate the idea of an empty land, available for the taking.

In this context, Barbier’s account of how he and his companion Jeanne came to drift towards the African coast inside a chest becomes positively comical. Barbier relates how “...the chest had drifted close to the shore of a savage African land quite evidently unimpressed by human foot”. Almost immediately, he adds: “[e]xcept possibly by aboriginals, but those were of no consequence” (133). There is an obvious incompatibility within the colonial myth between the belief in an uninhabited land and the practice of decimating the population already living in it. “A myth is a unit of imagination that makes it possible for a human being to accommodate two worlds,” Antjie Krog proposes in *Country of My Skull*, her work commenting on the effect of the TRC on the “new” South Africa. “*Myth makes it possible to live with what you cannot endure*” (Krog: 1998, 190, emphasis added). Only by holding on to the myth of superiority can the colonial authorities justify their treatment of South Africa’s native inhabitants.

The myth that emerges from the descriptions used by the narrator of the first journey is that of the untrammelled and unapproachable land, which invites violation by the very purity that the colonists perceive in it. The land is described in negative terms, according to the means by which it escapes the control of the colonists. In Barbier’s account of his first journey, the land is described as “uncharted”, “unnamed” (36) and “dateless” (51) – it has not been charted or dated or inscribed *as of yet*. In this characterisation lurks an anticipation of what the colonists resolve to do to bring the land under their control. In a perverse type of logic the potential for annexation and appropriation is inherent in its very intactness and inviolability. As John Berger has previously stated in *Ways of Seeing*, under patriarchy “a man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you ... a woman’s presence ... defines what can and cannot be done to her” (114).

On the second journey into the interior, this portrayal of South Africa as a coolly aloof, intact entity has been transformed to that of an entity that is now actively hostile in opposing its explorers. It is “A land hostile, empty, strange: it does not talk back, remains inaccessible”. The landscape is “crude” (248) and “forbidding” (258) and its heat burns away “all signs of life ... clean, to the bone” (246), like a carnivorous monster that devours its meal. The landscape is perceived as monstrous and insatiable. Barbier and his fellow explorers imagine it as an entity deliberately intent on destroying them. This description once again places the responsibility for violence with the temperament of the land and not with its despoilers, in much the same way that western society traditionally places the responsibility for sexual morality entirely with women, characterising men as blameless reactors to female enticement. The language used in Barbier’s second account is marked by sexual imagery in opposition to the previous emphasis on virginity and

purity. Barbier describes, for example, how a rainstorm that surprises the Afrikaner explorers in the middle of the desert is received jubilantly, as all members of the expedition strip down and “let the rain make violent insistent love” to them before they collapse on the ground (251). In the same vein, the Afrikaner massacring of animals and native villagers is described in sexual terms as “An orgy of blood” producing a “curious satisfaction” in the perpetrators (235-236). This points to a characterisation of the land as a sexually active woman or “whore”, an exceedingly conventional allegory in colonial literature.

On the third journey, which Barbier makes alone and on foot, South Africa is transformed once again in the eyes of its beholder. Barbier calls it a “land of space and miracles” (349) this time, marvelling at the fact that it “is beginning to yield its secrets, revealing itself generous, profound, miraculous” (355). The South African light is characterised this time as “shimmering” (358) and “bright” (369) rather than blinding, which makes it appear benevolent and magnanimous. In the same vein, Barbier sees the land as a “mutual deep mother” (359) and “older than history” (361), identifying it as a life force and attributing it with the appeal of great age and wisdom. The image imposed onto the landscape is that of a nurturing mother whose great age and endurance not only appears to provide stability and comfort to its inhabitants but also minimises the perceived consequences, and with it the disgrace, of colonial interference.

These descriptions confirm that there is a direct linking of the qualities that Barbier perceives manifest in the land with features traditionally attributed to specific female archetypes. As discussed, the association of colonial territory with the feminine is a well-documented strategy. Brink’s narrator also explicitly points to this design in his narrative. Barbier characterises his first sexual experience with the young French girl Héloïse, for example, as “...the very notion of a crossing of boundaries, a venturing into the unknown” (91). He extends this association between land available for male exploration and sexually available women in statements such as: “The desire for the Beyond was as fierce as the lust of the flesh. For years in fact – perhaps for good? - the two were not only linked but identical” (91). Land is equated with the feminine principle and the feminine principle is, of necessity, made subject to male conquest. “Land, you are woman. Woman, you are mine” (236), Barbier comments ironically, once again using the generic form for both land and women in order to represent their fate as mutually intrinsic and inevitable.

Barbier explicitly specifies that on all three of the journeys described above, he crosses the same land (“For the third time I retrace the trajectory already drawn twice before across the dusty surface of the land”, 349). It can therefore be assumed that the landscape does not physically change from one journey to another. The transformation is therefore most likely inherent in Barbier himself and in the fact that, as pointed out in the context of Bal’s theory of cultural analysis at the beginning of this chapter, perception is likely to tell us more about the perceiver than the perceived. Every

time that Barbier, as the narrator of his travel stories, characterises the landscape he traverses in a specific way, he establishes himself in relation to that landscape in a particular way. On the first journey, newly arrived at the Cape Colony, he perceives himself as the conquering and consummate hero bringing knowledge to the inexperienced and unknowing. In the second he plays the blameless victim of sexual duplicity and in the third he becomes an errant son seeking consolation in the bosom of his mother.

The transformation in the novel's understanding of authority follows that of a perception of loss of power by the protagonist that is resolved by means of his resignation to the greater authority of the land. This resignation is brought on by a new sense of "belonging" felt by Barbier who, by the end of the novel, is no longer the arrogant foreigner he was at the beginning but, rather, someone more akin to the tragic hero Diala recognises in Brink's earlier fiction. Unlike these earlier heroes, however, the protagonist of the 1993 novel does not encounter a South African landscape that is "inherently tragic" and forbidding (Diala, 907). The landscape of Barbier's third and final journey is "generous, profound, miraculous" (355) and its rocks and outcrops the physical evidence of its stories. The landscape acquires authority as a "visible language" for those that are able to read it (356).

The notion of a language that is visible, rather than audible, carries associations with writing, and it is in terms of writing that Barbier's assertion that the landscape of South Africa's interior has become "visible language" can best be interpreted. On Barbier's third journey he no longer feels alienated from the land and travels with the KhoiSan, who show him how to find food and shelter in the desert. As a result, Barbier begins to recognise that the land and its people are interdependent, not hostile toward one another, and he sees the landscape as a narrative, an account of connected events and interconnected lives, which is without end. He perceives this narrative as that of Rosette who, like Jeanne, represents to him that which is beyond definition and within the liberating realm of the impossible.

Conclusion: "I do not write, you cannot read"

On the Contrary plays with conceptions of authority and identity by focusing on the impossibilities offered by text. One way in which it does this is by repeatedly drawing the reader's attention to the fact that Barbier's narrative is not what it seems. Nothing about the narrative in *On the Contrary* is "straight". Barbier's account is filled with so many contradictions and impossibilities that it becomes infeasible for the reader to distil the truth from all the various versions of events with which the reader is presented. Barbier's account of events is presented in such a way that it is marked not only by the subjectivity of the imagined author/subject of the novel (Barbier) but also

that of the imagined recipient (the reader of Brink's novel). Barbier speculates, at the beginning of his narrative, that maybe he is "told as much as telling" and that:

[p]erhaps my very attempt to imagine what has happened to myself...is no more than the effect of someone else, in another place, another time, fifty years, a century, two hundred and fifty years from now, who knows, God knows, trying to imagine me (4).

Two hundred and fifty years from Barbier's date of execution (1739) would place us very close to the year in which Brink writes his novel. The narrator's statement makes the reader aware that Barbier is, in fact, a literary character conjured up "two hundred and fifty years" (4) from the time in which the historical Estienne Barbier lived. As a literary character, no other laws than those of language bind Barbier. Brink is eager to show his reader that the freedom found in writing far outweighs its limitations.

By examining Barbier's transformation from a narrative authority to one that is "told as much as telling," we arrive at the central problem posed by Brink's novel. The reader is presented with the idea that the language of "violence" (235) used by the Afrikaner farmers in communicating with a land that remains frustratingly "intractable," fails to establish "an effective identifying relationship between self and place" (236). Only on redefining his own position with regard to the landscape in the closing stages of the novel does Barbier achieve a way of relating to South Africa. The outcome of this realisation, however, still follows the fate of the tragic hero. Like Joseph in *Looking on Darkness*, Barbier's narrative begins and ends in imprisonment and is built around the premise that the narrator's execution is inevitable. The implication is that the progress that is made in the novel is one of a clearer understanding of what it means to be a South African, accompanied by a resignation to its tragic consequence. It is only in Brink's 1996 novel *Imaginations of Sand* that the female narrators Kristina and Ouma Kristien are able to explore the possibilities of making use of the imagination in order to arrive at a more hopeful conception of South African national identity.

Chapter 2: *Imaginings of Sand*: The Female Gothic in South Africa's Desert

“There are points of no return that mark the beginning, not the end, of hope”²² *Imaginings of Sand* (350)

Brink's 1996 novel *Imaginings of Sand* sees a development in the author's conception of possible identities for South Africans of conscience beyond that of the tragic hero or the political martyr. Written after the country's first democratic elections of 1994, the novel is not only set in a revolutionary context, but also expresses the idea that South Africa's history of violent oppression can engender an egalitarian future. The existentialist resignation to oppression exhibited by Joseph Malan is gone, and exchanged for a tentative belief in the inauguration of Benedict Anderson's “deeply horizontal comradeship,” which is deeply horizontal because it is non-hierarchical; and comradely because it looks towards a joint South African future (7).

The way in which the novel articulates this, I argue, is by presenting us with a narrative whose structure and quality is analogous to that of Gothic narratives. Representing the uneasiness with the past in terms of the anxieties of Gothic fiction, the suggestion is made that the confrontation with suppressed angst may lead to its cathartic resolution, much as happens in the Gothic. The apprehension felt in the interstice is, by this reasoning, necessary for a healing of the rift. Paired with a confrontation of fear, the Gothic, and Brink's Gothic-like novel also concerns itself with the recovery of “true” identity, which, in the case of *Imaginings of Sand*, is that of a new national identity.

In this chapter, I examine how Brink's novel explores national identity in South Africa as complicated by the presentness of its past and, in particular, in what way the use of Gothic elements conveys a vision of the predicament of forging a national identity. First, I discuss some of the features of Gothic narratives and the implication of their transposition onto a (post)colonial context. This is followed by a short synopsis of the novel and an elucidation of its central motifs. I then link specific motifs to Gothic concerns and analyse the impact of the employment of the Gothic on the novel's interpretation. The aspects of the Gothic that I focus on are that of the “haunting” of the past; “liminality”; and the distinctive concerns of the female Gothic. In analysing the way in which these are employed to articulate something specific about the construction of national identity formation in post-apartheid South Africa, I hope to gain insight into the implications of its conceptualisation.

²² All quotations taken from *Imaginings of Sand* (London: Vintage), 2000, unless specified otherwise.

“That surge within the real towards the unreal”: Gothic literature

In the introduction to their *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre*, Andrew Smith and William Hughes state that “[t]here is a sense in which the Gothic is, and has always been, *post-colonial*” (1). Both the Gothic and the postcolonial tradition provide a critique of post-Enlightenment rationality by presenting the scene of an encounter as a catalyst for disruption and change. In the case of the Gothic, this encounter frequently takes the form of a self-other confrontation that is either internalised and psychological, or historical, where a new order tries to break loose from its ties to an oppressive aristocratic (and often Catholic) past. The self-other dichotomy with which the postcolonial is concerned seeks a reinsertion of marginality that is conceptualised along racial, cultural or national lines. Both, however, give a place to the marginal in the imagination, and represent this confrontation as disruptive to existing power relationships.

Literary critics who examine the spread of the Gothic to the United States, where, according to many, it found its apex in the writings of Edgar Allen Poe, insist on the aptness of Gothic concerns for a colonial environment. The gothic space encountered in novels by early American authors like James Fenimore Cooper and Nathaniel Hawthorne articulates the anxiety for the foreign landscape central to the colonial experience, which often remains unexpressed in “mainstream” romantic treatments of nature. In these traditional accounts, colonial mythology posits territorial expansion as legitimate as a “natural” and inevitable process. The idea of a people divinely selected to govern a territory because of their “inherent” superiority and “organic” solidarity can be traced to nineteenth-century American beliefs of Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism, as well as to the Afrikaner master narrative (initiated in the nineteenth century) of the Afrikaners as “God’s holy chosen people with a mission to christianise and civilise a barbaric country given to them by God” (Ehlers, 3).

Conversely, in Gothic literary treatments of encountering one’s surroundings, colonial geography can no longer be seen in terms of Johan Gottfried von Herder’s “natural” economy of the people but transforms into Edmund Burke’s notion of the sublime.²³ The quality of beauty in its association with possession (smallness, straightforwardness, clarity, smoothness) is opposed to the vastness and incomprehensibility of the sublime, which eludes the grasp of the viewer and imparts pleasure by instilling fear. By experiencing the unfathomable, the sublime provides an insight of one’s position in the landscape based on emotion, not on rationality or possession. By being overwhelmed, this insight diverges from imperialist ideas of dominance and, instead, approaches bodily capitulation. Rather than physical superiority, the Romantic “overflow of emotion recollected in tranquillity” engendered by the encounter with nature is believed to demonstrate an

²³ Edmund Burke, although a member of the conservative Whig Party in England, was a staunch supporter of the independence of the American colonies during the American Revolution.

elevated sensitivity, which confers a moral superiority.²⁴ Emotions such as fear hence ultimately impart moral qualities on its partaker, and were enthusiastically explored in Gothic literary and painterly treatments.

In colonial literature, the apprehension conveyed by Gothic descriptions of mountain vistas and harsh terrains is equally meted out by manifestations of a human “other” in the colonial landscape, whose presence is both dreaded and disavowed. In her *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison explicitly links the palpable “absence” of the Africanist figure in (colonial) American writing to a Gothic suppression of what is strange and feared. The literature of the young nation of America she analyses as juxtaposing the fears and ideals of the colonizers in a Gothic fashion. The aggravation of the first American colonists with class and caste discrimination in the old country made way, in the new country, for the anxiety of confronting an unknown wildness. This resulted in a move “from discipline and punish to disciplining and punishing,” rather than from restrictions to freedom (35). Instead of embracing the potential of the new land as part of their rejection of the corruption of the old, the colonizers’ powerlessness engendered a “terror of human freedom – the thing they coveted most of all” (37). In giving expression to this terror, while simultaneously forming a coherent vision of the nation, American literature answers the colonists’ need to both inscribe and erase the African figure from its literature, according to Morrison. The Africanist persona, methodically excluded from conceptualisations of “the American nation” is created in literature for the purposes of “exorcism, reification and mirroring” – a figure that is excluded from the standard in order to provide the vision of difference that confirms (white) American identity (39). The fear of merging as heralding a loss of identity is integral to Gothic explorations of the liminal and the ambiguous, and is also much broached in South African literature.²⁵

In her *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (1997), Teresa Goddu interprets the focus on liminality in Gothic portrayals of the dangerous slipperiness of mixing, particularly miscegenation, as representing a loss of “sure and pure” (racial) identity in colonial and postcolonial fiction (4). By giving expression to the concealed fear of being overwhelmed by the “other,” the Gothic registers the cultural contradiction of the (post)colonial nation that wilfully overlooks the racially other members of its population at the same time as it pretends to unity and inclusiveness (26). This is clearly evident in the descriptions of the anxiety provoked by South Africa’s first democratic elections of 1994, which forms the context of the turbulent occurrences of *Imaginings of Sand*.

²⁴ The phrase “overflow of emotion recollected in tranquillity” was famously coined by William Wordsworth in his *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), to define (Romantic) poetry.

²⁵ For a more overt interpretation of this theme as confronting a fear of miscegenation, see Chapter 3 (“Remembering Discovery in *The First Life of Adamastor*”) of this study.

Imaginings of Sand has as its protagonist and main narrator Kristien, a young Afrikaans woman who is living in London at the time where the novel opens. Kristien is described as a fervent anti-apartheid activist who had broken all ties to South Africa when she moved to London to join her activist group and who has vowed never to return to her country of birth. At the news of her grandmother's hospitalisation and imminent death, however, she returns to South Africa just before the national elections of 1994. The grandmother, known as Ouma Kristina, is dying because her house has been attacked and set alight as part of the wave of violence that flares up in the country in the run-up to the elections. She asks Kristien to return to South Africa because she would like to pass on a legacy of stories to her granddaughter about the women of her family. These women are presented to Kristien in a series of narratives that are not told in chronological order and do not pretend to the status of the country's historiography. Rather, they are presented in terms of the novel's internal logic, in which contemporary events are used as a pretext for explaining aspects of Kristien's identity, that of her family, and, by extension, that of the nation. The tension that marks the contemporary events that Kristien deals with becomes analogous to the friction inhabiting South African history.

The unrest provoked by the fall of apartheid can be ascribed to the very strategy of apartheid, which was concerned with preserving (racial) identity. Here, too, the fear of intermingling is linked to the fear of losing one's distinctness and, with it, one's identity. The fact that this fear is based on ignorance caused by an ingrained disregard of the "other," is demonstrated in accounts such as Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (2000), which reports on the TRC proceedings. The South African poet describes how the shock of hearing the testimony of victims of apartheid shakes the attendant white South African reporters, while the black South Africans appear unfazed, because "[t]hey have known the truth for years" (45). For previously privileged groupings the horror of the stories of apartheid seems not to lie in the depravity of the acts described but, predominantly, in the encroachment of what is held to be unreal on the real. "[I]t is almost impossible to acknowledge that the central truth around which your life has been built is a lie," Krog states. "At the risk of the disintegration of your self-image, you would rather keep on denying any wrongdoing" (95). Once denial becomes impossible, however, disintegration appears inevitable. This breakdown of identity feared in the run-up to South Africa's 1994 elections is described in Brink's novel, much in the same way as it forms the preoccupation of Gothic tropes.²⁶

The nature of this fear and its implications on national identity in South Africa is unpacked in *Imaginings of Sand* through the exploration of Gothic ideas on historic transgression and

²⁶ In his 2006 article "Haunted House, Haunted Nation: *Triomf* and the South African Postcolonial Gothic," Jack Shear has similarly examined how the use of Gothic conventions articulate the anxieties prevalent during South Africa's 1994 elections in Marlene van Niekerk's acclaimed novel *Triomf* (1999). Shear provides some insightful remarks, but is obviously mistaken in terming Van Niekerk's use of the Gothic to frame this particular moment in South African history as "unique."

encroachment. One of the themes used in the novel to convey this is that of the intrusion of the past upon the present, which is the first Gothic motif I wish to consider. The Gothic conceptualisation of the past impacting upon the present in the same way that ghosts haunt the living, suggests that those aspects of the past that cannot be integrated into present ideas of the country's history and have consequently been left out, are most likely to resurface. By employing the trope of haunting in telling the left-out history of a South African family, Brink's novel is able to do more than "set the record straight," and instead tells it "slant" to provide an analysis of the colonial discourse of fear about merging with the other.²⁷ The first arena in which I explore this connection is in a brief examination of the reference to ghosts in *Imaginings of Sand*, which I link to the novel's syncretistic presentation of the genealogy of women that comprise the protagonist's foremothers. I then move to an analysis of the direct references made to Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," in which the conflation of a "house" as concrete structure and a "house" as referring to a family's ancestral line is repeated to a different end in Brink's postcolonial adaptation.

"The sins of the father": The Gothic persistence of the past

Whereas the narrative of *On the Contrary* centred on the fictitious nature of memory and history as the prerequisite for a continuous identity, Brink's later novel grapples with the necessity of acknowledging the incompleteness of historical representation. The nature of South African history, after all, makes it necessary to confront, rather than leave the past behind, to change South Africanness in a revolutionary way. Gothic novels employ a language that helps express the unexpressed by means of symbols and mystery: its conventions tackle the terror provoked by a confrontation with the unknown and use the imagination as a way to combat fear. Imagining the possibility of the simultaneous presence of exclusive binaries is seen to free the mind of its irrational fear. By ceasing to insist on the creation of dichotomies and hierarchies, the Gothic novel seeks to dissipate the threat of the unexpressed and darker half of the binary.

In the opening pages of *Imaginings of Sand*, the Gothic anxiety about loss of control is imparted by Kristien's fear of "going back" to her country of origin. While she sits in the plane that takes her back to the country of her birth after eleven years of living in London, she muses: "How easily eleven years can be peeled from one, a shift stripped smoothly from an unresisting body, leaving me naked, approaching death" (4). The "shift" or attire of a British citizen is stripped from her body the moment she boards a plane on the way home, suggesting a return to a previous identity. She describes her body as "unresisting" and the transformation as transpiring "easily," but hints that the lack of resistance is not due to acquiescence but rather due to her acknowledgement of

²⁷ With "slant," I make use of a term by Emily Dickinson, often considered as representing Gothic concerns to perfection in her poetic works.

the inevitability of this process. The dispossession of her carefully assembled British identity leaves her “naked” and without disguise but also vulnerable and without protection.

Kristien gives us an insight into the sense of independence and control that she obtained by leaving South Africa and “going it alone,” as well as her perception that her subsequent return once again removes this power. She describes the suitcase she takes along as “hastily-packed”, the cab she hails to the airport as “an unwarranted expense” and the argument she has with her British boyfriend Michael on leaving as “[u]nfinished business” (15). The words she uses are marked by doubt, insecurity and randomness. This expresses that she feels stripped of control over what happens to her on returning to South Africa so that subsequent events take on the characteristic of inevitability.

This interpretation explains Kristien’s cryptic remark about “approaching death” at the same time that she approaches her past, because death is that most inevitable of all facts. She is, of course, travelling towards the death of her dying grandmother but, at the same time, is heralding the death of her London self while resurrecting the self she has regarded as “dead” for the past eleven years. By the end of the novel we understand, in hindsight, that Kristien also travels towards the tragic and unexpected death of her sister and her sister’s family, as well as the “death of an era” in South African history. The “death” of apartheid that is heralded by the South African 1994 elections coincides with feelings of fear and anxiety on the part of many of South Africa’s inhabitants. Exploring these anxieties within a Gothic narrative, the novel suggests that the recovery of South African history is actually a question of acknowledging its (ghostly) continuance in the present.

In true Gothic fashion, the business of recovering history is tackled through the motif of the family line. Like Brink’s 1974 *Looking on Darkness, Imaginings of Sand* features the recurring enumeration of the names and life-stories of the protagonist’s predecessors. The motif of genealogy as the study of family lineage or family history is traditionally concerned with descent and the legitimacy of claims to power. By organizing history into a family tree and ties of kinship, a vision of history is given that is both orderly and hierarchical. The logic of succession parallels the way in which the Gothic envisions the past as attendant on the present, where contemporary phenomena are haunted by their history.

The starting point for the stories that Ouma Kristina tells Kristien to instil a sense of ancestry in her arrives with the Khoikhoi woman Kamma. Although it is immediately established that this story is no more than a “useful beginning” (175) of the family’s lineage, whose origins presumably go beyond this moment, the choice of this story as point of origin is significant in relation to contemporary conceptions of South Africa’s history. Like the first story in Joseph Malan’s family history, it lays bare the reality of contact between different races and communities from the onset of colonial history, and, as in Malan’s case, it is a story of rape. With the story of

Kristien's first foremother Kamma begins the story of the enforced and unacknowledged intermixing of different communities that impacts on South African national identity to the present day.

This acknowledgement of mixed lineage, carefully denied in the past by traditional Afrikaner families, successfully opposes the static interpretation of (ethnic) identities propagated during the apartheid era. It signifies a Gothic absence of compunction about difference. In *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* of 1988, J.M. Coetzee identifies this fear of difference with a "failure to imagine a peopled landscape, an inability to conceive a society in South Africa in which there is place for the self" (9). Exactly Ouma Kristina's ingenious employment of the imagination that opposes this failure eventually implants a sense of South African belonging in her granddaughter. Her assertion that their family line is of mixed origin is meaningful in relating this story to the nation. In the same way, the reference made to Ouma Kristina's house as haunted conveys the idea of the nation as haunted.

Section two of *Imaginings of Sand* is entitled "The House of Usher", and refers to the famous haunted house story written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1839. Brink's adaptation of "The Fall of the House of Usher" does not contain a description of the complex interiority of a house, whose symbolic significance, according to the traditions of Gothic description, traditionally signals the difficulty of access. The section preceding "The House of Usher", simply entitled "The Return", does contain such descriptions, and complies to the convention of "tall gates" (27), a "looming" exterior (29), "crumbling staircase" and "sprawling cellar" (30) that the houses described in Gothic stories exhibit. Even the Gothic practice of personifying a house to emphasise more directly that the state of one's dwelling place symbolises the state of mind of its inhabitant is adhered to in this first section. Ouma Kristina's abode has windows that "stare blankly outside, interrogating the view" (31), like an animate persona actively engaged in the surrounding landscape. None of this, however, is found in the succeeding section that actually refers to Poe's famous story.

In *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* of 1999, Robert Mighall points out that, particularly in Gothic fiction of the later period, a "house" can be both the ancestral seat of a family and the family itself. This equivalence is evident in Poe's story, which deals with a family curse that causes the simultaneous termination of both the Usher family line and the house in which the family has lived. At the climax of the story, Roderick Usher, the last remaining descendant of the Usher family-line, is carried to his death by his sister Madeline, who has been buried alive in the vault under the Usher house after she had fallen into a death-like trance. Madeline climbs out of the vault and drags her decaying body to Roderick but dies when she falls on top of him, taking Roderick with her. At the same time, a freak storm splits the Usher house in two and causes it to disappear under the surface of the dark lake. It appears as if the conflation of

house and residents is intentional in Brink's Gothic tale. The section "The House of Usher" deals extensively with Kristien's childhood memories of her grandmother, the house, the town in which the house stands and, ultimately, her family. Through these memories Kristien reconstructs the political landscape of the South Africa of her childhood years and considers the impact that this landscape still has on those people who inhabited her childhood. One of the insights that she formulates from this is that the unease between races continues in spite of the new political configuration of the country.

During her stay at her grandmother's dilapidated house, Kristien finds that the coloured housekeeper Trui and her husband Jeremiah are uncomfortable with her well-intentioned attempts to profess equality. When she asks to join them at breakfast they insist on standing while she eats and she cannot convince them to drop the use of the title "Miss" whenever they address her. Time and again Kristien is reminded of the difference in their status, regardless of her efforts to correct this history of inequality. When she draws Trui and Jeremiah's son Jonnie into conversation about his prospects for further education, for example, her considerate offer to help him suddenly "sounds such a 'white' thing to say" (72).

Similarly, the picturesque memories of the town and its shopkeepers that Kristien entertains momentarily appear to lure her into the trap of ignoring the political structure that made the quaintness and peacefulness of a town like the Outeniqua of her childhood possible. She walks through the town fondly remembering anecdotal events until she is stopped in her tracks by a conversation between three women, who discuss the recent mobbing of a white farmer by black demonstrators in the adjoining township. This invasion of the present in the past and, worse, the realisation that that past contained the same elements of injustice as the present, albeit unbeknownst to her at the time, causes Kristien to become "split between today and yesterday" (75). Kristien's discovery of the perpetual attendance of the past in the present can be linked to the Gothic concerns called up by Brink's title for the section.

Mighall's 1999 publication designates the fear of historical reversion as the main impetus for all Gothic fiction. The Gothic, although concerned with the past, is more concerned with the encroachment of the past on the present and, in particular, with anachronism as a source of disorder that disrupts "temporal propriety" (251). The horror of Brink's Gothic tale of change in a rural community like that of Outeniqua resides in the anachronistic nature of the behaviour of this community.²⁸ In keeping with the Gothic tradition, Kristien, as the novel's Gothic heroine (and the reader's counterpart), is given modern sensibilities within a Gothic setting and is seen to contend with the delusions of its political system. As a local returned from a lengthy stay in modern and

²⁸ For further investigation into anachronism as a trope for exploring South African constructions of identity, see Chapter 4 ("Under Cover of Silence: The Politics of the Fantastic in *Devil's Valley*") of this study.

liberal England, Kristien exemplifies the traditional Gothic figure of the progressive individual clashing with agents of reaction (Mighall 279). In terms of Mighall's hypothesis, this construction serves to "enforce the respective culture's sense of its own modernity" (285). Because progress has long been the dominant idea organising thought in the West, evil is logically associated with a "return" or a "regression". By associating a continued fear of difference with the country's apartheid past, Brink's novel locates progress in the dissipation of this fear in the present.

Mighall stresses the political function of the structure of opposition:

The Gothic dwells in the historical past, or identifies "pastness" in the present, to reinforce a distance between the enlightened now and the repressive or misguided then....The tyrants and monsters of this mode represent and attempt to exorcise the ghosts of the past (xviii).

Nevertheless, Brink's novel does not appear to place unmitigated faith in the exorcism of past evil. The division between past and present is not represented in as clear-cut a manner in Brink's novel as it is in most Gothic fiction, although it is hinted at in constructions such as Kristien's "return," which implies a geographical and historical regression to an earlier state. The presence of the past in the present is also not wholly characterised as unnatural or evil in *Imaginings of Sand*, as it used to be in the work of nineteenth century Gothic authors. To decipher Brink's intentions with regard to his qualified use of the Gothic, we must turn our attention to another Gothic motif: that of the family curse.

The idea of the family curse is suggested by the novel's reference to Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," and is perpetuated in Kristien's attestation that "the sins of her father" make it impossible for her to experience the newly-legislated political equality between Trui and herself in an uncontrived way. Kristien's father was active as an apartheid legislator for the National Party. As Mighall asserts: "crimes belonging to the ancestral past can blight both the present and future" (80). The relationship between Kristien and her patrilineal ancestry provides her with an official identity through her family name. Kristien does not, however, identify with the political actions or beliefs of her father. Ouma Kristina's provision of a substitutive matrilineal history serves the double purpose of supplying Kristien with a "way out" from the enforced membership of a lineage that rejects her as a woman; and of allowing Kristien an identification based on inclusion, rather than exclusion. "'I had to tell you everything.' She says. 'If you don't know our history it becomes tempting to see everything that happens as your private fate. But once you know it you also realise you have a choice.'" (324). Awareness of one's history equals an awareness of participation in a larger whole.

As it turns out at the end of the novel, Kristien's sister Anna, who has not heard the stories, cannot seek relief in any sense of shared history and does see her circumstance as a "private fate" that will push her towards extreme measures. The attempt at regulation inherent in Kristien's

enforced membership of her father's "House" enables the perpetuation of its curse of injustice, and it is a curse which continues to haunt the ancestral "House" long after her father has passed away.

The haunting of the past becomes manifest in the memories of those who lived through the years of apartheid. The various interpretations of memory as expounded on by Maghill, appear to cause the conflict within Kristien's experience of the country's break with the past. The concerns of the townspeople of Outeniqua in Brink's novel centre on an interpretation of memory as vengeance, in the Gothic sense. The women who discuss the confrontation between the white farmer and the angry black protesters have "little hope that he could have escaped. Where would a white man turn to in a black township, in these times?" (75). The implication is that, "in previous times", fear of or deference for a white farmer as the representative of a politically endorsed segment of the population would have guaranteed his survival in a black township. In "these times", however, the attitude of the black protestors towards the white farmer is presumed to be one of antagonism for remembered wrongs. Kristien, too, shows her awareness of the usage of memory as vengeance when she strives to naturalise the new relations in the present. Seeking to dismiss the need for memory, she is confronted with a second interpretation of memory: that of "memory as conscience" as the "basis for restitution and ultimately the forgiveness that comes from forgetting" (Mighall 109). Only by acknowledging the past can its imbalances be addressed in the present and can a society in South Africa be imagined in which, as Coetzee states, there is place for the self (9).

The Gothic symbolism inherent in this story therefore comments on the destructive nature of the inability to look outside of one's own world and assimilate exterior impulses into one's own experience. The inability to respond to the outside world is presented in Poe's story as the cause of both Roderick's death and the destruction of the house of Usher. The narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" explains that, in the last years of his life, Roderick Usher had withdrawn into the Usher house and closed himself off from the outside world. Roderick is described as someone isolated from external experiences to such a degree that his mind can hardly bear the physical reality of things. He is so sensitive that he can only eat the blandest of foods and listen to the softest of music.

According to Gothic conventions, any confrontation with external elements that cannot be accommodated by the rational mind requires the use of the imagination. Without the help of the imagination, such a confrontation causes the mind to turn in on itself. Only by means of a Gothic confrontation with the past, in which the madness and incongruity of old modes of control are revealed and imaginatively transformed is change possible. *Imaginings of Sand* includes such a confrontation, which, by citing the genealogical tradition in a parodical way promises change. Unlike the entitlement that traditional genealogical models provide, Gothic genealogy frames the impact of heritage as a curse. In both the Gothic and its postcolonial adaptation, the oppressive

authorial discourse of established historiography is portrayed as decaying and obsolete, and its impact on contemporary experience as an historical crisis.

In the next section, I unpack a second Gothic motif, namely that of liminality. The most overt instance of liminality is found in the novel's placement during the 1994 elections. Conceptualised as a "point of no return," the elections are presented both as a watershed moment that separates South Africa's history from its future, as well as a moment of in-betweenness characterised by uncertainty. Aside from this instance of temporal liminality, however, Brink's novel epitomises the postcolonial anxiety of national identification based on a precarious spatial predicament. In this scenario, the identity of South Africa as a frontier society is posited as liminal, and therefore Gothically unstable. After analysing the significance of both the novel's historical and spatial setting as a "twilight zone," I turn to a third trope of liminality that I see embodied in the figure of the "coloured." The position of the "coloured," I argue, is forwarded in the novel as a site of racial convergence in South African society, and is enlisted in the narrative for its liminal potential by means of a Gothic slant.

"This time, this place": Gothic liminality

According to Victor Turner, liminal space corresponds to a ritual threshold anticipating a change in social status and, therefore, in identity. In his "Liminality and Communitas" in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), Turner makes use of the concept of liminality to define the in-between phases of cultural progression and describes the instability that interrupts stable social structure as regenerative. Over and above its anxious Gothic connotations of disintegration, Turner interprets liminality as a prerequisite for the progress of cultural forms. The instability of the liminal phase makes it possible for new social structures to emerge, and therefore represents renewal as much as rupture.²⁹

In postcolonial theory the trope takes on an additional significance. Homi Bhabha, for one, recognises the potential of the concept for countering the hierarchies of Western binary thinking. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha makes use of liminality to signify a consciousness of being between two planes; of inhabiting a moment in which something becomes something else. The ambiguity that this implies he sees as indicating an alternative to the Western compulsion to insist on states of being that are definite and categorised. In linking this violent compulsion to the process of colonisation, a connection is forged between liminality and the possibility of resistance to colonial power. The complexity of the interactions between identities, nations and cultures, flattened by the obligation to categorise everything according to binary oppositions, is recognised,

²⁹ Turner offers a structuralist version of Arthur Van Gennep's earlier analysis of ritual transformation as encompassing a phase of ritual separation, liminality and reincorporation. See Van Gennep *Les rites de passage* (The Rites of Passage) (1909).

and made available for questioning. As Bhabha states: “[I]iminal space, in-between the designations of identity [...] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4).

To a certain extent, liminality is also deployed in Brink’s Gothic novel for its imaginative connotations of a transitional state that promises change. Slightly different from their use in postcolonial theory, however, the Gothic tropes employed exhibit a concurrent enthrallment with the threat of entrapment that liminality also presents. The disorientation accompanying the dissolution of identity represents, for the Gothic, not only the space in which this identity may be renegotiated, but the space in which it may possibly be obliterated. Although ostensibly less positive, the Gothic implementation of the liminal acknowledges the significance of the *affect* of uncertainty. The marginality that serves as metaphor for postcolonial opposition to identity constructions imposed from the outside, functions as a metaphor for internal anxiety at the conception of a self. For this reason, the employment of liminal tropes in *Imaginings of Sand* cannot simply be interpreted as the unreserved proclamation of a potentially inclusive South African identity, but should be analysed for their concomitant affects.

The anxiety associated with liminality is made concrete in the opening of Brink’s novel, which sees Kristien sitting in an aeroplane, in transit between England and South Africa, between her present life and her past. Kristien’s discomfort about this journey, already commented on in the previous section, is enlarged when considering the title for this section: “The Return.” Several aspects of the notion are alluded to in *Imaginings of Sand*, the most obvious being Kristien’s reluctant physical movement back to the place she came from. Another is her uneasy reimmersion in her childhood memories. Recounted with more focus, however, are Kristien’s opening musings on the country she is coming back to as returning to what “is regarded as normal” through the repeal of apartheid laws (4). South Africa’s return to a state of stability is interpreted in the novel as a pivotal moment, a sudden break with the past that promises the restoration of harmony on the condition of rupture. Formulated in the novel as “a point of no return” (250), Turner’s concept of liminality as a disruption promising eventual arrival at new stability becomes appropriate, as does the Gothic notion of the liminal as eliciting a fear of change.

The irony of the novel’s framing of the 1994 elections as a “point of no return” while being engaged with the real possibility of returning (to the past, to normalcy) is compounded by the references to an “event horizon.”³⁰ An event horizon is an ultimate instance of liminality, as it denotes the boundary surrounding a black hole. Inside this limit, the gravitational pull of the black hole is so strong that nothing leaks to the outside: no information about the inside is observable

³⁰ The second-last, climactical section (in which the elections actually occur and in which Ouma Kristina finally dies) is called “Event horizon.” Mention of this phrase is also made elsewhere in the novel, such as on pages 325 and 348.

from outside its borders. Equally, nothing that passes to the inside can ever return. The ominous connotation of an inability to return suggested by the “point of no return” is amplified by the metaphor of the event horizon. The horror of being “pulled in” to the unknown, provides a Gothic take on the concerns about the loss of power during this moment of crisis. Hence, an uncomplicated description of this pivotal and historic moment as promising renewal is written off as inadequate. The novel’s posing of South African panic as Gothic, in that the anxiety it provokes is tied to a past that cannot be dismissed, ensures that its irrationality is not read as incredible or set aside as laughable, but attributed to the very structuring of the society described.

Considering the function of liminal instances, Turner stresses the importance of understanding social roles as performances, and social transformation as an experience, and thus positions the liminal instance as one of interaction: with the past (preliminal), the future (postliminal), and the wider social structure in which it is embedded. In this light, the experiences of South Africans voting in the first democratic elections would unavoidably be informed by an untold past and inconceivable future, as its anomalous character refers to these phases at the same time as it interrupts them. The array of social roles that await on returning to a (new) stable social structure, as envisaged by Turner, are imagined in the world of Brink’s novel to be intimidating for as long as one is still overwhelmed by an unfamiliar, newly-uncovered past.

One way in which *Imaginings of Sand* expresses this idea is by giving the reader an insight into the anxieties felt by representatives of the novel’s Afrikaner community, who fear that the elections will obliterate their group interests and lead to the disintegration of their identity. The narrative grapples with the feelings of this community by probing the motives of characters like Casper, Kristien’s brother-in-law. Casper is a conservative Afrikaner who feels threatened by the pending elections and regards everyone who does not form part of the Afrikaner community as an enemy. “A week from now will be the end of the world as we know it,” Casper explains to Kristien, “I’m fighting to stop what’s going to happen next week” (80). Casper appears as a representative of the “frontier society” that defines the landscape as something to be “owned” by virtue of physical conquest. “This is a bloody tough land to survive in,” he insists to Kristien, continuing: “...we’ve paid for it in blood and shit. It’s the only place in the world we can call our own. Now they want to take it away from us” (49). Like the Afrikaner farmers encountered in *On the Contrary*, Casper stakes his South African identity on belonging that is justified by the strength required for confiscating land from others, and on the authority that is implied by his current possession. In the liminal instance in which these justifications are re-evaluated, the prospect of losing his “rights” strikes Casper as analogous to losing his place in society and, thus, eradicates his sense of self.

His anxiety is echoed by Anna, Kristien’s sister and Casper’s wife, who tells Kristien that “once the blacks take over...anything can happen” (48). Time and again the narrative presents the

separation between the two sisters as larger than their geographical separation, encountered at the opening of the novel. Kristien is presented as inhabiting a different outlook from Anna, something that the narrative suggests can partially be attributed to her physical separation from South African society, but mostly originates from a dissimilarity in experience. When Kristien is once again described as scorning one of the “security measures” her sister has implemented in preparation for the elections (she has equipped the entire family with black night clothing should they have to escape in the night), Anna tearfully reproaches her by saying, “You really don’t understand the first thing about us, do you? This time, this place -” (37). In Anna’s mind, the time and the place produces the “us,” and no South African who does not share its current position can form part of it. Casper and Anna still think in terms of the “us vs. them” dichotomy installed and fostered by the apartheid government and therefore do not look forward to a transfer of power. They phrase their perception of this moment in eschatological terms, conflating a change in the nation’s official makeup with an obliteration of self. By failing to interact with the instances of the liminal, the altered past and the impossible future, the historic moment around which the novel centres, becomes, to these characters, a centre which cannot hold, and threatens to loosen “mere anarchy” upon the world.³¹

The interactive nature of postcolonial identity construction during such “moments of historical transformation” is what Bhabha, in the same vein as Turner, sees as significant. According to him “[I]t is in the emergence of the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.” (2). Bhabha posits here that the awareness of division (between a nation’s history and its future, and between members of its population) is brought out into the open at those moments that interrupt the normal state of affairs, and subsequently not only makes possible, but *requires* a reimagining of the social structure. The “return” of South Africa to a nation made up of one (more or less united) community that the characters in Brink’s novel foresee as impossible, becomes possible, and even inevitable, due to the collective experience of disruption characterising the liminal instance.

Like Turner, Bhabha also conceives of the liminal space as both a performative and a productive one, one that produces and bears out, rather than merely describing, identification. In keeping with this, the liminal instances found in *Imaginations of Sand* are those of engagement, albeit tortuous, with others – other times, other people, other places. In the novel, as in Bhabha’s conceptualisation, identities are not defined independently. Negotiation occurs in a hybrid zone precisely because it entails an exchange of performances that potentially produce mutual

³¹ To paraphrase Yeats in “The Second Coming” (1921) – a poem also famously cited to give expression to the chaotic consequences of colonial impositions in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

recognition and thus validation. One of the most tragic instances of the paradox inherent in such performances occurs when Brink's narrative focuses on the so-called "coloured" community of South Africa.

Ironically, the coloured characters in *Imaginings of Sand* are represented as inhabiting a similar position to the members of the conservative Afrikaner community in that both regard the "black" government they foresee coming to power as threatening. Ouma Kristina's coloured housekeeper Trui voices her concerns about the upcoming elections by telling Kristien: "Next week we're getting a black government, then we'll all be killed in our beds" (169). Trui does not appear to regard these "blacks" as part of the "we" that she refers to in her prediction. Like Casper and Anna, Trui believes that there is an impermeable division between the side that she identifies with and the side that is about to take control of the country, and she regards this opposing side as hostile.³² Complicating this notion of sides, however, is her awareness of the liminal status of coloured South Africans. Through the mouthpiece of Trui, Brink's novel suggests that those who are regarded as "coloured" in South Africa consider themselves "in-between people" for who "nothing will ever change" regardless of whether the country's government is "white" or "black" (169). The in-betweenness represented here becomes a place of entrapment in the Gothic sense, rather than Turner's transformative phase or Bhabha's position of resistance and change. Responses such as those of Trui point to the complex issues rooted in the construction of a South African national identity, in which the figure of the coloured is that of Morrison's "erased presence" (17). By embodying the practice of miscegenation proclaimed inconceivable by apartheid dogma, South African coloured people are given the status of the invisible, falling between the cracks as they miss out on allocations made for the different racial categories. In this sense, their liminal and hybrid status represents the nation's taboo.³³

In "South Africa in the Global Imaginary: An Introduction" from 2001, Leon de Kok asserts that there is a danger that representations of identity can eclipse the country's reality because the country's "reality" is that of cultural hybridity (289). Well-known South African author Breyten Breytenbach has made this notion famous by referring to South Africa as a place of "glorious bastardisation," whereas De Kok, somewhat more subtly, sees it as "a country of thoroughly interstitial identities" (272). Rather than a liminal space, De Kok marks the crisis of representation in South Africa (specifically referring to South African writing) as a "seam" that brings together

³² Zegeye's *Social Identities* acknowledges this concern among present-day coloured groupings, who experience the ANC's strategy of retaining certain apartheid identities as a means of addressing imbalances, rather as a reaffirmation of the former "second class" status that coloured people held under apartheid. Zegeye remarks that coloured people have lately begun to use the term "coloured" themselves as a symbol of collective identity against other groups, particularly white people and Africans, that combats this notion of second-class citizenship (Zegeye 341).

³³ I discuss the further implications of this taboo for South African identity formation in the next chapter.

unequal elements, which he sees as a “site of both convergence and difference” (276). He goes on to argue that:

in the resistance to apartheid, a keen awareness of the doubleness of representation – an awareness that, I believe, implicitly anticipated later theoretical critiques of the sign – led to a deep and enduring suspicion of the idea of formalised difference. (283)

In response to the doubleness found in everyday acts of identity, South African literary culture, expressed in Brink’s *Imaginings of Sand*, is characterised by a doubleness of representation. On the one hand, this doubleness can be interpreted as opposing present-day attempts to secure a unified political identity (redressing apartheid’s imposition of differentiation). On the other, as De Kok, Breytenbach and Brink’s Trui indicate, it gives expression to the reality of South African identity as hybrid in a specific way.³⁴ Because representation is, of necessity, interactive and subject to change, De Kok firmly believes that it is inevitable that “representations of ourselves will always carry the mark of the seam” (287).

Brink’s characters, starting with Kristien’s first foremother Kamma, carry the mark of such a seam, and this seam can be traced in all the female descendants that come after her. By framing the ambiguity of identity in Gothic terms, *Imaginings of Sand* emphasises that, although liminal and indefinite, doubled identities emerge in response to concrete situations and are, therefore, not random but historically specific. By placing the issue of identity construction within an unequivocally female realm, Brink’s novel combines an investigation into liminal identities with another, third aspect of the Gothic that I wish to draw into my analysis, namely that of the so-called “female Gothic.”

“Somebody’s wife, somebody’s sister, somebody’s mother”: the female Gothic

Literary critic Ellen Moers first coined the term “female gothic” in her landmark publication *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1976). In this work, Moers treats the Gothic not so much as a discreet literary genre, but as an approach to writing discernible in various literary works. She includes all works that articulate awareness of danger and convey feelings of dread and anxiety, rendering unto the female variety a specific anxiety about the self and, even more precisely, about one’s position as an outsider to (male) society. Feelings of fear and guilt are, in the female Gothic,

³⁴ De Kok does point out that all attempts at “fixing” South African identity by means of representation causes power to enter the discourse, running the risk of restaging a grand master narrative in South Africa in the wake of grand master narratives such as colonialism and apartheid. Acknowledging the ambiguity of identity in representing it as liminal or double is one way in which this can be handled.

not merely the result of being placed at the mercy of someone or something, but are revealed as a fear of being female itself, which, in its positioning as other predisposes a dissolution of identity.³⁵

Brink's narrative positions itself within this exploration of female identity from the onset. The opening line, "A big girl now," is a partial quote from Ouma Kristina that Kristien remembers and admonishingly repeats to herself when she sits on an airplane dreading her arrival in South Africa. On using it, she conflates her grandmother's pronouncement of her developed status on being confronted with her first period as a thirteen-year-old girl, with a mental squaring of the shoulders in having to take up her identity as a South African. Both applications interpret the sentence as a directive to behave in a certain manner: to adhere to what is expected of one who inhabits this particular identity. The verdict of being a "big girl" demands fortitude in correspondence to being mature, but simultaneously withholds the autonomy attending adulthood in ruling her a child still.

Moers accredits the paradoxical nature of female identity, steeped in obligation but without the full power of independent decision, with shaping the specific quality of despair encountered in the female Gothic. She distinguishes the "female" variant of Gothic writing as one that does not, like its male counterpart, delight in the hero's dissolution of identity, but, instead, represents a woman's tortuous journey towards a firmer sense of self. In contrast to the thrilling possibilities of liberation that the Gothic dangles before its reader, the female Gothic deals with a pre-existing condition of "self-disgust, self-hatred, and the impetus to self-destruction" that requires resolution through a narrative extension of the identity of its heroines (170). Moers goes partway to explaining this phenomenon when she states that:

Despair is hardly the exclusive province of any one sex or class in our age, but to give *visual* form to the fear of self, to hold anxiety up to the Gothic mirror of the imagination, may well be more common in the writings of women than of men. While I cannot prove this statistically, I can offer a reason: that nothing separates female experience from male experience more sharply, and more early in life, than the compulsion to visualize the self.
(107)

Fittingly, the short opening chapter of *Imagining of Sand*, which both starts and ends with the idea of being "a big girl," presents the reader with a number of instances of female self-reflection, all of them disturbing.

Kristien describes how her airplane seat is sandwiched between that of two grubby businessmen who both attempt to grope her and who, on being foiled, call her a "bitch," or "witch" – she muses that she cannot be sure which word was uttered. She reflects on their actions as

³⁵ This refers to Simone de Beauvoir's concept of women as "others" who stand outside of society in which only men can function as subjects.

understandable, rather than outrageous, and identifies ironically with their way of thinking by reckoning: “I am female flesh, I may be invaded” (4). Interspersed with this incident are her memories of her father’s disappointment at her being born a girl, which she retrieves by placing herself in the position of her father reflecting on her. She imagines that: “seeing me born, like my predecessor, without the distinguishing appendage of the right sex, he retreated in disgust and pretended I hadn’t happened” (3). By allocating the focalising power to her father, as she subsequently does to her assailants, Kristien’s perception of her identity as a woman takes on precisely the qualities of alienation and self-disgust that Moers sees as necessitating the female Gothic quest.

Susan Wolstenholme, in her *Gothic (Re)Visions* also describes this female brand of Gothic anxiety as being concerned with a recognition of the self as the object of a hostile gaze (60). Kristien’s self-conscious first-person narration, focalised from an outsider perspective, characterises her as a Gothic heroine grappling with her pariah status within the (South African) community. Kristien sees herself as an outcast because of her emigration to London, but through the course of the novel comes to see her experience of being excluded as something that connects her with her fellow South Africans. Her self-image as one that is “unwanted,” initially by her father and subsequently by her countrymen, eventually extends to numerous groupings denied power in the country’s history, and is forwarded in the novel through its recitation of hidden and unwanted stories. By absorbing these stories and recognising her participation in them, Kristien gothically fulfils her quest for a stable identity, and, analogously, points towards the possibility of finding a place for all South Africans.

The epiphany that Kristien experiences in *Imaginings of Sand* arrives when she grasps the precise significance of her grandmother’s stories. This marks the gothic climax of the novel, where a change in the perception of the heroine releases her from captivity. Wolstenholme characterises this liberating vision as brought about by a disregard of boundaries and delight in a “disjunction between what is ordinary and familiar and what is strange and terrible, to the undoing of their opposition” (58). Gothic motifs destabilise certainties and occupy the space between fantasy and reality, which holds the promise of change. The novel’s unstable, Gothic space is comprised of Ouma Kristina’s fairy-tale-like stories, which do not hinge on criteria of realism or truth, yet still, as Kristien muses, “always resolved everything, without disturbing the miraculous nature of the world” (5).

The way in which Ouma Kristina tells her stories differs from conventional historical accounts in several ways. First of all, the stories are not told chronologically and they do not refer to immutable facts. Kristien first hears the tale of her grandmother’s great-grandmother Wilhelmina, then that of Ouma Kristina’s grandmother, mother, daughter and then those of the women who

came before Wilhelmina. Like the Gothic novel, Ouma Kristina's narrative is fragmented and multiple and concerned with exploring possibilities rather than with transmitting concrete realities. Ouma Kristina's great-grandmother Wilhelmina is given superhuman powers in her tale, she lifts ox-wagons and entire logs across canyons and rivers while she is five months pregnant (276). Wilhelmina's grandmother Lottie is endowed with the ability to talk to animals and Wilhelmina's daughter Petronella is said to have been nursed by crocodiles as a child and grows up to become the personal confidante of God himself. The suspension of disbelief necessary to appreciate these stories comes effortlessly to Kristien, and, by association, to us as the extended audience.

Secondly, Ouma Kristina's narrative reverses the image of a progressive male lineage, already commented on above, by foregrounding the role played by women in the familial history to the exclusion of all else. She achieves this primarily by establishing that the family's women are the main characters of her stories, each time emphasising that the focus of the story should lie with its female agent. The recorded historical events that surround each story, ranging from the story of the first contact of the inhabitants of the Cape with foreign settlers to the impact of the Second World War on the country's politics, are consistently swept to the sidelines. The story of Ouma Kristina's foremother Wilhelmina, for example, is foremost the story of a woman whose growing weight became her only means of articulation in the repressive male-dominated atmosphere of the Great Trek of the 1830s. Historically recorded events such as the numerous clashes between the Voortrekkers, as they were called, and the native inhabitants of South Africa's interior during this time, are presented in the narrative as incidentals. This has the effect of lending importance to the aspects of history that relate women, rather than transforming the inadequate recorded historical events into a stratum that all of a sudden appear to be populated with female agents.

At the same time, Ouma Kristina's narration of events also emphasises women's agency in shaping the genealogy of South Africa's population by refuting the popular myth of the central role men play in begetting progeny. Ouma Kristina's foremothers seem purposefully negligent with regard to the entrenched husband's privilege of claiming offspring. The first-mentioned foremother, Kamma, is profiled as a mistress who withholds the children she bears from their presumed father and, instead, brings her blonde and blue-eyed offspring for safe-keeping to the Khoikhoi people from which she derives. Kamma's granddaughter Samuel strangles her husband with her long hair and then disguises herself as a man and embarks upon a lesbian love affair. Her daughter, Wilhelmina, marries a sickly husband whom she nurses and protects with devotion, only to poison him with arsenic and go on to marry again twice, killing one husband in a fit of rage and another by accident by means of her voluminous flesh. One of Wilhelmina's granddaughters, Rachel, is born during one of her father's lengthy absences, which calls the parentage of the child into question. The most likely candidate responsible for this particular pregnancy is Salie, a coloured farm

labourer, who later turns out to be the great-grandfather of Ouma Kristina's servant Trui. This, once again, links the family narrative with the narrative of South Africa's mixed population and, concomitantly, provides a link of identification traversing racial classification between the novel's narrator, Kristien, and the coloured Trui (as Salie's great-granddaughter). Most importantly, in all these scenarios, the men, like those events familiar from recorded history, are "incidentals."

The marginalisation of male accomplishments in Brink's novel does not, I argue, present us with a simplistic rewording of South Africa's exclusionist history in terms of an all-female viewpoint that seeks to correct or complete past omissions. Ouma Kristina constantly keeps the possibility open that the story she tells is different from what actually happened, but she also constantly teaches Kristien that accuracy is not important. Rather, she emphasises that this awareness of other sides of the story makes it "possible to go beyond" (149), and therefore plays an important role in releasing Kristien from her Gothic confinement within South Africa's predicament. Ouma Kristina's convoluted tales teach her granddaughter that only on transgressing you discover that beyond what you regard as "the familiar, the permissible" lies not the end of the world but the beginning of a new one (149). The unexpressed anxiety and fear of the other that led to violent responses in the past becomes, in the Gothic reworking of it, an awareness that it is the compulsion to retain control, and not the loss of it, that threatens disintegration of the self.

In contrast to Kristien's success in surrendering control as the Gothic strategy for dissipating the fear of the other, Kristien's sister Anna seeks to battle her female self-consciousness by seizing control, eventually causing the destruction of both herself and her family. Like Kristien, Anna is plagued by an outside perception of herself that imprisons her in a position of powerlessness. Even on experiencing the euphoria of the elections, where the impossible has happened and anything seems possible, she believes that:

[E]ven if the country does change, what difference can it make to me? I live on a different level, I'm afraid it's very basic. Man and woman. . . . I'm living on a kind of subhuman level. I'm not even a woman anymore. I'm just somebody's wife, somebody's sister, somebody's mother. (316)

Anna is not able to alleviate her fears regarding the collapse of those boundaries that divide "us" from "them" and continues to exclude herself from those elements she considers alien to her way of life. Anna is presented in the novel as someone so accustomed to adhering to social constructions of herself that she is unable to imaginatively recreate her image of herself in response to a changing situation. Anna refers to herself as a "female impersonator" who is very aware of her role and responsibilities as a "big girl," and who feels them stifling her into a position where she has none of her own decisions to make. Explaining to her sister how she came to marry Casper, she attributes it

to his taking of her virginity, after which she felt bound to marry him because “[y]ou transgress, and then you pay. You can’t go scot free” (134). Transgression, to Anna, signals a breakdown, not independence, and at the close of the novel she murders her five children and then shoots her husband, and subsequently herself, in the head to compensate for it.

Presenting us with these two different outcomes to the ordeal of femaleness, Brink’s *Imaginings of Sand*, like other Gothic novels, links the isolation of women with madness and death. At the same time, the ability to empathise and imagine the other is associated with progress and regeneration. By accepting that the past consists of different experiences that coexist, it becomes possible to accept that people, and you yourself, rightfully experience the present in different ways as well. All memories and stories and recreations of the past gain legitimacy as they all serve to link identity in the past to a valid identity in the present.

Conclusion

Reading Brink’s work in terms of Gothic motifs and strategies, a conceptualisation of South African contemporary identity as immersed in, but not condemned to, past practises of segregation becomes evident. By examining the process of searching for South African national unity in terms of a Gothic preoccupation with the stranglehold of the past on the present, the novel implies that the secret to outliving this legacy lies with reengaging with the past rather than opposing it. An event that breaks with history, no matter how much of a milestone, is insufficient in itself for changing entrenched perceptions. As evinced by the characters in *Imaginings of Sand*, to many South Africans the change in the country’s administration may not herald a straightforward dissipation of the “us” and “them” dichotomy based on racial qualities as much as it threatens to produce a new imbalance. Like Roderick Usher in Poe’s Gothic tale, figures like Casper, Anna and, initially, Trui, are unable to look outside of their own social or familial circle and respond with empathy to elements they regard as new or alien. They are unwilling to relinquish the division employed during the apartheid era because they fear a loss of control. In the context of the Gothic novel the result of such an incapacity is self-destruction. At the same time, the novel brings the hope that Gothic tactics can aid a response to difference that moves beyond fear. By confronting the secrets of the past and reimagining liminal and female placements within South African society, a way is offered out of the impasse of South African national identity.

The imaginative coalescence of binary opposites, such as between history and story and between the real and the possible, have disappeared by the end of the novel. Kristien realises that “what used to be stories has begun to coalesce into a history,” and she describes this history as “hers, ours, mine” (126). The us vs. them dichotomy is dissolved at the moment that rational thought has been put aside and the imagination is deployed. The stories that Ouma Kristina has

passed on to Kristien have left her capable of breaking free of the stranglehold of the past without rejecting or excluding it from her identity. After ingesting the stories she is told about her foremothers Kristien comes to accept that she has a history of her own that is inseparable from that of South Africa. She admits that when she had immigrated to England she had fully intended never to return and attempted to exclude herself from a South African identity, but, by the end of the novel Kristien acknowledges the complexity of her relationship to her national identity and her connection to South Africa's past. She realises that she cannot deny her identity or her complicity in the country's history and decides to stay in South Africa and reclaim her heritage. "I know now the extent of my responsibility," she states, "and what it means to be exposed here to past and future alike, conscious of origins and possible endings" (59).

Brink's novel ends on the day of the elections and follows Kristien in her conclusion that the merging of separate identities under a single national identity does not require an effacement of individuality or a correspondence with a new dominant discourse. The memories and experiences and stories that make up Kristien's life are endorsed as history in the same way that a story published in a history textbook is acknowledged as history. She does not have to deny the history of any of the thousand of people surrounding her in the queue to safeguard her own. The emphasis that Ouma Kristina has placed on the legitimacy of fabricated memories and constructed histories during her story-telling sessions with Kristien, has helped Kristien to understand at last that all history is a story and all stories, even those that conflict with other stories, are admissible as history. The use of the imagination allows conflicting versions to co-exist and ensures that the crumbling of the boundaries that exist between the self and its opponent no longer presents a threat.

In the next chapter, I consider one of the ways in which South African literature itself embodies this reengagement with the past by turning my attention to André Brink's *The First Life of Adamastor* (1993). Somewhat of an anomaly in the author's oeuvre, this work takes up the challenge of imagining the country's pre-colonial past without veiling the authoritative assumptions that such a reimagining implies. Firmly set within a framework of the quest for grasping the complexity of the country's history, it personifies the variety and disarray of South African identity. As a self-conscious literary exploration it extends the possibilities for co-existing viewpoints offered by the Gothic, and similarly contributes to the creation of a "great South African tale" in the same way as did *Imaginings of Sand*.

Chapter 3: Remembering Discovery in *The First Life of Adamastor*

“There’s no problem in the world that cannot be solved by a story.”³⁶

The First Life of Adamastor (62)

Where *On the Contrary* rakes up the crisis of identity experienced by Europeans on arriving in the Cape Colony of the seventeenth century, and *Imaginations of Sand* deals with the problematics of a post-Apartheid “return,” *The First Life of Adamastor* sets its narrative in the time of the first recorded contact between Europeans and South Africa’s early inhabitants, neither of whom were aware at that time that an identification as “South African” would ever come to pass.³⁷ Traditionally portrayed as a discovery, this interpretation of events attributes authority to the seaborne side and a concomitant passivity on the land-bound one that, I argue, Brink’s work foregrounds and unpacks in an intriguing manner. By integrating colonial stereotyping into his tale in a way that moves beyond mere allusion towards the burlesque, Brink’s work draws attention not only to its own formal status as a self-consciously *Western* novel, but also to how colonial and other Western conceptualisations of the event continue to frame the reader’s perception of South African identity today.³⁸

In considering how the novel conveys an awareness of its status as a Western work of literary fiction and its effect on the way in which we read the book, I focus on the term “contact” to organise my analysis. As Mieke Bal describes in her chapter on “Interdisciplinary Methodology” in *A Mieke Bal Reader* (2006), concepts are a useful tool for analysis because they are more than a rewording of “what is already known” (161). Aside from functioning as mini-theories that bring structure to a set of observable facts, concepts are metaphors that carry a surplus of information and therefore express the complexity of a certain subject, as well as proposing new readings of it (159). By becoming sensitive to the differences between the several aspects that the notion of contact covers (the extent of its metaphorical “reach,” as Bal terms it [158]), as well as keeping sight of the similarity that makes their association acceptable, I hope to bring insight into the “story” that Brink’s novel tells beyond that related by its anecdote.

The First Life of Adamastor problematises the notion of “first contact” as we encounter it in traditional historiographical narratives of European voyages of discovery, by offering several contradicting and overlapping narratives of contact. Contact is represented in the novel in the context of nationalist repercussions, as the discovery of South Africa by European powers has been

³⁶ All quotations taken from *The First Life of Adamastor* (London: Vintage), 2000, unless specified otherwise.

³⁷ The events referred to here are those of Portuguese explorers Bartholomew Diaz and Vasco da Gama sailing around the southernmost tip of Africa in 1488 and 1497 respectively, as the first recorded Europeans ever to have done so. Both came ashore to plant crosses, but did not establish a permanent settlement, regarding the Cape of Good Hope as a landmark en route to the East, rather than a destination in itself.

³⁸ Burlesque makes something appear absurd by imitating it in an exaggerated form. The humor lies in the retention of recognizability, which allows for the exposure of preposterousness in the (unexaggerated) original.

the traditional starting point for all historiographies of the country. Yet it also extends the consideration of these repercussions to the meaning of contact in other contexts. The forms of contact that I analyse in this chapter comprise different power relationships at several levels, and yield various metaphorical connotations, all cohering into a multifaceted but lucid expression of the complexity of South African society.

I explore three different instances of contact in the novel, which I analyse for their metaphorical reach and conceptual potential. The first instance of contact that I choose to explore occurs between an authoritatively exploring European side and a stationary, retreating native one. The way in which this aspect of a first contact or “discovery” is presented in the novel is, I argue, through an analogy with the contact between the various (literary) texts that make up the source material for the story. The second form of contact that I focus on is that of the narrative strategy of reader invocation, used by the framing narrator to draw the reader into complicity with his propositions for reading the narrative. Conceiving of this narrative force as mode of contact is productive in exploring how the novel’s identification of the narrators and readers as (hierarchically unequal) participants who are present and involved during the relating of the story has on the interpretation of the narrative. The third manifestation of contact I scrutinize is that of the sexual contact between the novel’s two primary characters, which extends the discourse on contact to “miscegenation.” I argue that the specific way in which the novel narrates the landmark encounter between dissimilar ethnic groups as a near-parody of certain Western literary and historiographic conventions, entices its analogous extension to these three other examples of contact as highlighted by the novel.

Imagining a South African Community - “first contact” as a contact between texts

The narrative of Brink’s *The First Life of Adamastor* is taken from a diverse range of cultural texts that include Khoi oral narratives, Greek myths, biblical stories and various imaginative reworkings of the colonial encounter. These attempts at linking the origins of the South African community to the event of first contact and forging a cultural memory from what is, in effect, a memory of European origin, provides a telling instance of the role that this particular memory of colonial contact still plays in the context of present-day national, rather than racial, identification.

It is telling in particular because the euphemistic use of the term “first contact” to describe the relations between European (Portuguese) navigators and indigenous South African (Khoi) inhabitants, aside from evading the violence which accompanied this occurrence, presents the participants in the event as representatives of specific cultures that are here brought together for the first time, to foreshadow other, later, community constructions based on this initial contact. The manner in which the knowledge of the later outcome influences our perspective on the event is

problematic, because the group of Khoikhoi who see the Portuguese navigators ashore cannot be perceived as representatives of a supposedly unified “indigenous” South African community, nor can the Portuguese sailors stand as representatives of the “European” element of South Africa’s ensuing “rainbow nation”.

The idea of the contact between these two fallaciously representative factions as shaping the South African nation is a central trope in present-day nationalist imaginings, popular because it invests its white community with a legitimate, less controversial (because pre-colonial) line of descent than that of the later Dutch and British settlements. I use the term “pre-colonial” here in the sense of “prior to settlement,” invoking the distinction between “colonialism,” indicating a transfer of population to the colonized country, as occurred under Dutch and British control of South Africa, and “imperialism,” which could refer to other ways of exercising power over the territory (as in the case of the indirect control brought into play by the fifteenth-century Portuguese).³⁹ Let me elucidate how this myth of first contact is foregrounded and problematised in Brink’s novel by means of different (literary and non-literary) texts.

The story told in Brink’s novel *The First Life of Adamastor* follows the general outline of the myth of Adamastor. It tells the story of T’kama, the leader of a group of Khoikhoi who live on the Cape coast at the time that a crew of Portuguese seafarers disembarks in search of provisions. The crew is presumably that of Vasco da Gama, the first known European to double the Cape in 1497. Although the narrative advances this hypothesis, partially by referring to specific styles of clothing and behaviour attributed to Da Gama and his men by the history books, it is never explicitly confirmed. This both counters and emphasises, by means of *paralepsis*,⁴⁰ the colonial tradition of hinging stories of discovery on the name of great exploratory (male) figures who, even if everything else about the journey of discovery is transmitted in an incomplete or inaccurate way, are always admitted into the annals of the sponsoring nation in great and accurate detail. In Brink’s novel, T’kama observes how the Portuguese visitors arrive and bring turbulence to his community by introducing guns and alcohol and engaging in unfair trading. The climax to the troubles that the strangers are seen to bring to the Cape shore is made manifest in the figure of the Portuguese woman who arrives ashore “on the morning of the sixth day” like a character straight out of Genesis.

T’kama, who has explained that his name, roughly translatable as “Big Bird”, derived from his being burdened with unusually large sexual organs, adopts the belief that the woman who has come ashore is “made for” him (or, at least, for his sexual organs). He is determined to join with

³⁹ See Kohn, 2006.

⁴⁰ At this point in the novel, the omnisciently-narrating Adamastor, who is looking back on the event, states quasi-nonchalantly: “I cannot say for sure today that they were Vasco da Gama and his men on their way to or from the East...”, naturally suggesting that this is exactly who they were (13).

her, but the Portuguese foreigners appear appalled at this and initiate gunfire, at which T'kama and his people flee with the Portuguese woman into the interior. What follows is the story of a journey through the hinterland of South Africa during which T'kama's community becomes increasingly angry at the presence of the Portuguese woman, who cannot communicate with them and who does not adhere to their observances and customs. During this time T'kama becomes increasingly frustrated because his penis grows larger every time he comes near the woman and he cannot consummate their union.

This is all paralleled by droughts, illnesses and other hardships that are increasingly attributed to the failure of this sexual union until, towards the end of their travels, T'kama's penis is bitten off clean after he uses it to haul the Portuguese woman to shore and safeguard her from being attacked by a lurking crocodile. The Khoi medicine man subsequently attires T'kama with a clay prosthetic and the union is finally consummated. After this consummation the Khoikhoi arrive back at the Cape coastline and settle there, only to be surprised by another fleet of ships whose crew comes to shore and who claim the Portuguese woman as soon as they see her. T'kama, who has learned Portuguese from the woman during their time together, appeals to the seafarers to let him pay a bride-price for her restitution. The seafarers accede, but when T'kama arrives at the rendezvous-point at midnight to be reunited with the Portuguese woman, he is left hugging the figurehead of a ship and is subsequently tied to this statue and beaten by the sailors. At the end of the novel T'kama, as the first incarnation of the mythical Adamastor (as we have been informed in the introduction), is left to die, but he prophesies that his death will never be accomplished because his spirit lives on in the child that he and the Portuguese woman have engendered.

The images summoned up by *The First Life of Adamastor* are part of a wider network of images from popular South African culture and history. The image of the founding of the nation in the moment of discovery is perhaps the most obvious of the novel's appeals to cultural memory, and one that will be explored more fully later on in this chapter. The stock image of the national population as forged from interracial relationships is part of another popular script, as is the reassuring perception that the group repressed by European settlers that formed the original South African inhabitants were made up of Khoikhoi. This population segment has been so significantly decimated in the present day that any antagonism on their part is no threat to negotiations of peaceful transactions between racial groups in South Africa today, and is therefore considered a safe arena for discussion. By memorising these cultural motifs within the novel the extent to which they impact on identity in the present is brought up for consideration. Discussing the various tropes below, however, I argue that the precise manner in which the novel alludes to them makes it impossible for the reader to leave them unchallenged.

The most dominant of the literary references that the novel makes, is to the Portuguese epic poem *The Lusíads*, written in 1572 by national poet Luis de Camões as a celebration of Portuguese history and, more specifically, in praise of the exploits of Vasco da Gama. In this poem, the first recorded mention of a mythical figure called “Adamastor” is found, although De Camões purports to be referring to Greek mythology.⁴¹ Da Gama’s encounter with the Cape of Storms, long popularised in Western Europe as a site of horrific shipwrecks is described as a confrontation with the figure of Adamastor as the giant spirit of Africa.⁴² Adamastor is positioned in the epic as the embodiment of pagan Africa that resists the colonizing mission and that invokes a curse on the Portuguese navigators, instantly conjuring up an unequal relationship between “discoverer” and “discovered”.

In contrast, Brink’s tale, written over three-hundred years later, sees the initial meeting between the discoverers and the tribe of T’kama (as the first incarnation of Adamastor) as a relatively affable one, marked by mutual hesitance and misgiving, certainly, but also by an exchange of gifts and attempts at communication (19). The inevitability of being arranged along either side of the divide between good and evil that marks De Camões’s pseudo-classical and mythological account, is replaced in the modern rendition by the distinct impression that anything could still happen and nothing is preordained. In this way, the pleasure that is to be had, as a reader, from having one’s expectations met, so obligingly provided by classical narratives structured along recognisable patterns, gives way, in *The First Life of Adamastor*, to the pleasure of readerly surprise. The reader of Brink’s novel, although fully aware of the connection with De Camões’s tragic tale (courtesy of its “Introduction”), is made to hope against hope that the outcome of the story will be different, as so many of its elements clearly point towards divergence from the original.

Aside from ensuring familiarity with a particular script, De Camões’s work also clearly connects with another set of authoritative stories in referring to classical mythology. In classical Greek legend, the Titans were the older, pre-Olympian gods who rebelled against their father Uranus, god of the heavens, and were overthrown and punished by Zeus. According to myth, Adamastor pays for the crime of filial insubordination by being exiled to the south of Africa

⁴¹ In Canto V of De Camões’s epic we also find the first description of South Africa in a European literary work, provoking the oft-quoted remark that, in contrast to European processes whereby societies, in telling stories of their origins, move from myth to history, in the South African colonial context a move is made to transform documented encounters of Africans and Europeans on the subcontinent into palatable myth.

⁴² Adamastor is ostensibly one of the fallen Titans of Greek mythology. A recent (2007) edition of Brink’s novel has a new title, which reads: “Cape of Storms: The First Life of Adamastor, A story”, giving pride of place to the adventurous (and more generally recognisable) image of a “Cape of Storms”, and relegating Adamastor to a mere subtitle. The cover of the new edition is also “revamped” and made decidedly more “sexy”. An image of the back of a black man clutching onto the naked torso of a white woman covers the new jacket. *The Immorality Act* of 1950 that, although discarded by 1990, could, at the time of the book’s first publication in 1993, still be freshly remembered by book-purchasing audiences may have discouraged earlier uses of such imagery.

(described in a later reworking of the myth by nineteenth-century South African poet James Campbell as “the butt-end of the world”), where he falls in love with the sea-nymph Thetis. Thetis does not return his feelings, but her mother, Doris, is eventually pressured into arranging a nocturnal tryst between the two. When Adamastor attempts to embrace Thetis during this rendezvous, he is punished by the Olympian gods for rebelling against the new order and for aspiring to love the goddess, and is turned into the rocky mountains of the Cape.

It is apparent that connections can be drawn between the plight of De Camões’s Adamastor and that of Brink’s T’kama, which corresponds with the novel’s characterisation of T’kama as (the first) incarnation of Adamastor. The reference to *The Lusiads* links the novel with attempts at justifying colonialism that were current in the sixteenth century.⁴³ T’kama could, then, be seen as analogously representing the villain of the plot who wilfully contravenes the natural order, and harvests punishment as a consequence. I argue, however, that the link between the two stories is not one of simple duplication, but that *The First Life of Adamastor* constitutes a revisitation of the story that deconstructs its initial rationale, providing different perspectives.

Jonathan Crewe, in his article “Recalling Adamastor: Literature as Cultural Memory in ‘White’ South Africa” (1999), posits that attempts at linking the Anglo-South African community to the early Portuguese epic of Da Gama’s circumnavigation of the Cape have been current in South African literature from the nineteenth century onwards, and form an attempt to invest this community with a purely European lineage and cultural memory.⁴⁴ Exploring the role that cultural memory plays in South African national identification, Crewe takes off from sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who proclaimed memory to be a collective rather than an individual phenomenon, constructed, rather than natural. This theory considers memories within the context of socially constructed narratives, both in terms of their social answerability and their inevitable capitulation to social impulses. Crewe claims that even individual memories are socially mediated and that any exclusion from collective memory is equal to identity deprivation. This view gives even more weight to the notion of a (proto-) European discovery starting the history of South Africa that legitimises not only a continued European presence, but naturalises its self-appointed supremacy.

Furthermore, Camões deliberately connects Anglo-South Africa to the cultural myth of Troy: Thetis is the mother of Achilles, and *The Lusiads* frames the Portuguese Da Gama as both the descendant of or conflation with the mythological Lusus, and as a re-embodiment of the Trojan

⁴³ The ideological justification of colonialism as responding to a “natural” and “innate” superiority (in terms of cultural advancement) on the part of the colonizers and a concomitant inferiority on the part of the colonized (who were ostensibly unfit to rule themselves), pre-dates Britain’s nineteenth-century conceptualization of a “civilizing mission” (“the white man’s burden”), and can be traced right back to the Crusades. See, for example, Lerner, Meacham and Burns, 1998 and Kohn, 2006.

⁴⁴ This is comparable to the way in which De Camões’s epic tale invokes a classical European heritage for the Portuguese, subsequent to the ending of Moorish occupation of the peninsula in the thirteenth century.

warrior Aeneas.⁴⁵ The use of the legend of Troy as justification for myths of national origin is thought to have started with Virgil, who, in his *Aeneid*, puts forward the Trojan prince Aeneas as father of Romulus and Remus and as the founding father of the Romans. Publications such as the 2004 *Fantasies of Troy: Classical Tales and the Social Imaginary in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* edited by Alan Shepard and Stephen Powell, show how this practice was adopted and extended by interested parties in medieval and early modern Europe. The essays in *Fantasies of Troy* investigate various ways in which evoking the legend of the Trojan War constituted a tactic in advancing the nation state in France, Italy and the British Isles. By reinventing Trojan heroes as founding fathers of specific European interest groups, the aptness of grouping these people together was reinforced. In this way, the cultural need for forming a nation was endorsed by the so-called natural course of history, and national identity was authenticated.⁴⁶

During the fourteenth century, at the height of their voyages of discovery and exploration, it was beneficial for the Portuguese to validate their national origins by recalling (and so inventing) a classically venerated past in which they were united even prior to Moorish rule. It is ironic, however, in terms of Lusus's ancestry (in classical mythology he was thought to be the son or companion of Bacchus) that De Camões's poem grants an antagonistic role to Bacchus, in which he is portrayed as a Moor and the embodiment of an East that tries to prevent the progress of Da Gama and his men. Lusus and Da Gama are here conflated, both seen as the incarnation of the Portuguese spirit that presses bravely onwards in spite of the opposition from a variously-guised "Other," who, in this instance, is unfavourably associated with Bacchus, whose role as god of wine appears less respected by the sixteenth-century Portuguese than it was by the ancient Greeks.

The extension that is invited by Brink's reworking of the tale would seem to be that of T'kama or, more specifically, Adamastor as the founding father of the South African nation, whose fortitude in the face of adversity (which, it is hinted, will continue through all his incarnations to come) provides legitimacy for South African national identity. In this case, it would be the very otherness of the Portuguese, as opposed to more familiar nationalities such as the English or Dutch, that would make it possible for all South Africans to image themselves unified in opposing it. The

⁴⁵ Achilles, famous war leader in the Trojan wars, is said to have killed Hector, son of Priam and brother to Paris, during the Trojan wars. Lusus is seen as the mythic founder of ancient Lusitania and the Lusitanians, the ancestors of the Portuguese. In his *Lusiads*, however, De Camões's descriptions of Da Gama's exploits evoke Virgil's *Aeneid* even more than accounts of Lusus. Canto I begins with a homage to Virgil, and, throughout the poem, mention is made of Trojan equivelants of the experiences that befall Da Gama and his men. On first encountering Adamastor, *The Lusiads* describes him as a "crafty Moor" taught by "vengeful Bacchus" to oppose Da Gama "as erst false Sinon snar'd the sons of Troy" (Canto I, page 26 in Mickle's 1776 translation).

⁴⁶ A famous example is provided by the twelfth-century "History of the Kings of Britain" by Benedictine monk Geoffrey of Monmouth. In this work, Geoffrey attempts to make available a coherent and logical line of descent for the various kings of Britain, starting with a character named Brutus, who is described as a descendant of Aeneas himself. The resulting genealogy, forced as it is to sew together Celtic, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Danish and other influences (and various sources from the sixth, seventh, and ninth centuries) into a single family tree, is remarkable for its imaginative determination. In spite of its implausibility, it forms the basis for immortal stories such as Mallory's Legend of King Arthur and Shakespeare's tales of King Lear and Cymbeline.

snag in this interpretation lies in the presumption that T'kama is recognisable as a representative of present-day South Africans. This presumption is frustrated in the text when it allocates T'kama and his people a mode of perception that is estranged from modern comprehension. The description of the Portuguese boats as “enormous sea-birds” that opens the narrative instantly places the focaliser at a distance from us, readers; as does the deliberately naïve descriptions of the Portuguese as “multi-coloured,” referring to their clothing and “not having much in the line of skin,” on account of their being white (12-13). So while T'kama's (and Adamastor's) admirable resilience, in Brink's version of the myth, contrasts positively with De Camões's estranging description of him as a veritable monster, his character remains alienated from the reader and precludes an easy identification. Instead, I contend, it functions as a representation of instability that perfectly encapsulates the modern predicament of South African national identification.

In “South Africa in the Global Imaginary” (2001), Leon de Kok attributes the mythologizing of Southern Africa as the unsightly “Adamastor” to a “crisis of represent[ing]” the African other (275). Colonial perceptions of the frontier in South Africa saw it as dark, threatening and hostile, as opposed to the American frontier, which was characterised as an “optimistic” one.⁴⁷ This act of appropriation sees disturbing colonial encounters being assimilated along with De Camões's poem as a justification for a civilising European white presence in Africa. In chapter one of this study, the same dehumanising presumptions were exhibited by the Afrikaner farmers that Barbier encountered during his travels, and in *Devil's Valley*, which will be unpacked in the next chapter of this study, I will return to an analysis of this phenomenon.

In this same vein, the reference to the myth of Adamastor as the central theme that runs throughout the novel may be a comment on the traditional way in which racial relationships have been represented within cultural memory, providing a means to evolve this convention beyond its dichotomous deadlock. As case study for his exposition on the process of fictionalisation that need not be considered separately from cultural memory, Crewe's article takes a look at Luis Vaz de Camões's *Os Lusíadas* as a popular site of cultural memory constructed by white Anglo-South Africans who, from the 1950s onwards, desperately sought to link themselves with a European mythology. The work, in its capacity as a Portuguese epic poem from 1572, strangely enough was hailed in 1909 as “the greatest of South African poems.” This epitomises the widespread Anglo-South African trend of importing European cultural memory and identity into South Africa in order to invest the Anglo community with an epic line of descent that predates the controversial periods of Dutch and British settlement.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Noël Mostert's *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1992.

Within the local reworkings of Camões's epic story, the figure of Adamastor proved the most emphasised, as well as the most contentious. Crewe attributes this to the fact that the figure of Adamastor, as personification of the Cape, anticipates both a resituation of European identity within cultural memory worldwide, and a reconstruction of whiteness within South Africa itself. Crewe notes that, in the oft-quoted seventeenth-century English translation of *Os Lusíadas* by Richard Fanshawe, Adamastor, even more than in the original Portuguese, is presented as a riddle to the Portuguese explorers. His appearance is described in terms of consternation and non-comprehension, as those who encounter him are at pains to make out what exactly this apparition constitutes. In this way, the symbolism of Adamastor is ambiguous. His visage as hostile symbol of the African continent, he appears to portend the dreaded disasters that await the explorers of this unknown land (unknown to them, that is).

Crewe traces the use of the figure of Adamastor as a threatening force in several South African poems, particularly those of Anglo South African poet Roy Campbell, and concludes that the one imaginary solution to the problem of South African displacement that is offered in these works is that of taking flight. Speaking of Campbell's "Rounding the Cape" he claims: "the poem is a script for self-exile (and implicit return to Europe) as emancipation" (83). The explicit racialisation of Adamastor and of all human relations in later adaptations of the myth, seems excessive because it is unwarranted by Camões's original text. It evokes the central position that race occupies in white South African consciousness. It can be read as the extreme distillation and abstraction of blackness, performed in literary images in order to propagate a purified image of whiteness. Crewe recognises that, with regard to the reciprocity involved in such antipodal race constructions, the white South African now no longer has the option of exile or flight because "the imaginary white man remains bound to the blackness of his own construction" (84). By linking the construction of race in Anglo South African literature to this same construction of race within Anglo South African cultural memory, their self-destructive and restrictive effects can be usefully critiqued.

In this regard, Brink's novel moves beyond being the umpteenth in a long line of works that make use of the Adamastor figure in order to give expression to the experience of being white at the "butt-end" of Africa. *The First Life of Adamastor* focuses attention on an experience of South Africa as the centre, not the periphery, of cognition, without the option of withdrawing or vacating the country. The characters that focalise the novel's story are indigenous inhabitants of the country and do not perceive the event of discovery as one of the discovery of something foreign at all, but rather as an encounter with a foreign intruding culture. The terms in which the Portuguese sailors are described focus on their strangeness. For instance, they are described as ostriches, "their heads so overgrown with beards and moustaches you could hardly see their faces" (13). Not once within

the novel are they given a platform from which to speak their own view. They are described as being without language, as “they could utter sounds, but these were quite meaningless,” (18). The experience presented in the novel is what can be regarded as the “South African,” not the colonial experience, and the figure of Adamastor is reclaimed from its colonial position as an omen of danger and transformed into a local tourist guide.

Nevertheless, the notion that Brink’s novel is, perhaps, nothing more than a recent reworking of an earlier-told story is encouraged by the novel itself. On the novel’s very first page, a context is created for the character of Adamastor in terms of genealogy: “the long genealogy of giants who begat one another” (1). From page 11 onwards, T’kama, as the first incarnation of Adamastor, appeals to his authority as our narrator by cataloguing his descent in terms of a long list of “sons of”. The idea that *The First Life of Adamastor*, in keeping with the characterisation of its main narrators, is merely the latest in a successive line of narratives, one based purely on male descent is easily conceived. By taking a closer look at the treatment of stories within Brink’s novel, however, I will suggest that it is neither a straightforward reworking of an earlier theme nor a creative attempt at entertaining its reader with a pseudo-post-modern melting pot of narrative sources.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the dialogic imagination of novels as hybrid constructions that contain the ability of one voice to ironise and unmask the other suggests the possibility that Brink’s novel undoes authoritative discourse by forcing a renewed interaction between the narratives he cites, rather than a simplistic transmission of their “begettal” of one another.⁴⁸ In this way, Brink’s *The First Life of Adamastor* does not simply complete the idea of a mythical discovery of uninhabited lands subsequently civilised, but changes the reading of these myths. The discussion that is made possible within *The First Life of Adamastor* hinges on the idea of “contact” as embodied, first and foremost, in the cultural notion of discovery. Todorov, in his *The Conquest of America* (1984) positions the discovery of America at the nucleus of present-day Western identity. Todorov unashamedly states that “[t]he history of the globe is of course made up of conquests and defeats, of colonisations and discoveries of others” (5), further acknowledging the political agendas that underlie such a construction of history. The presumptuousness implied in his naturalisation of a Western worldview is evinced by his dubbing this specifically and subjectively structured history as that of “the globe.” This presumption is earnestly questioned in the representation of events in Brink’s novel. The viewpoint given “from the landward side” within the novel brings the one-sidedness of traditional descriptions of colonial encounters home to the reader, albeit in a somewhat simplistic manner.

⁴⁸ See Mikhail Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981).

The centrality of the myth of discovery within South Africa's cultural memory itself is also brought up for questioning within Brink's reworking of the myth of Adamastor. Along with Marshall Sahlins, in his article "The Return of the Event, Again" (1991), we can legitimately ask how a single event can determine a whole historical trajectory of national relations, let alone global ones. Sahlins concedes the importance of historical events but also maintains that it is more analytically productive to view history as a structure or system over and above a mere accumulation of events. He bases his argument on the fact that even events derive their significance from the cultural structure that frames them. Exogenous events, such as "invasion" or "discovery" (depending on one's outlook), may occur outside of the control of the culture to which they befall. But they are still attributed with meaning based not on their objective properties but on the place they are given within that existing culture or of the new cultural frame that emerges. When we consider that events are defined in hindsight and according to their contrast to and difference from so-called "non-events," the extent to which events change the order of things is the most culturally significant thing about them.

Such an alteration in interpreting the novel is brought about not only by its intertextual associations, but also by the manner in which the narration is delivered to the reader. As previously mentioned, *The First Life of Adamastor* is the harbinger of not just one, but at least three narrators, all of whom display authoritarian characteristics and try to steer the reader in a particular direction. In order to examine the effect that this has on a reading of the myth of South Africa's founding, and the impact this would subsequently have on the nation's identity, I now turn towards an analysis of contact between narrator(s) and reader.

Invoking the Reader: Contact between Narrative and Reader

The narrative strategy of reader invocation, used by the frame narrator to draw the reader into complicity with his propositions for reading the narrative, is the second form of contact that I focus on in this chapter. It will become clear that my aim here is not to analyse Brink's work for the purpose of learning *about* his novel, but rather to learn *from* it. By confronting the novel on its own terms and positioning it as a cultural object that participates in an analytic discussion, the novel itself, and not its author, becomes a speaker and participates in the production of meaning. For this reason, neither the obfuscating question of authorial intention nor plethoric issues of authorial authority play a role in this analysis. This is not to say that the question of authority itself can be left out of the discussion. Instead, I will argue that the entire structure of *The First Life of Adamastor* can be read as an interrogation of authority, especially that of narrative authority.

Brink's *The First Life of Adamastor* is aware of its own status as a narrative. It is characterised by a plethora of narrative voices, remarkably so for a novel of barely one hundred

pages. The first narrator encountered in the novel is the narrator of the introduction. This speaker functions as a framing narrator, who assumes an authorial voice and brings us the succeeding story. The narrator of the story proper, starting with section 1 on page 11, is split into two voices. The first is T'kama, who is also a participant in the story that is told, and undergoes the action that he relates to us. The second voice, which interrupts and steers T'kama's narrative by means of remarks and footnotes, is that of the omniscient Adamastor, who looks back on his first incarnation as T'kama. The two incarnations can be distinguished as separate voices in the narrative by the difference in their knowledge and awareness. T'kama is a naïve narrator compared to the omniscient Adamastor, a difference that supports the use of dramatic irony in some of the novel's pivotal passages.

The framing narrator opens and closes the novel with an account that provides a context for the narrative and enfold the story proper. This narrator definitely but almost imperceptibly sets himself up as an authoritative voice on the opening page of Brink's novel. Words such as "formula," "narrative forms," "tradition" and "genealogy" ease the reader into the story of Adamastor, and appear to set up a type of theoretical justification for what is to follow. The opening paragraph, punctuated by qualifications such as "I believe" ("An old Spanish tradition, I believe...") and "to my knowledge" ("Rabelais, to my knowledge the first to introduce Adamastor in a story...,") is marked by the distinct impression that the reader has been sat down to learn the contextual history from an authority on the subject.

To compound matters, the reader is not only confronted with a series of facts with regard to the background of the myth of Adamastor, but also with the framing narrator's interpretation of it, albeit couched in somewhat less definitive terms. The narrator offers "[m]y own suspicion, the product no doubt of a more cynical and secular age..." (3). These interpretations are interspersed with judgmental comments such as "[r]ather exaggerated, but that is what happens..." (5) and "[i]n many ways this is an unsatisfactory translation" (6). The reader may feel compelled to accept these judgements as her own because a few clever additions of the word "we" in this opening monologue serve to create a sense of being on the same side as the discerning narrator. Discussing the Titans from which Adamastor originated, for example, the narrator states that "[s]ome of them, as we know from Greek mythology, are buried under huge mountains," (4) presumably shaming those of "us" who do not know Greek mythology at all into quiet deference. When this brief reminder of the level of knowledge that the reader is presumed to have is followed by two admonishing interspersals of the phrase "bearing... in mind" (5, 6), which function as reminders to the reader to stay with the argument; the invitation that the framing narrator extends to the reader at the end to "take the plunge" with him in exploring his hypothesis, begins to sound less like an invitation and more like a requirement.

The framing narrator often takes on the guise of the intrusive narrator of a Charles Dickens novel, who, as specifically stated in the introduction, “proposes the terms of contract with the reader” (1). This establishes a relationship between this narrator and the reader that is marked by connotations of obligation, and sets up a hierarchy of contact over and above any sense of allegiance a reader may feel with regard to further characters or narrators. The relationship between the reader and this narrator is strengthened when he speaks of the world of the sixteenth-century seafarers as opposed to “our own time and terms,” providing a frame against which to read the story in terms of the “imagined community” that he sets up in his use of the word “our.” As Bal discusses in her “Afterword” to *Travelling Concepts*, every use of the word “we” is a performance of a community (Bal, 325). Not only does the novel assume that its audience is part of a particular community, but it actively shapes that community by means of such assumptions (Anderson, 25). The contract binds readers to this authoritative narrator as he bids them to heed the story’s frame. The reader and framing narrator are drawn together. The word “contract” comes from the Latin and literally means “drawn together” into a complicitous alliance, which will now enter the story as an informed unity.

The specific identity of the narrator of this first, explicatory section, is not made entirely clear, nor does it necessarily need to be made clear. What does become evident is that this framing narrator is set up as an ostensibly reliable source of authority that privileges the reader with a frame against which the succeeding story can be read.⁴⁹ The framing narrator reappears in the reader alerts that start each chapter, where he helps to place the reader on equal footing with T’kama.⁵⁰ Chapter I of the novel, in the same heavy-handed Dickensian manner of the introduction, previews that this is a chapter “[I]n which the reader encounters a curious kind of bird, and a woman hatched from an egg” (11). T’kama’s encounter in the novel becomes the reader’s, and even his manner of perception of this event is likened to ours, as, apparently, we will find the bird as curious as T’kama deems it. The division between reader and focaliser appears temporarily straddled, and is further undercut by the omniscient narrator Adamastor, who provides an overlapping dimension of perception that destabilises both the reader’s (non-) relationship with T’kama the focaliser and with the framing narrator.

As becomes apparent from the beginning of the novel proper (from page 11 onwards), the identity of the narrator of the main story is quite different from the framing narrator. The opening

⁴⁹ For an extensive account of “Reliable Narrators as Dramatized Spokesmen for the Implied Author” see Part II section VIII of Wayne C. Booth’s *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1961.

⁵⁰ A humorous example of such a reader alert is that of chapter IV, which runs: “In which an answer is given to a question which must have been smouldering in the reader’s mind for some time now, to wit: Given the anxious circumstances in which they spent that night, the emotional condition of the woman from the sea, the nature of the narrator’s wound and the size of his member, did he have intercourse with her?” The chapter that follows this alert is the shortest in the book, and comprises just a single word: “No.”

page of the narrative that follows this pedagogic frame sees T’kama and Adamastor take over as narrative voices. T’kama presents himself to the reader as the narrator of the story proper by itemising his features in a particular sequence, ensuring a specifically circumscribed reader’s perception of him. The first thing he mentions to the reader is that he, the “I” narrator of Adamastor’s story, is the leader of the group who witness the landing on the beach. “It was to me they all turned to for advice. I was their leader,” he states. He goes on to provide us with his name, in the same breath explaining that this name, T’kama, or “Big-Bird” is derived from the fact that, in the Khoi language, “bird” is “a slang word for the male member.” “[S]o I humbly trust,” he goes on to say, “as I am not given to self-advertisement, that the reader will draw his (or indeed her) own conclusions” (14). After this piece of self-advertisement masquerading as humility, T’kama provides the reader with his genealogy, consisting of the mentioned line of begettings apparently engendered only by male subjects. In this way, the nature of the narrator’s prejudices is brought home to the reader. Any assertions of attempts at making contact can be read against this background of bigotry.⁵¹

The story of the first life of Adamastor is focalised by T’kama himself, interspersed with correcting remarks and explanations by the omniscient Adamastor. T’kama’s storytelling allows the reader an insight into the events that befall the protagonist from a privileged insider’s view. T’kama’s experience of the Portuguese landing is presented from within his viewpoint, a fact that is brought to the fore in descriptions of the Portuguese vessels as “enormous sea-birds”, the descending rowboats as “eggs” (11) and the colourfully clothed navigators as creatures “[l]ike birds” with “feathers” in “all colours under the sun” (12). The belaboured difference in cognition between the focalising T’kama and the reader sets up a divide that continues throughout the novel and is strengthened by the establishment of a communal “we” and “us” that pointedly excludes the reader. “[A]ll those people looked alike to us”, T’kama tells the reader in explicatory fashion, emphatically excluding the reader from the community he is describing.

T’kama’s description of events is inscribed with terms that have associations with newness and origination, corresponding with the expectation of readers that the event will mark a new beginning, a primary event. The advance of the Portuguese ships as perceived by the Khoi people on shore is described in terms of the laying and hatching of eggs. The place from which they advance is the “nesting-place” of the sun and the breeze that accompanies this primeval scene is “newly sprung up” (11). In fact, everything about the scene appears new and fresh: the people who come ashore are of a kind “we’d never set eyes on before” (12) and the time during which all of this is said to occur is defined as “that first afternoon” (14), as if there had been no knowledge of time or

⁵¹ In the next chapter, on the politics of the Fantastic in Brink’s *Devil’s Valley*, I will show how the narrator of the novel establishes a similar relationship with the reader by establishing himself as unlikable and untrustworthy.

days before. This particular use of the rhetoric of nationhood in terms of firsts and beginnings implies the view of a deferential descendant. The evocation of origins hereby becomes a means of creating the idea of a community, whereby the circumscription in time of a starting point for a nation allows for the ritualisation of memory as commemoration (Brennan, 50).⁵²

The narrator's first mention of T'kama's awareness of the Portuguese woman is couched in terms similar to those used for describing the event of "first contact," with T'kama asserting that his "first sight of the one I later named Khois... is beyond comparison with anything else." The wonderment he feels during this moment he calls his "only innocence" (14), again conjuring up the image of a (biblical?) beginning, rather than a continuation from the past. The trope of star-crossed lovers that represent particular facets or aspects of a nation's population that seek to join within a national community is a popular one within the genre of novels that embody the idea of nationness in their content, representing the desire for a nation in which the lovers could possibly come together. These novels, Jonathan Culler states, in an article entitled "Anderson and the Novel," "share the project of national reconciliation," the desire to represent previously unreconciled parties as lovers who are actually "naturally" right for each other" (25). Brink's novel may be said to represent its readers with a similar trope, but with such apparent hesitance and misgivings that a conclusion on national reconciliation or a united national identity is far from reached. The narrators of the novel play a large part in communicating the questionability of such constructions to the reader, both in how they present the unfolding story and in the way they characterise their own relation to it.

The narrator who guides the story is not T'kama at all, but the later embodiment of Adamastor, who is distanced from T'kama and connected to the readers by several hundreds of years. This point is driven home in various footnotes and asides, in which the narrator provides a frame of subsequent historical and literary occurrences, making mention of seventeenth-century Dutch explorations, eighteenth-century portraits and nineteenth-century poetic reworkings of the myth of Adamastor, as well as his specific referral of readers to later chapters in the novel. The narrator even, every so often, translates T'kama's view of events into modern perceptions, and often throws doubt on his interpretation. At other times, these interpolations by the narrator that "oversees" the narration of T'kama deliberately throw doubt on the accuracy of the narrative by emphasising the historical distance of events. "I cannot say for sure today" (13), the supervising

⁵² The added feature of a reference to the event of Portuguese, rather than later Dutch or British invasions, appears to encourage a "we" feeling rather than a "them and us" feeling. Ironically, as Timothy Brennan discusses in his essay "The National Longing for Form," European nationalism actually arose from the age of exploration, whereby the markets created by European imperialism motivated the construction of nation-states on the European continent itself. This suggests Todorov's point: we only needed to know who we were when we found out there were other places. Imperial conquest caused the fall of Europe's universal Christian community and supplied nations with self-identity (59).

narrator warns the reader, and “It is difficult, five hundred years later, to give a clear account of what happened” (32). With respect to the pivotal arrival of the Portuguese woman onto the shores of the story, this supervising narrator reveals himself as most despotic.

On T’kama’s account of the arrival of the woman, the supervising narrator admits that the presence of a Portuguese woman aboard an exploratory vessel “would have run counter to all social, economic, moral, religious or pragmatic considerations of the time” (22), casting instant doubt on the event just narrated. He also, however, dismisses this disbelief by retorting that “it hardly matters what history records” because, in terms of the story, the woman was simply there (23). In this way, the supervising narrator reveals his own heavy-handedness in conjuring up events he is “remembering” and sets up the logic of the novel as ultimate authority, even when it conflicts with official historiography. This is made explicit at the start of the third chapter, where he revokes the escape from the beach accomplished by the Portuguese woman at the end of chapter two by decreeing that “for the sake of my story, for the sake of the whole history still ahead of us at this point, I shall bring her back to land.” (28). The physical, though impossible, presence of the woman is required in the story in order for it to develop.

The arrival of the woman, and of the Portuguese at the Cape in *The First Life of Adamastor*, causes the order of things to change significantly for T’kama and his people. The beginning of the narrative sees T’kama seeking to control the damage by referring to the ordered genealogy of himself and his people and explaining to his readers, in a pseudo-anthropological way, in what order and to what purpose certain rituals have always been performed by his people. The progression of the narrative, however, sees things come “undone” as the impact of the arrival of the Portuguese is felt. The metaphor of the “arrow daubed with bitter-berry magic” that T’kama uses to explain the invasive and inevitable nature of his growing awareness of the Portuguese woman, can be successfully extended to the contaminating influence that the event of the Portuguese landing has on the daily life of his group (28). The flight into the hinterland that the Portuguese provoke the Khoi to undertake causes the death of various members of the group due to illness and hunger. The alcohol that the Portuguese distribute among the Khoi gives rise to insubordination among the Khoi and a breakdown of the group’s hierarchical order. The presence of the Portuguese woman among the Khoi causes internal dissatisfaction among the group. All these cases of direct action and reaction, cause and effect, contribute to T’kama’s ultimate death on the beach and his prophesying of a future for the country marked by “bones, so many bones. The sheer whiteness of white,” a vision only alleviated and ultimately conciliated by the child engendered from the union of T’kama and the Portuguese woman that will mark the future of South Africa (133). A union between self and other in its various guises, related to autochthony and foreignness, masculinity and femininity, Africanness and Europeanness, is thus seen to originate a South African national

identity. In the next section, I analyse the contact between the Portuguese woman and T’kama as a third manifestation of the concept of contact, paying particular attention to its positioning as the narrative focus of the novel and its appellation to colonial interpretations of inter-race contact as “miscegenation.”

Intersecting Miscegenation

The primary meaning of the word contact is that of a state or condition of physical touching. Robert Young, in his *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995), discusses the extent to which the desire for meeting and incorporating the culture of the other gave rise to what he calls “colonial desire.” He adds that, although much attention has been paid to the two major products of cultural contact in postcolonial discourse, namely, language and sex, little attention has been paid to the mechanics of cultural contact itself (5). These mechanics, as Young terms them, are pursued in a variety of guises in *The First Life of Adamastor*, in a way such that each appearance of contact in the novel uncovers but also destabilises another. The motifs of the fluctuating contact between narrator and reader and that between T’kama and Khois are, as it were, combined within the novel to destabilise readers’ preconceptions and to move away from truth as a system of binaries. By taking a closer look at how these instances of contact are set up and destabilised a greater insight into the kind of perception observed in the novel may be achieved.

The contact between T’kama and Khois is positioned as the central procedure that demands to be performed for the story to make sense. Here the varied nature of the contact between the novel’s readers and its narrators/focalisers and the contact between its central characters inform and intersect each other. For, one particular aspect of the Adamastor myth is that of the sexual contact between Adamastor and Thetis or, in Brink’s reworking, between T’kama and the Portuguese woman. In the transfer of this aspect of the legend into *The First Life of Adamastor* it becomes a central site of meaning that is loaded with implications. Adamastor pronounces a curse on the Portuguese sailors should they settle at the Cape, and one aspect of his curse is his prophecy that European values of chivalry and matrimony will disappear if they decide to install themselves in Africa.

The metaphoric way in which this part of the curse is phrased presents the reader with an image of an “Angelick lady” (representing romance, chivalry and matrimony) being disrobed by “black, rude Caffres.” This image, of course, links up directly with European fears concerning the black man’s desire for the white woman. At the same time, Adamastor is painted as gratifyingly immobilised and sexually impotent by the punishment dealt him in response to his illicit desire for the nymph Thetis. This state of incapacity is an essential element of focus in later South African reworkings of the poem, meant to secure the tranquillity of a white population increasingly and

uncomfortably aware of their own status as usurpers on the continent. Crewe sees how Adamastor resurfaces in various South African literary texts, each time accompanied by a barely expressed fear of the revenge he is justified in exacting. At the same time, the lamentation of Adamastor at being isolated and stuck “at the butt-end of Africa” is echoed in the feelings of the Anglo-South Africans themselves, who come to identify with him in this way.

The theme of miscegenation is a much-used trope in Brink’s fiction that dates right back to 1976 (*An Instant in the Wind*), when the *Immorality Act* of 1950 was still in effect. Sue Kossew, in her *Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J.M. Coetzee and André Brink* of 1996, interprets this interest in cross-cultural intimacy as an interest in the creative potential of transgression. In her critique, Kossew discusses several aspects and possible interpretations of Brink’s repeated use of the motif of miscegenation. She identifies that, within Brink’s novels, this theme frequently takes the form of a black protagonist who is allowed to overcome, however briefly, the barrier imposed between him and “the ultimate thou-shalt not,” the white woman (49). Rarely do Brink’s works present interracial sex between a white man and a black woman. This foregrounds the idea of transgression when it is considered that, although relations between white men and black women were historically frequent within South Africa, the image of interracial sex between black men and white women was often considered in legislation and historical debate as a source of great fear among figures of colonial authority.

Kossew suggests that Brink’s bold employment of this image proposes the empowering idea that “history can happen without the white man” (51). At the same time, however, she acknowledges that the historical distancing that most of his novels engage in, although possibly interpreted as a probing of the origins of racial tensions, could alternatively be seen as suggesting that a union between black and white is no longer possible in the present. In a similar way, Kossew proposes that, although the journey undertaken by T’kama and Khois to escape the Portuguese in *The First Life of Adamastor* could be read as a metaphor for the growing understanding between black man and white woman, the subsequent end of the novel reworks the theme of the betrayal of the indigenous man by his contact with the white woman. This notion of the coloniser woman’s ultimate rejection of her affinity with the colonised man on the basis of a shared lack of power is a popular colonial trope, whereby “the ultimate betrayal results from the power of the colonizers to recolonise the wayward woman” (59).

Brink’s novels refer to and sometimes appear to intersect with the image of miscegenation within a colonial context. Stoler, in her *Race and the Education of Desire*, remarks that, ultimately, in colonial discourse, anything and everything could be attributed to the dangers and contaminations of sex (vii). In a similar way, Young, in his critical work, explains that the height of the colonial era saw opposing theories rise up in Europe with regard to racial mixing, some theorists seeing it as

signifying the death of the nation and others as its salvation (101). Young explains that, because the state sought to rule its population through the ideology of normativization, through which social behaviour was controlled by turning social dilemmas into the problem of the individual, the normativization and legislation of sexual activity played a pivotal role. Sex, after all, appeared to be what linked individual life to the life of a species as a whole, and, in terms of colonial discourse, one's personal conduct was tied to racial survival (Young, 171). The colonial practice of governing sexual conduct was mostly aimed at the dangerously undisciplined sexual appetites of women. Ostensibly, within *The First Life of Adamastor*, the colonial image of the white woman as both removed from the sexual desires of white men and imagined as the object of the desires of black men (while prohibited from desiring for herself) appears to be continued.

The meeting of self and other that Todorov discusses proposes that the discovery of the existence of "others" is central to the process of identity formation. For this reason, he sees the specific case study of the "discovery of America" of 1492 as deserving of special attention. One reason he gives for this is that it exemplifies a discovery of a "radical difference" to a greater extent than the exploration of other parts, of which the existence was already known or at least suspected. The other reason that Todorov distinguishes is expressed in more poetic and nebulous terms, and consists of a claim that the birthplace of the genealogy of his assumed readers is found in the event of discovery of 1492. "We are all the direct descendants of Columbus," Todorov avers (5). The ascription of the formation of a univocal American identity to an event as riddled with misconceptions, coincidences and blunders, not to mention the interference of a large variety of nations and nationalities, as Columbus's voyage of 1492, is exceedingly ironic. The incontestability of this perception within even present-day American cultural memory testifies to the power of the image of first contact as a catalyst for national identity in other parts of the postcolonial world.

"Contact," or, as Todorov prefers to phrase it, "the discovery of the other," is perceived as procuring a sense of totality or participation for the discoverer that is essential in forming a conception of one's identity. But what about the one that is discovered? Does the event of discovery set up a hierarchy between discoverer and discovered or does the term contact, with its more egalitarian connotations, do greater justice to the process and practice? If the acquisition of a sense of identity can be attributed to a renewed sense of the totality of which one forms a part, then the counter-acknowledgement of the identity of the encountered other, who has compelled this awareness, would seem assumed. Examining the way in which this process has been memorialised within cultural motifs, however, the conviction of this assumption seems somewhat shaken.

Miscegenating the Nation

Brink's novel represents the moment of South African first contact between Portuguese sailors and Khoi residents in terms of observation rather than discourse. The Portuguese who came ashore at the start of the novel are observed by T'kama's group of Khoi men, who do not approach the "intruders" (as they are dubbed by the Khoi) and do not reveal themselves to them. The narrative repeatedly refers to the activities of the Khoi as watching the European men. "[W]e watched the eggs returning to the land," the narrator states, and "[w]e watched in awe," "we watched the strange men," "[w]ith our own eyes we...witnessed" (16-17). The Portuguese, whether confident of finding the land empty or just plain oblivious to the observing Khoi, are described as performing a number of ritual acts without any concern for acquainting themselves with the encountered land. They fetch water, wash their clothes, hunt for food and finally open a hole in the ground in order to plant a large cross within a raised outcrop. When the Khoi finally decide to make their presence known to these preoccupied trespassers, the Portuguese appear less than pleased.

T'kama's Khoi are described as seeking to communicate with the Portuguese out of an apparent sense of kinship with these strangers, who they perceive as fellow worshippers of "our Great Hunter." They interpret their planting of a cross on the hill where the Khoi worship the hunter Heitsi-Eibib as a sign of equal respect for this deity and are thus encouraged to come out of their hiding places. The Portuguese, however, respond to this attempt at communication as an economic transaction. They offer beads and copper and solicit the company of Khoi women in exchange. On being introduced to these women, the Portuguese proceed to baptise and name them, without further evidence of seeking to communicate with them (verbally, that is). Seen through the point of view of jubilant European narratives of discovery, the lack of communication and one-sidedness of the approach may seem difficult to extract, but in Brink's description of the experience from the landward side the deficit becomes palpable.

With respect to gender attitudes, however, the European-Khoi opposition cannot be interpreted so simplistically. A few pages after the narrator has related of the Portuguese lack of regard for Khoi women, T'kama himself comes upon the Portuguese woman for the first time. She immediately piques his interest because of her deliberate isolation from the rest of the Portuguese retinue. She arrives ashore by herself and later than the rest of the group, and, on reaching the shore, proceeds to engage in the solitary activity of bathing. T'kama, who, at this point, has also disengaged himself from the rest of his group because of his disgust with their fraternisation with the Portuguese, appears interested in approaching her because of a feeling of shared solitude. He originally resigns himself simply to observing her activities.

The narrative belabours the point that T'kama is unaware of the sexual identity of the woman, at first, because of his apparent unfamiliarity with European traditions of clothing. He is initially under the impression that he is observing another Portuguese man, albeit with slightly

longer and more brightly coloured clothes than the others. Once he has identified her as a woman, however, he feels compelled to approach her. This compulsion, unlike the previous attempt at approaching the Portuguese that was described as arising from a feeling of fellowship, is clearly inspired by another feeling altogether. He approaches the woman with the intent of a sexual union, stating that “[t]his rearing mamba in my loins ... would not know any peace again before it had come to rest deep in the kloof made for it” (28). All his attempts at communicating with the woman are geared towards communicating this desire. He tries to put her at ease by showing her she has nothing to fear from him; he undoes his clothing to show her he has nothing to hide; and he shouts at her to come back after she runs off in fear. Eventually he duplicates the actions of the Portuguese men seeking sexual relief by offering an assortment of objects as “bride-price.” When even this fails to conjure up the desired response from the woman, T’kama hits her over the head with a stick and carries her off.

This act of indifference to the emotions that the Portuguese woman has been trying to communicate to T’kama (shouting in fear; running off; trying to defend herself against his advances with a rowing stick) is humorously represented as analogous to the arrogant disregard for understanding T’kama’s own intentions that is perpetrated by the Portuguese. When the Portuguese sailors come running to the aid of the Portuguese woman, T’kama innocently describes himself “gleefully wav[ing] back at them, laughing with joy, taking in one hand the thing that was standing all by itself so that they could see my intentions were honourable” (32). His amazement at the reaction of the Portuguese to this when they start shooting at him, stands in ironic contrast to his own unwillingness to take the standpoint of the Portuguese woman seriously, in spite of being quite aware of its nature. He knows she is afraid of him (“I couldn’t understand her fright at all,” 27, and then, “I realised what had scared her,” 28) and that she feels an aversion to him (“...perhaps what she had against me,” he speculates, 30). Nevertheless, he relegates the negotiation of his relationship with her to a transaction between men. He is confident that “her menfolk” will be amiable to his intentions “considering that by that time they’d been to the bushes with so many of our women” (32, note the possessive cases).⁵³

The oblivion exhibited by the Portuguese towards race relations and T’kama towards gender relations gives an indication of the problematics that inevitably inhere in attempts at communication. Todorov, in his treatise on the subject, eventually acknowledges that the true discovery of an other, in terms of dis- or uncovering this other and acquainting oneself with him or her, had never really been the aim of the early European explorers. Apart from the well-recorded central objectives of extracting wealth from and imposing Christianity on the “newly found” lands,

⁵³ Equally, T’kama wastes no time in “baptizing” the Portuguese woman in the same way that the seafarers did their Khoi brides – he names her *Khois*, explaining: “which means, of course, Woman” (14).

Todorov also recognises that, in the case of many European missions of discovery, the feat of discovery was an intransitive act (48). This lack of transfer, rather than indicating a concern for preservation of the encountered culture, testifies to a lack of regard for the culture encountered. The process of discovery is one-sided in that it serves to confirm popular conceptions of Western culture as progressive, innovative, adventurous and triumphant. In Todorov's discussion of the features of Columbus's explorations, discovery appears as something to be achieved, after which it becomes important to compile proof of this achievement in drawing up travel narratives, the (re-)naming of geographical features and, of course, harvesting tangible materials in the form of natural resources and biological and even ethnographic samples to take back to Europe. These processes of recording, nomination and harvesting all evince the use of language for denotation and not for communication with those encountered. The lack of communication between the European and indigenous American parties speaks of the inability to perceive the other's human identity. There is no reciprocity or exchange apparent in the process, leading Todorov to comment that "Columbus has discovered America but not the Americans" (49). In this way the process of discovering alterity leads to an immediate rejection of this alterity. Contact, in these terms, is not really defined by any sense of communication or connection at all.

The blurring of racial boundaries exemplified in miscegenation and the ambiguous identities resulting from it, contributes to a typical perception of colonial discourses such as the Adamastor myth as enacting two sides of an encounter. This generous interpretation of miscegenation is also evident in its use as a powerful trope in the national imagination of former Portuguese colonies such as Brazil, where the idea is propagated that Brazilian society is uniquely achieved by means of a felicitous melting of races (Ribeiro, 55). These ideas present a fiction of co-operation that is often directly, and unfavourably, compared to the colonial practices of Northern European nations that are condemned for their lack of mixing within the colonies. Ann Laura Stoler, in her *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (2002), rightly points out that this carries the implication that sexual intimacy with European men yielded social mobility or political power for colonised women. Needless to say, such implications are completely unfounded (Stoler, 57). Although racial mixing has historically been a focus of political and social debate for its perceived subversive potential in exposing the arbitrary logic of categories of colonial control, Stoler's work demonstrates that miscegenation in and of itself cannot signal the presence or absence of racism. Again, its representation provides information about the power structures that support its imaginary. So, how is it represented within Brink's novel?

Critical authors have criticised Brink's characterisation of the relationship between T'kama and the Portuguese woman and, indeed, it is hard not to suspect Brink of validating the colonial stereotype of the well-endowed and sexually rampant black man who desires the European woman,

in the manner of traditional colonial discourses that were exposed in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* of 1967. At the same time, the image of the ridiculously large phallus with which T'kama is encumbered and which periodically (literally and figuratively) "pops up" throughout the novel, is almost begging to be analysed as a Freudian mnemonic symbol with wider metaphorical significance. T'kama's desire for Khois, however, is perhaps more usefully interpreted not purely in sexual terms but rather in terms of the employment of the concept of contact in the manner in which it was used to characterise the narrator's positioning vis-à-vis the reader within the logic of the novel.

Indicating a meeting or communication with someone, the contact between T'kama and Khois progresses steadily in the novel, in spite of, or maybe even because of, the failure of sexual contact. Long before their physical relationship can be consummated, T'kama asserts his urge to simply "be" with Khois "through days and years...day and night, life and death" (36). On first encountering Khois, T'kama expresses his instant knowledge of Khois by stating: "as I stood there staring at her and trembling, ...I had been struck to the quick by an arrow daubed with bitter-berry magic" (28). This metaphoric arrow represents the spread of awareness of the other within T'kama and is the direct cause of the supervising narrator, the omniscient Adamastor, subsequent writing back of the woman into the story in spite of her escape. T'kama's consciousness has been irrevocably contaminated by his awareness of her existence and he has "taken up the burden of her existence in [his] conscience" (44) without the possibility of ever disentangling themselves from each other.

Once the encounter between T'kama and Khois has occurred, it becomes impossible to revert to their separated lives, which now carry the mark of the absence of the other. Because of this absence, they are able to bond and truly make contact without necessitating any sexual union. In these terms, the representation of an attempt at engendering a "race" of South African nationals or of forging an inclusive national identity based on bringing together oppositional elements could be read as successful within the context of Brink's novel. The success is not, however, hailed as an unmitigated one, as the description of subsequent events and failed instances of contact within the novel shows.

Conclusion: Opening up National Identity from the Landward Side

If we take Benedict Anderson's concept of a nation, expounded upon in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* of 1997, as a starting point, we can perceive the nation of South Africa as a political community that is constructed by means of the invisible ties of the imagination. As such, we distinguish it by the style in which it is imagined more than by its history or demographics, allowing us to question to what extent the history of power struggles

inherent in the moment of first contact shaped these imaginings, and to what extent it continues to influence our perception of the South African community (Anderson, 6).

Anderson's seminal work explores inconsistencies within the concept of nationhood by insisting on the impossibility of solid descriptions of the nation, and locating the fundamental condition of possibility for the nation, something he calls the "homogenous empty time" (24-25) of the nation, within the disorder created by the continuous movements of mass migrations and other changes. In the context of these conditions, Anderson links the nation with imagination and, especially, with imaginative literature. Anderson is concerned with the framework of a new consciousness that literature makes possible: the way in which it provides a paradigm that enables the imagining of a community, rather than with any nationalistic content of novels. Anderson sees the nation as neither a form of social organisation nor an ideological tool, but, instead, as a more natural consequence of the appearance of a "synchronic mode of temporality" (homogenous empty time) that arises from the birth of print capitalism onwards (25).

The story's narrator, although speaking in the "we" form, does not appear to include the reader into the community he conjures up. Anthropological details are supplied in a manner that appears off-hand but clearly unnecessary if the implicated audience is part of the community designated as "we". The excessive detail seems calculated to empower the reader with a sufficiently accurate visualisation of occurrences in spite of a presumed outsider status. On the morning after the arrival of the Portuguese, for example, the narrator recounts the following: "The predators abroad in the night had caused all our *fat-tailed* sheep to break from their kraal and it took us all day to round them up again and repair the hedge of *white-thorn branches*...at dawn we pissed on the dying coals of the fire, and sprinkled fresh water *from pots and calabashes* at the entrance to the huts" (16, emphasis added).

Communities are evoked within novels and this evocation is extended to the community of those addressed – there is a continuity between the world of the novel and of the reader (28). The address of the reader works by means of presuppositions, but not necessarily on a national level. *The First Life of Adamastor* frames the problematic notion of first contact as we encounter it in traditional historiographical narratives of European voyages of exploration and discovery, by contradicting and overlapping narratives of contact. Within the logic of the novel, the contact between reader and narrator is represented as treacherous because it shifts between Adamastor's various guises as narrator, focaliser and character. At the same time, the contact between the novel's central characters is set up in terms of sexual interaction, only to change and transform into a state of psychical, rather than physical, touching, and this touching encompasses the internalisation of each other's divisions and differences.

So, by playing around with the expectations regarding contact in terms of popular representations of the origins of present-day South Africa's multi-cultural population, *The First Life of Adamastor* presents the logic of binaries as useless and unproductive. T'kama and Khois are not posited as complimentary male and female partners, or even as representatives of the African and the European within the novel. Their relationship is not the stereotypically happy one of romantic novels, and the end of the story does not see them merged into an embodiment of the synthesis between two cultures. Instead, the novel imagines its narrators, its readers, and its characters as divided subjects jointly able to accept difference. The same repudiation of synthesis as the desired solution for South African division is explored in the next novel I analyse. Although very different both in narrative voice and the style of its imagining, Brink's *Devil's Valley* complements the story of Adamastor's first life in its revisitation of a popular trope from South Africa's historiography.

Chapter 4: Under Cover of Silence: The Politics of the Fantastic in *Devil's Valley*

“But the problem with yesterday is it never stays down, you got to keep stamping on it.”

Devil's Valley (299)

Silence, and in particular the silences surrounding the past, figures large in *Devil's Valley*, André Brink's twelfth novel that, first published in the year 1998, explores the changes that swept South Africa following the first democratic elections of 1994. In short, the novel contains the story of disillusioned journalist, Flip Lochner, who, in postapartheid South Africa, goes in search of an isolated Afrikaner community that has remained in the past and that is said to live in the remote mountains of the country's interior. More than that, however, it is the story of how Lochner, as narrator and main focaliser, reacts to the secrets harboured by the community within the context of his own misgivings about South Africa as the product of a repressive history. Analysing how the themes of silence and history are dealt with in the novel, I aim to interpret the transformation consummated in conceiving of South Africa's history as of necessity incomplete and selective.

The theme of history as something that can be profitably revisited is a running thread in the novel, as is the idea that the past continues to revisit the present. The ghosts of previous valley inhabitants mingle with the living. This seamless integration of the dead and the living is not merely an aesthetic feature reminiscent of the fantastical, but a realistic comment on the South African situation, where the past continues to assert itself. *Devil's Valley* suggests that silenced discourses never “stay down” but inevitably resurface as distorted and fantastical re-imaginings. The potential of such a fantastic reworking, I suggest, lies in its offering access to that which has been concealed.

One aspect of the novel that beautifully illustrates the perpetual resurfacing of the past is the handiwork of the Devil's Valley's resident painter Gert Kwas.⁵⁴ Kwas paints portraits of all the community's inhabitants, which he periodically updates as the years wear on by painting over the older portraits. The palimpsestic result is that all the layers of previous inhabitants as well as the younger versions of present-day inhabitants shine through, mimicking the uselessness of denying the past in the present. At the same time, the resultant portraits take on a frightening appearance that can be attributed to their being recognisable as human faces, which are made unfamiliar by their sporting too many features, as eyes and ears from the faces underneath are observable at the surface. The result is situated somewhere between the real and the improbable and, as such, lies within the realm of the fantastic. In a society such as the South African one, marked by restriction and constraint, the fantastic may prove valuable because it contains the capacity to point out the

⁵⁴ The word “kwas” means “brush” in Afrikaans.

possibilities for hearing and seeing that which was silenced or covered. In examining the silences that the novel's fantastic imagery points to, I propose to turn silence into a concept.

Deploying silence as a concept for an analysis of Brink's novel, I hope to study the politics of the novel, the assumptions of power and status it inflects in the South African society it presents. I posit that the presence of fantastical elements makes the absent present in the novel, and the silenced audible. The novel suggests the potential for reconciliation, or even redemption, to lie not with historical conquest or the description of facts, but with a revisiting of the past. Where the presence of fantastical elements indicates a history unsuccessfully laid to rest, I see the complications that surround the breaking of silence for the enlightened revisiting of the past framed in two ways in the novel. One of them posits silence as an absence; the other frames silence as abstinence.

The first connotation of silence, namely that of silence-as-absence, is addressed in the novel in the shape of the large lacunae in South African history that the fabula of *Devil's Valley* centres on. The largest of these takes the form of a dismissal of the ethnic cleansing that enabled white settlement in South Africa. This issue is addressed in the novel when the valley inhabitants deny that there were Khoi people who lived in the Devil's Valley before them. The silence-as-absence practised by the valley dwellers is mostly conceived of as active. Lukas Lermiet, the founder of the valley, points out, for example, that "there's nothing one can do about tomorrow. It comes as it must. All you can do something about is yesterday. But the problem with yesterday is it never stays down, you got to keep stamping on it" (299). This acknowledgement of suppression is couched in terms of authority through the subjunctive "got to" and an intimation of physical violence by the use of the word "stamping." In contrast, a passive form of silence-as-absence is set up in the novel as well, and characterised as equally detrimental to an enlightened revisiting of the past. The passive performance of silence is harder to detect and more insidious in its effect, and is dispensed in the novel by its character-bound narrator, Flip Lochner.

Ostensibly, the narrator, in his guise of journalist, is empowered to convey the stories told by the inhabitants of the Devil's Valley to the reader, because he is closer to the milieu of the reader than are the regressive valley dwellers. In spite of this, obvious discrepancies come to the fore between what the reader can be assumed to interpret as self-explanatory and the apparent worldview of the narrator. By looking at the relationship that is set up (and subsequently dismantled) between reader and narrator in the novel, the significance of silence-as-absence is shown to inform a larger context of silence as complicity, and history as a responsibility, in postapartheid South Africa. Hence, the first part of my chapter is devoted to tracing this narrator-reader relationship and interpreting its wider framework.

As the narrator's version of historical events presumably roughly coincides with that of the intended reader, this overlap can be brought to bear on the role of silence in contemporary South African treatments of the past. The first part of this chapter deals with these instances and relates them to the naturalisation of "whiteness" as discussed in Richard Dyer's *White* of 1997. Dyer's argument that white culture has set itself up as the invisible norm will be used to suggest an interpretation of Brink's novel as forwarding silence as a presence rather than absence. By setting something up as natural, its presence can be taken for granted to the extent of seeming absent: it is hidden in plain sight, as it were.

The conceptual aspect of silence-as-abstinence, rather than as absence, is also addressed in the novel. In contrast to absence, abstinence suggests a silence that resists. Although Lochner is eventually given free rein within the valley to record the inhabitants' stories of their past, the tales told are often incomplete, irrelevant and even conflicting. I argue that silence-as-abstinence as resistance is foregrounded in the novel. A tension is set up between the interpretation of history given by the valley dwellers and by the narrator. This is done by means of the contrivance of an "outsider" first person narrator, who constantly recontextualises the stories in an interior monologue informed by his knowledge of historical occurrences outside of the valley. I examine how Lochner's narration reveals that he conceives of himself as empowered by access to, variously, the valley's facts, women and land. Subsequently, I analyse how these presumptions are undercut in fantastical ways by the resisting silence of all three of these, ending on the insurgency practised by the soil of the valley itself.

After all, in the fictional setting of *Devil's Valley*, it is not so much the words that are spoken but rather the confrontation with unusual occurrences and strange appearances that alert the protagonist and, through him, the reader to what lies beneath the surface. The suppression of the depravity of the community's organisation – this pretence to absence – outs itself in unnatural appearance, whether in the form of webbed feet and multiple nipples or mirages of non-existent bodies of water or women. These unnatural appearances, I argue, take on the character of the fantastic. The fantastic, as espoused in Romantic and, particularly, in Gothic literature, focuses on phenomena that occupy the breach between reality and fantasy. Its transitional status has been analysed by Tzvetan Todorov, in his work entitled *The Fantastic* of 1973, as simultaneously communicating the anxiety of uncertainty and its motive.

In looking at the novel in terms of the fantastic, I aim to probe deeper than a mere consideration of images of hesitancy and doubtfulness to suggest that multiple memories and stories allow for the successful coexistence of experiences. The novel's fantastic images speak of contortion and agitation, *not* peaceful resolution. The coexistence of stories without mutual acknowledgement implied by an over-writing and silencing of what lies beneath speaks of a

malady that declares itself in disturbing ways. In the next section, I trace some of the arguments in a discussion on the usefulness of the imagination in achieving political change. In a subsequent section, I then assess the political significance of the two practices of silence within Brink's novel after analysing the use of the fantastic as defined by Todorov, for shaping the novel's politics.

Fantastically Hesitant: The Politics of the Fantastic

I start from the idea that the interpretation of a narrative can be seen as an articulation or opening up of the noise that the written form of a story closes off. The appearance of fantastical elements within a narrative that pretends to journalistic investigation and documentation can be perceived as a rearticulation of previously silenced stories and histories. The past, although censored and modified to suit the public appearance and morality of the valley-inhabitants, does not stay in the past, but continues to interact with present-day life, as it does in South Africa today. Investigating how Brink achieves this in *Devil's Valley*, I will also try to show why the fantastic is an appropriate genre to deal with the past that haunts the present.

Critical authors have previously condemned the use of the genre of the fairy tale or the fantastic in South African literature, as it was perceived a convenient way to side-step political issues that needed to be exposed. As J.M. Coetzee pointed out in his acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize in 1987, there was simply too much truth in the country for imaginative literature to hold. Truth "by the bucketful," he called it.⁵⁵ Exiled South African author Breyten Breytenbach even called on all writers to take up political responsibility instead of what he disparagingly called "speaking of flowers."⁵⁶ At the same time, South African author Njabulo Ndebele, in his groundbreaking essay "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" (1984), warned against the tendency of sensationalism in South African literature, articulating the country's narratives as a series of spectacular and unmitigated tragedies. This tendency he saw as both too abstract and too general to be useful for contemplating the reality of South African experience as it left out the means of considering experience that was not as spectacular but no less important or, for that matter, no less tragic.

However, Emily R. Zinn, in "Rediscovery of the Magical: On Fairy Tales, Feminism, and the New South Africa" (2000), repositions Ndebele's argument in the context of the magical. She identifies the central position of the magical within the South African everyday as not so much standing in opposition to the ordinary but rather embedded in it. Ndebele uses a

⁵⁵ "[T]here is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination" (J.M. Coetzee 1991).

⁵⁶ In Rosemary Jane Jolly's *Colonization, violence, and narration in white South African writing: André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, and J.M. Coetzee*, 34.

short story in which a magical incident occurs as one of the examples for his call for a return to the ordinary, and Zinn traces the same concern with the magical everyday in South African white writing. Not, as she firmly states, as a way to avoid the political, but as a way to steer South African literature in a new direction. She attributes Brink's increased interest in the magical to a fascination with "easy intercourse between the living and the dead" that forms a part of African oral traditions and has "spilled over into Afrikaans literature" (Brink, 26 cited in Zinn, 250).

Similarly, Elleke Boehmer (1998) expresses the hope that the end of apartheid has finally given South African authors the leeway to do away with the division between reality and fantasy altogether. She praises this inclusivity for exploring ways of representing the world that are true to its "skewed, fragmented, upended" nature (53). Zinn does not lose sight of the fact that the magical can be used for both liberating and conservative political ends. Nevertheless, she believes in the usefulness of fairy tales particularly in the South Africa context, because of "their flexibility and their tendency to cross cultural boundaries" (251). Nevertheless, such an interpretation of African literature by means of fairy-tale conventions may be problematic, as it flattens the distinctions between African oral folktales and the Western tradition of the fairy tale. She argues that both "resist the assertion of an authorial version," but forgets that, by now, the canon of Western fairy tales, although their origins cannot always be verified, is ossified into an authoritative body with its own conventions of interpretation (251).

Zinn shows how the potential for imaginative literature in a time of national crisis does not necessarily obstruct the political responsibility of the writer. Coetzee, in the very same acceptance speech in which he lamented the all-pervasiveness of truth, quoted Nietzsche when he added, "we have art so that we shall not die of the truth." In an essay published in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly's *Writing South Africa* (1998), Brink views imagination as central for retrieving from the past what has been silenced:

I certainly am convinced that without the attempt to grasp, with the creative imagination, the past and its silences, South African society as a whole may get bogged down in mere materialities, sterile rationalisations, and the narrow mechanics of retribution or amnesty. (25)

Material reparations are required in the process of recovering from an unjust system. But, as Brink recognises, because these injustices were perpetrated largely within a context of language and images, not only in laws, it also requires an act of the imagination.

In imagining South Africa, one of the writers who serves as an example for penetrating the surface image of the nation, is Breyten Breytenbach. Breytenbach became frustrated with the state of South African writing in the 1980s, and critiqued the narratives that adhered to the determinist assumption that everything can be represented. In his works published at this time, such as *Mouir: Mirror-notes of a Novel* of 1984, Breytenbach associates this determinism with both Calvinist Christian discourse and apartheid discourse in seeking to consolidate power by authoritarian means. He sees it as the task of the politically responsible author to rupture the fixity of determinist writing and so provide an alternative to its attempts at control by means of naming, since “[n]aming is taming” (84). The strategy that Breytenbach proposes for achieving a resistance to literary authoritarianism is, as Rosemary Jolly analyses in her *Colonisation, Violence and Narration in White South Africa Writing* (1996), “envisioning that which is absent, rather than recording that which is present” (85). This because the absent, he argues, throws the validity of appearance into doubt, much in the same way as Tzvetan Todorov sees the fantastic doing.

In *The Fantastic*, Todorov studies the literary genre of the fantastic in terms of “codifications of procedures and responses,” examining the rules and codes that are shared by the novel and the reader for a successful attainment of a certain effect (Foreword, viii). He inquires into what defines a particular literary piece as fantastic by tracing both anti-structuralist suppositions, that state that “the structures formed by literary phenomena manifest themselves at the level of these phenomena,” and structuralist propositions, that claim that social structures are unrelated to reality but only knowable through models constructed according to that reality (17). The one sees literature as imitating observed reality and the other as creating a reality that we can observe. By this second definition, what we observe through language moves beyond the real and the natural and into the supernatural.

“The supernatural is born of language,” Todorov states, as a novel’s fantastic elements exist only in words, adding that “language alone enables us to conceive what is always absent: the supernatural” (82). This ability to conceive of what is not actually present communicates a possibility of what *could* be, unrestrained by traditional (physical, empirical) laws or (cultural, political, social) conventions. Similarly, Breytenbach calls for an inscription of the fantastic in the novel to represent not what is forever impossible but precisely what is possible. He sees history “as a discipline” that eliminates options in its attempt to reproduce the past “as present” (86). By recreating history as a story and seeing it as an account not only of what one experienced but also “the absence of what you did not experience,” he believes that the violence of determinism can be ruptured (86).

I argue that Brink's use of the fantastic is neither an apolitical cop-out nor an overdramatised spectacle of general power struggles. *Devil's Valley* is not apolitical because it presents aspects of the fantastic as the consequences of South Africa's politically incorrect past. Rather, the dead cannot rest because the past continues to have an impact on the present. At the same time, the fantastic images in the novel are presented not as dramatic ogres or frightening omens, but as the sad consequences of the irrational fear of intermixing of the valley community. The stifled nature of the people that populate the valley gives rise to the very impurity that they dread. In Brink's novel, the conjuring up of impossible scenes and images indicates a lack of the acknowledgement of specific historical occurrences, such as the mixed origin of the community, and not an attempt to side-step these issues. These call to mind what Todorov calls "the fantastic."

Todorov argues that the fantastic occupies an interesting position within literature, defined as it is by the retention of uncertainty. As he explains, any event that appears strange and irregular is usually solved by either its explanation as an illusion, which safeguards the laws of nature known to the reader, or as the product of the imagination, so that a different set of laws is accepted by the reader. The former situation would be an example of the use of "the uncanny" as genre, and the latter that of "the marvellous." The fantastic, as Todorov explains, is situated midway between these, and only for as long as the uncertainty about genre is retained (25). The fantastic therefore occupies a frontier, an interregnum, "a hesitation between the two," comprising a break or interruption (26). The hesitation by the reader as to what generic code to apply is by definition transient (31).

This hesitation of the reader, according to Todorov, is often the result of her identification with the chief character who, as in the case of Brink's novel, is simultaneously the narrator. Lochner observes numerous events that are not so much foreign but rather clichés of an out-of-date (and therefore out-of-place) Afrikaner past. This foreignness conforms exactly to what the narrator expects to find and wishes to record, evinced from his leading questions, which direct the interviewed character towards the admission of stereotypical racism. Apart from these instances, however, there are also occurrences that cause him to hesitate between attributing a particular event to an explicable reality or to the world of imagination, firmly setting them, at least for the duration of this hesitation, in the realm of the fantastic as outlined by Todorov (156). The fact that some things cannot be known because they are absent from the memories or experiences of the villagers, and others because they actively abstain from imparting them to the narrator, adds to the uncertainty that is characteristic of the fantastic.

Examining the significance of the fantastic in *Devil's Valley*, Todorov's arguments are helpful. He mentions, for example, the use of the fantastic as a pretext for alluding to things that would have been barred from realistic texts (158). The examples Todorov gives, such as incest, homosexuality, necrophilia and excessive sensuality, are all dealt with in *Devil's Valley* (158). However, their forbidden nature must be presumed not to extend beyond the morality of the Devil's Valley society, and not to that of the intended (twenty-first century) reader, who can be presumed to have encountered these themes in non-fantastic literary works.

More subtle is Todorov's suggestion that the fantastic aids the reader in dealing with the abnormal outside of a framework of (conscious or subconscious) condemnation (159). In this, he states, the themes of fantastic literature are the same as those of psychoanalysis, in that they deal with a perceived impossible causality between phenomena by allowing for connections between unconscious processes of the mind. Todorov asserts that the fantastic has a function in dealing with what is culturally unacceptable in the same way that psychoanalysis does, and that the themes of fantastic literature and those of psychological investigations overlap. The fantastic disturbs the stability of the narrative and has the power to initiate a new order in a way that, as Todorov states, enacts a transgression of the law (161).

Aside from this social function of the fantastic, Todorov also identifies the genre as useful at a pragmatic level for the purpose of horrifying the reader or keeping her in suspense. Moreover, he detects a syntactical function: aiding the development of the narrative (162). Lochner's narrative clearly needs the unbalancing effect of the fantastic in order to progress. If, as I venture, the narrator's search for information on the Devil's Valley is really a search for his own role within the contemporary South African context, the presumptions with which Lochner starts off need to be unsettled before any progress can be made. Just as the stories upheld by the valley's inhabitants give evidence of suppression, the story that Lochner *wants* to find ignores everything aberrant to his version of events. Contortions and mutations arise from both forms of censure and, I argue, eventually make Lochner as suspect as the people in the valley.

This links back to the central idea forwarded by Todorov: that the fantastic temporarily suspends the border between what is real and what is not. This suspension interrupts the logic upheld by narrative and exposes this logic as a construct that represses everything that contradicts it. In tracking the fantastic signposts that litter Lochner's narrative to the silences they mark, the motifs of silence as silence-as-absence and silence-as-abstinence can be productively explored in the novel.

In the next section, I briefly outline out how the first of these, silence-as-absence, operates by making use of selected feminist theories on the functions of silence in discourse as well as Richard Dyer's hypothesis on absence in *White*. Then I examine the absences brought

to the fore in the novel by Lochner's first-person narration, investigating how he seeks to point out telling silences in the Devil's Valley community but, in the process, points to holes in his own articulation instead. By analysing his attempts to position himself as the enlightened outsider, the fantastic element within modern-day South African discourses on progress can be unravelled as prone to the danger of continuing omission and, therefore, being less than useful in redressing it.

The absence of race: Silence as absence

In an article entitled "The Problem of Silence in Feminist Psychology" (1996), Maureen A. Mahoney reassesses the meanings of silence and voice by complicating the viewpoint that voice is associated with power and silence with powerlessness. In this simplistic equation, those who cannot speak cannot make their experience known and therefore cannot influence their own lives or history. Mahoney quotes feminist theorists such as Carla Kaplan and Carol Gilligan in arguing that sometimes authority resides with the silent party, for example in job interviews or psychotherapy. The potential for resistance in silent defiance contradicts the idea of silence as one-dimensional. Similarly, in her "Cries and Whispers: The Shattering of the Silence" (1995), linguistic expert Robin Tolmach Lakoff recognises the traditional association of silence with a lack of content and, therefore, with absence (25). Lakoff interprets the interest in the effect of gender relations on speech over the interest in silence as unsurprising, because presence is often perceived as more meaningful than absence, as "[w]hat is explicit and apparent," she claims, "responds to analysis more readily than what must be inferred" (25).

Both Lakoff and Mahoney argue for the recognition of the ambiguity of silence, which complicates the mono-dimensionality of its interpretation as mere manifestation of the absence of power. At the same time, however, both authors recognise that subjects cannot always choose to be silent anymore than that they can choose to speak; sometimes silence does indicate an absence of power. Lakoff describes the subtle form of control that lies in "silencing by silence" (or, in other words, non-response) practised by the powerful against the powerless. Non-response, she posits, even "annihilates" the other speaker and pretends that she does not exist, so that, in this context "[s]ilence is analogous to invisibility" (29). The analogy between silence and invisibility connects with Richard Dyer's discussion of whiteness as invisible, connoting an absence of race that constitutes a silence within racial discourse upheld by the empowered.

In his seminal study *White* (1997), Dyer commences his investigation of the representation of white people in Western culture with precisely silences or lacks: he observes that white people are not "raced" in the West, and therefore slip unobtrusively into the position

of norm against which everything is measured (Dyer, 2). Dyer points to the conspiracy of silence that sustains this normative position. Whiteness, he argues, is an empty construct that is not based on reality because “[w]hite people are neither literally nor symbolically white” (42). The skin colour of Caucasians varies and never approaches pure white, just as their characters differ and never approach the moral purity that white connotes symbolically. The pretension is therefore in need of constant reiteration by means of cultural imagery.

Citing examples from literature, cinema, and art, Dyer interprets whiteness as an active and explicit cultural marker, not an absence of specificity that cannot be critiqued. By coming to see whiteness as a fabrication that is based on distinguishing features as much as other racialised colours are, the power structure that underlies it is exposed. One example that he refers to frequently is the invisibility of whiteness, since Caucasian people usually do not recognise themselves as white, or, for that matter, “raced,” at all. Dyer describes “how amazed and angry white liberals become when attention is drawn to their whiteness” (2). He argues that this refusal to identify with “white” as racial is often connected to an emphasis on egalitarianism. He cites bell hooks, who argues that “they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity” (2). This, as hooks points out, rather than making racism disappear, serves to normalise and, therefore, perpetuate it.

The same presentation of white as the absence of race is set up in the exchanges that take place between the narrator Lochner and the inhabitants of the Devil’s Valley in the novel. Lochner never makes mention of his inevitable complicity in white privilege but, instead, presents himself as a champion of the maligned. At the same time, the valley dwellers’ stubborn repudiation that there exists an alternative to whiteness in the stories of their origin presents the reader with the ostensible absence of race. This absence of race is so implausible in the South African context that its lack becomes discernible, as the novel’s distorted narratives are marked by the distortions of fantastical imagery. These distortions finally see whiteness being “made strange,” inviting a perception of the silent insistence on racelessness as a racist discourse (10).

I now return to silence-as-absence in an examination of both the active silencing perpetrated by the valley inhabitants in their concealment of aspects of their history, and the passive, but no less treacherous, silences inherent in the narrator’s conveyance of the Devil’s Valley past. The ludicrous insistence on an absence of race by the valley community, I argue, manifests itself in the contortions of the fantastic, and I interpret the novel’s fantastic elements as indications of a troubled past that “won’t stay down.” In analysing Lochner’s dissimulation, I posit that his threefold positioning as narrator, as white male, and as a journalist, make him

inevitably complicit in suppression. By failing to confront this complicity and presuming its absence, Lochner is precluded from attaining the status of freethinking liberal and, instead, sees his thinking confined.

The absence of race as implausible and therefore up for investigation is emphasised from the onset of the novel. Describing his first vision of the Devil's Valley community, Lochner concludes his report with the observation that "[t]here was something outlandish about the scene," because "nowhere in the Devil's Valley was there any sign of a black or brown labourer" (37). The narrator calls the reader's attention to the fact that something is amiss in his description of the valley community, something he terms "outlandish" to draw on its connotations of "foreign" and "not native." Absurdly, this glosses over the remarkability of finding a traditional nineteenth-century rural community in the midst of an industrialised, modern nation. Lochner sets up the valley's lack of racial progressiveness rather than its other forms of historical stagnancy (speech, dress, beliefs) as a feature of note. Already we are confronted by the bias of an ostensibly objective reporter in the way that he focuses the attention of the reader.

The absence of "any sign" of black or brown people in the Devil's Valley is a artifice connected with the community's validation by the pretence to purity. Tant Poppie Fullmoon, hostess to Lochner, tells him, for example, that, at the time that the first Lermiet moved into the valley, "there was no one else here, this place was set aside for us from the beginning of time, so God kept it clean for us" (97). The idea of a location set aside by a higher power articulates a belief in the election of the Devil's Valley society. Simultaneously, it implies that the community has the obligation to maintain their isolated way of life, leaving little room for transformation. Tant Poppie's explanation equates emptiness with "cleanliness," suggesting that the settling of the valley by Lermiet and his compatriots did not destroy the clean nature of the location as they, themselves, were clean. The only way to retain this cleanliness, or the appearance of it, is to remain silent about what her story leaves out: the practise of miscegenation that contradicts her pretence to purity.

Tant Poppie is one of the agents who ensures that the absence of race is perpetuated and silence maintained about a past that "won't stay down" in her capacity as the midwife who stones to death those babies that exhibit "black blood" and are considered "throwbacks" to an earlier, multi-racial make-up of the valley's community. The silence that accompanies her routine, as these "lost" children are never referred to again, is broken by the contortions exhibited by the children that she does allow to live. These often take on fantastical forms, ranging from oddly distributed body hair to harelips and multiple digits. The deformities of these children are caused precisely by the prevention of admixture, which has resulted in

inbreeding. These grotesque features ironically sabotage the connection between biological and metaphorical purity.

Dyer investigates our modern concept of whiteness as the historical conflation of the colour white with symbolic connotations centring on the idea of purity. Purity denotes a singularity in referring to the absence of diversity that, by extension, links its metaphorical meaning of virtuousness to an absence of plurality as well. In this way, the silence surrounding the miscegenation practised by the Devil's Valley founders would appear to be motivated by the community's pretence to righteousness. As soon as this silence is interpreted as what it is, as the absence of acknowledgement of their mixed beginnings, however, the pretence to virtue is transformed into an exposure of vice.

Dyer analyses the link between whiteness and purity on both physical and metaphorical levels. Although he stresses repeatedly that the skin colour denoted as white is not actually white at all, he acknowledges that cultural representations have nevertheless asserted white as the means of identifying Caucasians. As main catalyst and sustainer of the idea that whiteness equates with morality, Dyer points to Christianity. He argues that "Christianity...is founded on the idea – paradoxical, unfathomable, profoundly mysterious - of incarnation, of being that is in the body yet not of it" (14). He continues that this artificial link between the body and spirit in Christian culture forges symbolic and metaphorical connotations of whiteness to the extent that they become as "natural" (or rather, as "unnatural") as the physical (18).

Christianity plays an important role in Brink's *Devil's Valley*. Dyer's identification of purity as the primary obsession of whiteness finds a conspicuous counterpart in the narratives of the founding of Devil's Valley that accentuate the unsullied nature of the society's ancestry. In "Biblical Mythology in André Brink's Anti-Apartheid Crusade" (2000), Isidore Diala points out that Brink's novels frequently centre on the "Afrikaner reduction of the Bible to a white mythology that complements the materiality of apartheid" (80). This "white mythology" is "white" both because of its perpetuation by a race (fictitiously) designated as white, and because its status as mythology (and therefore not reality) is carefully kept silent, invisible, and white.

The bible, Diala posits, forms the superstructure of myth and allegory that supports the way in which Afrikaner people see black people. According to him, Brink connects Afrikaner consciousness, its assertion of hardship and the imperative to fight for land and survival, to what she calls a "Christianisation" of apartheid (81). Brink's novels send up the Christian practice of interpreting phenomena according to biblical symbolism. He interprets Brink's ridicule of divine ordinance as a refusal of "the Afrikaner Biblical sanction of apartheid" (81).

This biblical sanction is cited in the novel when Lukas Lermiet tells Lochner that the valley *was* founded on admixture. On enquiring into the community's founding history, Lochner is told that the valley was "full of enemies" on Lermiet's arrival, and not an empty wilderness (297). Lermiet relates how he and his companions "had to get rid of [the Bushmen and Hottentots] to clear a spot for ourselves" (297). This alternative story reveals the missing element in the version told by Tant Poppie, the silence-as-absence that leaves out the shameful notion that the community is racially impure, as well as the scandal of the violence that accompanied the consummation of miscegenation by the valley founders. But more even than an absence of certain facts, the silenced truth conceals a reversal of facts. Instead of the accepted story about a population that resides in a certain locale and is protected by divine ordination from pollution by outsiders, the valley's suppressed history is the story of the Afrikaner Lermiets as the outsiders who perpetrate defilement.

Lermiet continues his story to Lochner by telling how a few of the surviving enemies were allowed to integrate with the community and came to live, not just alongside, but also among them. The reasoning behind this was the need for female partners in order to maintain the community. This apparently uncharacteristic detour from the idea of keeping the race pure is justified by means of a pseudo-biblical baptism of the Khoi women who are given, not just Afrikaner names, but names from the bible. This hides the presence of race in its absencing of the features of race. In narratives of the past, race resides in words and names and those, easier than physical appearances, can be changed so that their original identity is silenced.

The biblical parallel is extended when Lukas Lermiet asserts that similar practices are described in the bible and would therefore pass as legitimate. "Abraham and Isaac and Jacob also had to make do with what they could get," he claims, establishing a telling analogy between his own tribe and these three figures from the Book of Genesis, all three of whom were patriarchs of the Jewish, and later Christian religion (297).⁵⁷ All three were also wanderers who did not stay in their place of birth but travelled and became the heads of families in new places. Lukas Lermiet is forging a resemblance that would position him as the head of such a great family, relegating the fact of impure origin to the sideline.

The silence around this mixed ancestry he justifies by claiming his eradication of race. Lermiet tells Lochner, in a boastful manner, that "[w]e Lermiets are good breeders. We fucked the whole Devil's Valley white" (298). The presence of black females is thus precluded from influencing the racial make-up of the bloodline. The allotment of superior power to the white

⁵⁷ These three formed a direct paternal line: grandfather, father and son. Abraham, as first patriarch, was forced to marry the servant Hagar because Sarah remained childless. Isaac, the next patriarch, was married to a bride picked out by his father. And Jacob, as third patriarch, was tricked into marrying Leah when he wanted to marry Rachel and had to work a further seven years to reach his desire.

Afrikaner males insists on their ability to absorb, and therefore neutralise, the contaminating effect of their partners' blackness. The presence of these black women has thus been purged from history and the silence around their absence warranted.

The silence-as-absence perpetrated by the mythologies of the valley inhabitants is clearly set up in Devil's Valley by their internal contradictions and the fantastical appearances they give rise to. The silence-as-absence performed by the narrative of its character-bound narrator, however, is more insidious but, I argue, no less indicative of the damage done by enforced silence. I now turn my attention to the way in which Lochner, as the novel's narrator, attempts to situate himself as a reliable outsider empowered to convey truth. Simultaneously, I examine how this pretence is both reinforced and then subverted by his variegated status as white male; as narrator; and as journalist.

“I know what our people are like”: the white, guilty narrator

The position of the narrator, investigative journalist Flip Lochner, as the outsider of the community he is interviewing, yet as the insider in the world the reader of the novel is presumed to inhabit, enables him to parade the strangeness of the object of his investigation and comment on its aberration from present-day South Africa that is its context. This sets the community up as one that is perceptibly different from the one from which Lochner as narrator derives. Hence, the reader may be inclined to accept the strangeness of the trappings of the valley within the logic of the novel, but she is clearly warned that Lochner's observations that follow should not be dismissed in the same way. Lochner frames his observations of Devil's Valley in disapproving terms that, I argue, serve to conceal his complicity, as a white man, in South African hierarchies of power.

To return to Lochner's description of his first thoughts on the valley community, the way in which he phrases his sense of wonderment is revealing of his own bias. The complete version of his summation runs:

There was something outlandish about the scene, although it took some time to register. Only much later, like the sight of a star that reaches the eye long after it's already expired, did I discover what it was: nowhere in the Devil's Valley was there any sign of a black or brown labourer. It might have been somewhere in Central Europe, or on the moon, anywhere but in the South Africa in which I'd been living all my life. (37)

The observed fact that there are only white people living in the valley is framed in specific terms. Lochner notes that there are no black or brown *labourers* in the valley. Far from this implying that there *are*, perhaps, black or brown inhabitants who are not labourers, the remark reveals the expectation of the narrator: the absence of black or brown inhabitants may be

expected, but the absence of black or brown people to perform menial tasks is not to be expected. The beliefs that inform Lochner's suppositions are exposed to judgement as much as those of the people of the valley.

The abnormality, for the narrator, lies in the absence of the paradox of apartheid that preaches the physical segregation of races, but at the same time requires physical propinquity for the economic and political hierarchy to be sustained. In the earlier-mentioned "Biblical Mythology," Isidore Diala traces the roots of colonial racism in economics. The biological arguments for a hierarchy among races attempt to neutralise racial difference as physical difference, whereas the difference imposed by imperialist practice actually had its roots in economic motivations. White peoples' perception of blacks, she argues, are formed by myths and allegories that substantiate the idea of inferiority on a metaphysical and physical level. For this reason, he states, white people cannot see black people objectively (13). On the corporeality of the racist paradox, Dyer states:

All concepts of race, emerging out of eighteenth-century materialism, are concepts of bodies... Black people can be reduced (in white culture) to their bodies and thus to race, but white people are something else that is realised in and yet is not reducible to the corporeal, or racial. (14)

"The idea of race," he goes on:

locates historical, social and cultural differences in the body. In principle this means all bodies, but in practice whites have accorded themselves a special relation to race and thus to their own and other bodies. They have more of that unquantifiable something, spirit, that puts them above race. This is a badge of superiority. (30)

Lochner is prepared to find an absence of racial equality, but cannot reconcile his conception of white people with the notion of their having racialised bodies capable of labour. Hence, he is presented as Dyer's white liberal, who pretends affront at the racial segregation practised by a rural Afrikaner community, but fails to think outside of racial terms himself.

When the narrator at a later stage returns to the issue of the absence of brown or black people in the valley, he frames this in a similar way. Questioning his hostess, he asks:

"One thing I noticed here," I said, "is that all the people in the Devil's Valley do their own work, I find it hard to understand, because I know what our people are like ... Are you telling me there never were any black servants with the Lermiet party?" (96)

Lochner finds it hard to fathom the stoic practice of an absence of race. The expectations of the narrator with regards to the Devil's Valley community is thus transferred to the reader: signs of

rural backwardness or fundamentalist tradition are accepted as confirmations of the journalist narrator's sensationalist expectations, but any deviance from these expectations strikes him "like the sight of a star that reaches the eye long after it's already expired," something he fails to notice as it occurs but which seizes his attention after it has passed his field of vision.

On hearing from Tant Poppie that the Devil's Valley community chooses to preserve its isolation from the outside world to prevent the corruption of their society, Lochner reports on the world from which he comes, and explains:

"The country went through bad times which lasted for many years," I said, "but a while ago we had elections and now there's a new government and everything ... we even have a black president now. The whole world looks up to him." (96)

Tant Poppie's retort that "then you can mos see what God wanted to protect us from" (96) is meant to set off the unfamiliarity of the valley community's outdated views from the reader's familiarity with Lochner's perception, while the downplaying of the horrors of the apartheid years as "bad times" lends extra bathos to the rapport between narrator and reader. Drawing the reader into agreement with the narrator, however, sets her up for a confrontation with complicity. This is seen when Lochner himself realises that his convenient "exoticising" of the Devil's Valley community does not allow him to avoid a reconsideration of himself as similarly guilty of discrimination and intolerance, albeit to a different degree.

By "exoticism" I refer to the active construction of something as foreign and other to make it fascinating, as critiqued in Edward Said's 1978 *Orientalism*. Said's emphasis on the relationship between power and knowledge implicit in Western constructions of the non-West is relevant to Lochner's opposition between the Devil's Valley community and the rest of South Africa. In both cases, an ostensible positive appreciation of otherness is rooted in a negative inversion of the dominant culture. Just as Said termed Western "Orientalism" "[a] Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3), Lochner practices an authority over the valley inhabitants by emphasising their otherness. This, I argue, detracts attention away from their sameness in constructing narratives that propose a particular conception of the world as righteous and allow no opposition.

Again, the option for opposition arrives with them being "made strange" in Dyer's method of undermining the assumptions of representation (10). The significance and repercussions of a strangeness attributed to representations of whiteness within Brink's novel is evident both in the ways in which the narrator Flip Lochner represents the inhabitants of Devil's Valley and the ways in which they represent themselves. In making whiteness strange, Brink's *Devil's Valley* offers an opportunity to expose the assumptions of both the narrator and

the character's descriptions of a fictional South African society. Ironically, precisely by employing the fantastic, this novel manages to emphasise the normalisation of social hierarchies: against a backdrop of such obvious outlandishness, the artificial power structure imposed on the so-called real world seems almost as bizarre as that of Devil's Valley.

Lochner perpetually emphasises his difference from the people that he observes in the valley, or, rather, he stresses that the deviance is all theirs. His narrative emphasises that the features and events the community experiences as normal are, in actuality, anything but. Although the inhabitants themselves find nothing strange in events such as ceremonies with goat sacrifice, frogs raining from the sky, dead people walking and chatting among the living, or lakes appearing and disappearing in different locations in the valley, Lochner reacts to these activities of the community as bizarre. I argue that by unpacking the way in which Lochner is positioned as the novel's narrator that the silences that are the object of his investigation can be connected with the silences that are its means.

“My fuck-up of a life”: the narrator as rat

As a first-person narrator, the reader easily identifies with Lochner because, as Todorov states in *The Fantastic*, “the pronoun ‘I’ belongs to everyone.” The reader's recognition of herself in the narrator allows her to “enter as directly as possible into the universe of the fantastic,” where the combination of supernatural events and a realistic narrator creates the doubt that is the ultimate condition for the fantastic (84). That these events would appear fantastical to the reader can be understood within the context of Lochner's own misgivings about South Africa as abnormal in itself, a product of a repressive regime that continues to leave its mark both inside and outside of the Devil's Valley. He is told different versions of the story of the origin of the valley's community, each of which contradict the others, while all emphasise a shared sense of guilt. This guilt seems the result of the failure to maintain racial purity, but can also be associated with the guilt over displacing the former Khoi inhabitants of the valley. This is suggested by the leading questions that the narrator asks and the way in which he interprets the phenomena he encounters.

Tant Poppie's pretence at “cleanliness,” for example, when she tells the story of the settling of the valley by the Lermiet clan, is met with derision by Lochner, who already knows that the valley had not been empty. His narrative suggests that the purity of its white settlers, too, is contestable, describing their righteousness in sarcastic terms. He is careful to disassociate himself from such dissembling and fails to consider his own complicity. In spite of the distance that he tries to establish between himself and the objects of his investigation by his adoption of a tone of superior ridicule, a conflation is effected between himself and the valley

founders. This is accomplished by the authoritative position that he claims for himself as judgmental narrator who, like the founding fathers, allows this empowerment to go to his head.

On first seeing the Devil's Valley at the opening of the novel, Lochner narrates: "And down at the very bottom lay the deep slit of the valley, half-hidden behind dark thickets of natural forest. The kind of view that turns on a dirty mind," continuing that "I could imagine the sensation the first Lukas Lermiet must have felt looking down here, the kind of randiness that marks every first man: seeing the earth unfolding" (7). Describing the land as actively and willingly "unfolding" itself in front of the explorer's gaze, reference is made to the colonial myth of the untouched land inviting violation by the very intactness that explorers attribute to it. This theme, much-examined in postcolonial criticism, is inevitably associated with a feminising of the landscape, in which land available for male exploration is associated with women made sexually available for male conquest.⁵⁸ By stating, in an appreciative tone, that he "could imagine" what Lukas Lermiet, the founding father of the valley community, must have felt, and phrasing his speculations about these feelings in such strong sexual terms, Lochner makes himself complicit with these bigoted practices without acknowledging them as such.

This complicity also extends to his investigative practices. Lochner is clearly set up as the conquering male within his own narrative, wherein he also makes it quite clear to the reader what Devil's Valley represents to him. On first being confronted with the opportunity of picking up his investigation of the history of Devil's Valley after abandoning it thirty years earlier, Lochner states: "For the first time in years something had caught me by the balls again" (19). This frames his understanding of this opportunity in decidedly, perhaps even aggressively, masculinist terms. Lochner appears to perceive his chance for exploration in terms of a pseudo-colonial, and perhaps even megalomaniac, opportunity for (sexual) conquest. Lochner terms Devil's Valley a "fallow field...where no historian has yet set a fucking foot. Every word spoken in this place is a bloody new invention. This is how the writer of Genesis must have felt. *Let there be light*" (46).

The ostensibly unexplored nature of the history of the valley is what appeals to the investigative journalist, he instantly compares himself to that epitome of masculine concern for primacy, the Christian God, assumed to be referred to as "the writer of Genesis". That Lochner overlooks the ironic fact that the Devil's Valley is already populated, and therefore not exactly untrodden, fits in neatly with early accounts of exploration that promulgated the myth that the African continent was uninhabited. It is also at odds with his own disapproval of the origin stories of the valley inhabitants that pretend to a virgin location awaiting their penetration. The absence of intelligent life that he pretends to is as unjust and inaccurate as the Lermiet

⁵⁸ See McClintock (1995) for a comprehensive analysis of this colonial strategy.

allegations of available land. Throughout Lochner's narration, the similarity between what he is doing as omnipotent reporter and what the Lermiets do in fabricating their valley's history is shrouded in silence.

The agenda behind the narrator's expectation of what he would find in the valley may be revealed by his commiseration that he "might have been somewhere in Central Europe, or on the moon, anywhere but in the South Africa in which I'd been living all my life" (37). The contention that what he expects to find is an indication of "the South Africa in which I'd been living" (emphasis added) explain his relegation of all that is contrary to his conception of South Africa as "as alien" as Europe or the moon. Lochner's research in the Devil's Valley achieves a personal note here as it takes on the aspect of a quest for validating, perhaps questioning, his understanding of the country. In this light, Lochner's role as an investigative journalist becomes relevant.

One would perhaps assume there cannot be a more committed form of writing than journalism, providing objective, unbiased, or at least verified information to readers, who become the responsible citizens around which modern-day democracy is based. However, this assumption is disturbed by contemporary journalistic practices, such as in South Africa's past, where the State of Emergency made freedom of the press impossible.

Lochner directly comments on this in relation to an incident with his editor during the apartheid years. This editor had called him in to the office to reprimand him for reporting on a particular story on racial discrimination. In reaction to Lochner's simple contention that he had observed the race-motivated atrocities he had reported on with his own eyes, and could, therefore, not be expected to disavow them, he is told that: "[f]or your information this never happened" (14). The contradiction between what Lochner knows to have happened and what he is being asked to ignore not so much as to *unknow*, influences his later conceptions of reality. Because of this, he becomes obsessed with written records, as he sees these as irrefutable.

The notion that a paper presence can refute absence and overcome enforced silence is perhaps not an unreasonable one. In the context of apartheid South Africa, however, with its history of law-enforced gagging and muzzling practices written into the constitution, the faith in "small hard facts" is naïve, if not irresponsible (30). This is another paradox of apartheid, which required journalists to report that what had happened, had, in fact, not happened at all. Lochner wonders how South African journalism can ever regain its commitment in the face of such practices of silence-as-absence.

In a similar way, South African poet and journalist Antjie Krog (1998), describes that many journalists, although aware of the importance of reporting on the proceedings of the commission to inform the country and make the past "headline news," also had misgivings

about doing this. They had previously been used by the apartheid government to censor reports on resistance and, following on this complicity, they were unconvinced that their commitment could ever be believed again (15).

After Apartheid, and away from the specifically South African context, Brink's novel suggests that journalism does not necessarily revolve around well-researched facts but, rather, on spectacle. The reader's perception of Flip Lochner is already framed by the epigraph that opens the novel:

Most journalists are restless voyeurs who see the warts on the world, the imperfections in people and places ... Gloom is their game, the spectacle their passion, normality their nemesis.

The probability that Lochner's journalistic viewpoint will be marked by exaggeration and grandeurism is instantly set up. Additionally, the presence of the opening quote points to an external narrator that frames Lochner as character-bound narrator, who, in turn, frames the valley inhabitants as story-tellers. This reminder of the presence of a character-bound "I" immediately warns readers that all experience described in that story is filtered through the subjective perception of this "I".

Lochner's position as a journalist, a white male and a narrator who is the hero of his own story and aware of his power as the author of that story, makes its impact upon the tale he is telling us. Lochner's own admission of disillusionment with journalism as a high-standing ideological or moral tool and his own lack of scruples, make it unlikely that his viewpoint is simply believed by the reader. So, we have to work for our information as readers, sifting what we can use from what we cannot. In this way, the complicity of Lochner triggers the reader to make her own decision on the novel's meaning.

As discussed above, the narrative of *Devil's Valley* contains numerous indications that cause the reader to doubt whether the information that its narrator provides is part of the reality that he pseudo-objectively seeks to uncover, or part of the reality that he has already established in his mind. The fantastical imagery that the novel throws up, I argue, unsettles Lochner's pretence at a factual account. It also functions as warnings to the reader to look beneath the surface of his interpretation for indications of his motivations. In this way, the narrative's resistance to presenting history as a tabulation of facts proposes a revisiting of the past as an alternative. In addition to the instances of silence-as-absence that the discussion above has seen the novel forward to complicate conceptions of history, in the next section I examine its proposition of silence as abstinence.

The resistance implied in conceiving of silence-as-abstinence is showcased by the valley inhabitants, who only tell Lochner what they have decided fit for his consumption. They practice silence-as-abstinence as a means of control over his intrusion. I focus, in my examination of the community's attempts at withholding, on Lochner's female interlocutors and explore the ways in which Lochner variously seeks, and is denied, access to the valley's records, its women and its lands. All three of these, I argue, actively resist control by defying the narrator's delineations of them. Before looking at these, I briefly return to the theory on silent resistance and discuss the merit of ideas on the gendered power configurations of fantastic narratives.

Silence as Abstinence

In assessing silence-as-abstinence within the context of the novel, I return briefly to Mahoney and Lakoff's distinction between silence as absence of power and silence as empowering. The main fault that Mahoney, in "The Problem of Silence," finds in the simplistic association of silence with absence lies in the presumption of a unitary voice that is suppressed and needs to be heard. This denies the complexities of "different roles and shifting subject positions," and conflates the individual experience with a collective one (604). This presumption of collective feeling comes to the fore strongly in Lochner's dealings with the valley inhabitants. Their unitary stance against him as outsider gradually gives way to reveal the presence of outsiders within the community itself, all of them women and the most notable one of these being the orphan Emma. Emma, as a woman of uncertain parentage and unprotected by a male husband or father, is vulnerable to exclusion from the traditional community. She is earmarked by Lochner as a convenient point of access in his attempts at extracting information.

In defining insider status in the power structures at play in the *Devil's Valley*, gender plays a central role. In her exploration of the way in which female characters and images are read in fictional and historical narratives, Debora Kodish (1987) claims that men are often attributed with an active role with regard to new lands or peoples or events that are to be brought under control. Women, however, form part of those phenomena that are placed under such control. She identifies the theme of a "powerful male outsider" who causes "the new awakening of an often silenced woman" as a powerful one, which "resonate[s] with a marked, if unacknowledged, sexuality" (574-5). The male outsider is active, while the female insider is a passive informant who is to be "won into speech" (575). This theme is certainly present in *Devil's Valley*, where Lochner falls in love with Emma and is determined to save her from her marginal position within the valley community by taking her with him when he eventually goes home.

As Lochner sets himself up as the conquering male within his own narrative, his exploration into the silenced elements of the community's history, which centre on Emma and her parentage, start to take on the nature of a sexualised conquest, in which he wins both the story and the girl at the same time. In Lochner's expression of a desire for exploring the unknown, the oft-referred to sexual frustration that he experiences is aligned with his apparent need to "plunge" into the "hidden depths" of history. Lochner also equates the Devil's Valley with female possession on a more personal level, as he tells of his initial misgivings about leaving his wife, Sylvia, to do research on the valley because he is aware that a journalist colleague of his is competing with him for her affection:

If I were to abscond for a couple of months to do research in the Devil's Valley, I had little doubt that he'd settle so tightly into her own little devil's valley that once again only his toes would stick out. (19)

Sylvia is literally equated with the valley. Lochner's decision, years later and after his divorce from Sylvia, to return to researching the valley may reasonably be equated with a desire to repossess what he has lost, with regard to both information and the possession of Sylvia.

Ironically, the power to satisfy that Lochner attributes to the stories about the community is never fully realised, as that which Lochner seeks to uncover and, I would argue, possess, resists his intrusion by a practice of silence-as-abstinence. This active resistance takes place in the novel at both animate and inanimate levels, as well as individually and communally.

Exploring the connotations of power and powerlessness in silence, Mahoney admits that there is a problem with the notion of silence as defeat and powerlessness, not potentially a choice or an act of resistance. She quotes D. W. Winnicott who views silence as not only a pathology but as possible power and activity, particularly in claiming the right not to communicate. Silence he sees as potential protest against intrusion (Mahoney 83). This links up with the refusal of many of the valley inhabitants to speak to Lochner as journalist, and his suspicion that they are all conspiring to tell him a particular version of the story or even nothing at all. Under Winnicott's definition, this gives evidence of conspiracy in preparing responses as a sign of resistance against probing.

Mahoney gives this a psychological interpretation when she explores the capacity for resistance as lying in the balance between choosing to be heard and not be heard and speaking and refusing to speak. She cites absence as potentially a form of "perfect communication" where all sense of individual subjectivity is lost and sacrificed to mutuality, as it forms the condition for realising one's own agency in communication, or, indeed, in one's ability to

withhold it. I argue that Lochner's pursuit of, and experience of insurgency from, the valley's documentation, its women and its land, are all presented as agents performing silence-as-abstinence in the novel.

The valley inhabitants' ability to remain silent under interrogation directs authorial control away from Lochner and plummets his narrative in the realm of the fantastic. This is in contrast to that out of which he had hoped (and expected) to construct his narrative, and which he describes as "the reassurance of a few small, hard facts" (30). These, in their irrefutable solidity oppose the fantastic. Lochner describes the reassurance of facts to lie in their being "certain, unshakeable by wind or weather," which opposes them to the unpredictability of both the natural and the fantastic (30). As already discussed, Lochner's experiences as a reporter in South Africa have made him uneasy about conceptions of the truth. He cynically recounts in his narrative how he had believed in the possibility of truth in his youth, but how disillusionment had "shocked [him] out of this" and transformed it into a faith in facts (91). Because these facts need to have the appearance of hardness and certainty, he comes to the Devil's Valley with tape recorder and camera in tow. As devices that record only what appears in front of them and leave a tangible record, they would be able to give credence to appearance as real. Each time that Lochner attempts to use the recorder, however, it resists, and the camera is dropped and breaks on his initial descent into the valley. These incidents are so improbable that they resemble inanimate forces that sabotage the pursuit of facts in an enactment of silence-as-abstinence.

In a similar way, Lochner's expectations of finding historical documentation in the valley are repudiated by the residents' insistence that there are none. "It was to get away from all those things in the Colony that our Seer first brought us here," Tant Poppie tells him (46). The refusal to keep records is associated with an act of political resistance against colonial rule. Lochner's initial interpretation of this absence of records as an opportunity to install himself as primogenitor associates his attempts at delineation with the autocratic practises of the colonial government that the absence of records resists (46). Rather than an opportunity to "play god," however, this pre-emption from access to documented fact makes Lochner dependent on the testimony of others. Although oral testimony does not have the hardness or certainty that he attributes to recorded fact, it is also not characterised by a willing pliability but, rather, takes the form of an elusive and frustrating indeterminacy that resists his authority. The oral accounts provided by his interviewees leave silent as much as they tell, and equally unreliable fantastic images confront him in total silence. In examining these, I focus on their female variants, and discuss the complications that gender adds to silent resistance.

“Too slippery to catch”: abstinence as a silence that resists

The use of the fantastic in *Devil's Valley* foregrounds the perception of Flip Lochner as the eyes and ears through which readers comprehend the goings-on in the valley. This is because he, as the medium observing phenomena, is also the agent who relegates it to the fantastic through his inability to explain these realistically or dismiss them as imaginary.

Simultaneously, this allows the reader to become aware of the inhabitants' expression of silence that Lochner's narration cannot efface or overrule. In Todorov's words, "The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (25). The silence-as-abstinence encountered by Lochner often make it impossible for him to explain the impossible or illogical away.

Compelled to rely on the oral accounts of the valley residents, Lochner indicates a preference for interviewing its women. This is because he sees them as more "accessible" as they share his outsider status in the patriarchal Devil's Valley society. At the same time, however, Lochner's own chauvinist conceptions of women colours his interaction with them. His approach to women is characterised by sexualisation, particularly in his pursuit of Emma. Although he contacts her under the auspices of investigating the silenced story of her lineage, Lochner eventually equates this buried story with the history of the valley, and his desire to obtain the story with his desire to possess Emma.

In other instances, such as his interviews with Annie-of-Alwyn, he takes a similar approach in envisioning himself as conquering his subjects, even if he is not particularly interested in them romantically. In his description of their awkwardness with each other after she has blurted out the story of her great grandmother in a surprisingly unrestrained way, he sees himself and Annie: "[l]ike two people, I thought, who'd had sex too soon and now were embarrassed about getting dressed in front of each other" (280). His interaction with the valley women is determined by unequal gender relations and misrepresents his dependent position as the interloper asking for information. I contend that these unequal relations are addressed by the women's use of silence-as-abstinence as a form of empowerment.

Emma, who becomes involved in Lochner's search for facts on her mother and father, evinces a conception of history that actively opposes his rigid definition of it. Rather than the "small, hard facts" that Lochner seeks, Emma wants "a story that makes sense" (288). Her version of history asserts that it be user-friendly and practical, which sets it up as active and productive in the present. The way in which Lochner deals with history sees it made certain and safely consigned to the past.

Emma's abstinence in resisting that inflexibility occurs on three levels. First of all, she refrains from giving Lochner the single, coherent version of her past that he asks for. Instead,

she contradicts not only the other villagers, who tell Lochner their versions of Emma's actions, but herself as well. Secondly, she frequently abstains from answering his questions at all. To Lochner's invasive "I want to know everything about you," she responds by inviting him to give an account of himself with the words, "No, tell me about *you*" (288). Thirdly, Emma's resisting silence-as-abstinence takes the shape of the fantastic. Her appearance defies Lochner's apprehension, as, the first time he sees her, she is bathing naked in a pool in the distance but disappears instantly when he tries to approach her. After she becomes his (unreliable) informant in his quest for the truth, he is still often reminded of the elusive nature of Emma's presence. When he tries to convert her to his faith in facts, for example, he proposes that, "it's in our nature to look for something to hold on to. Footprints to lead you somewhere." Even as he says this, however, the fantastic confronts him with its predicament as he is reminded of the first time that he saw Emma, "when she, too, hadn't left any footprints" (288).

A similar resistance is practised by Tant Poppie, who refuses to give Lochner the explanations he seeks when events disturb his sense of reality and logic. One of these events is the nightly visits he receives by the silent women who inhabit the realm of the fantastic in that they defy his attempts to classify them as either real or imaginary. The first of these visits occurs just after Lochner has taken part in the village porcupine hunt. On returning to his bed after the hunt, the narrator recounts the following:

I was still conscious of blowing out the candle, but after that I blacked out. In my sleep a woman came to me. She drew the kaross from me and set to work with the kind of clean, absolute lust a man only dreams about. By the time I became aware of her, I was already far gone. (86)

The attestation that this event occurred "in my sleep" would suggest that Lochner is merely dreaming, but the ensuing description of events unbalances this suggestion.

After describing sexual intercourse, the narrator relates how the visiting woman tries to flee from him. He grabs her foot but she, however, is "[t]oo slippery to catch," and gets away from him. In a delayed reaction, Lochner returns to bed only to sit up suddenly to remember that the foot he had clutched had "long toes and fleshy webs between them," and that he had "a long blue ribbon knotted loosely around my prick" (87). Descriptions of the woman as "belonging to the night" and having webbed feet attribute her to the realm of the imagination, in spite of the contrary evidence of the physically irrefutable ribbon.

To develop the suspense in which the narrator, and, subsequently, the reader is caught, a similar occurrence takes place the following night, when the narrator admits to having "lustful dreams" before he is interrupted by the entrance of a woman. On her exit, he attempts to shed

light on her but fails to see more than a “brief flare.” Yet, he states, “that kept me awake, because a succubus is not supposed to be visible in the light” (137-8).

Again, the scene of the appearance of the woman is framed by the narrator’s dreams, in this case dreams that are specifically “lustful” and that can therefore reasonably be assumed to incite “visions” of the same nature. The relegation of this apparition as Lochner’s fantasy, however, is undercut by his assertion that he could physically *see* her by the light of his lighter, in spite of the fact that “a succubus is not supposed to be visible in the light.” The woman, by this logic, may have been real after all, but again she is furnished with characteristics that hamper her easy categorisation as real, such as her strange appearance (the harelip) and her propensity for having wordless and unbidden sex with foreign men. The hesitation between relegating this incident to the real or the imaginary, which, instead, sets it within the realm of the fantastic, continues in descriptions of the third visit.

The following night, Lochner again receives a woman in his room, and again he catches a brief glimpse of her on leaving. The woman who visits the narrator on the third night is not, from the outset, simply postulated as appearing in a dream, presumably because both narrator and reader are, by now, aware of the ambiguous nature of these visits. She is once again presented as “strange,” however, both by means of her appearance (the hair that covers her entire body) and the effect that she has on the narrator (his hair standing on end). The possibility for consigning her to reality appears to be achieved when the narrator retains her physical clothing at the end of the episode. The dismissal of her indeterminate nature is precluded, however, by the inability of her clothing to reveal anything about her identity. Her dress is “like any other in the Devil’s Valley,” and nothing in the valley is ever what it seems.

Subsequently, Lochner confronts Tant Poppie with the nightly visits. “These last few nights there were women coming to my room,” he states, at which Tant Poppie undercuts the factuality of his statement by soberly replying, “I am a light sleeper and I did not hear anything.” (182). She resists his appeal for an explanation by sidestepping his appeal for elucidation. When he continues his account of the events, Tant Poppie, on her part, continues practising silence-as-abstinence in opposing him. Lochner’s questions about the identity of these women are met not with a verifying answer but a mystifying question. “Who says your visitors were real women?” she asks, “[t]hey could have been nightwalkers” (183). This, once again, leaves the impression that the nature of the Devil’s Valley cannot be classified as part of either the reality that forms the background of Lochner’s own life, or the imagination that he seeks to impose on the valley by means of a sensationalist story. The fantastic remains intact thanks to the unwillingness of Tant Poppie to give an explanation of phenomena. Lochner’s frustration at his inability to obtain the information he wants makes obvious the link between

silence and resistance, a connection that is further strengthened on extending the interpretation to the very ground of the Devil's Valley, which, in being personified, constitutes a fantastic translation of the spirit of the valley community by performing a resistance of its own.

Dry as hell: the Devil's Valley

The coherent arrangement of the Devil's valley community is tested by the prodding of Flip Lochner into the community's past. The disintegration of its society is symbolised by a drought which inhabits more and more of the conversation of the people, as it comes to play an increasing role in the novel. The drought threatens the survival of the people and, at the closing of *Devil's Valley*, a last-ditch attempt is made to rally the troops by a sermon from the community's preacher Holy Lermiet. The presence of an outsider in the form of the inquiring narrator has caused a shift in perception in the community and, instead of showing a united front, the meeting becomes a platform for discussing alternative ways of interacting with each other.

As already mentioned, one of the central figures in the novel who embody the potential for imagining a way of life outside of the context of Devil's Valley is Emma. During the first encounter between Lochner and Emma, where she is bathing in a pool of water, the incredulity surrounding her presence is compounded by the fact that the pool of water suddenly disappears as much as she does. The explanation that Lochner is offered by Lukas Death does nothing to resolve his confusion, but does set up a fantastical analogy between the valley community and the topography of the valley itself. He says: "There's no stopping her when she gets the urge... That one will squeeze water from a stone." (34). The will to water is connected with its physical presence, so, within the logic of the novel, the opposite may also hold true. The extreme drought could be interpreted as a lack of will to water in the valley and this could indicate a resistance from within the valley to the continuation of an established way of life.

Alternatively, it could simply point to the unsustainability of its perpetuation. The absent rains need not necessarily be read on a metaphoric level, as the predicament mirrors that of rural communities in South Africa today. During the apartheid regime, rural communities were generously subsidised by the apartheid government, who recognised that its ideology found its strongest core in the communities of white farmers. With the abolition of apartheid, government subsidies were redirected. The absence of government protection left farmers vulnerable in times of extreme droughts, while European and US farmers were still protected by their respective governments. Newspapers report that many South African farmers in the Western Cape and Northern Cape Provinces, who have struggled with drought since 2003, have since turned away from farming and have taken up alternative means for subsistence, mostly

within the tourist sector. This has led to the actual disappearance of a traditional way of farm life.⁵⁹

The beliefs and practices of the community of Devil's Valley are depicted in the novel as out of touch with contemporary South African concerns. In spite of Lochner's attempts to find in the valley a means of redeeming himself, his attitude to the fantastical renderings of Devil's Valley say less about the valley itself and more about his interpretation of them in context of the South Africa beyond the valley. The novel suggests that Lochner has been exposed to a life-altering discovery within its confines. Following on his insistence of "tangible evidence," he reaches a point near the end of the novel where he understands that "[w]e fabricate yesterdays for ourselves which we can live with, which make the future possible" (299). His questionable motifs and disagreeable disposition, however, leave open whether he, together with the reader, has been transformed by this new understanding of the past. This is expressed by the uncertainty with which the novel ends, as Lochner tries to make his way out of the valley but is obstructed in its last paragraph by the dead patriarch of the valley who forms his "last ordeal" (369).

As discussed, the resistance that is offered to Lochner's sanctimonious insistence on weighing down the valley community with his interpretation of their way of life takes the form of silence-as-abstinence. Villagers refrain from validating the narrator's conjectures and withhold their alternative explanations, and even the reliability of written records is actively hidden from him. Additionally, the appearances of fantastical phenomena defy Lochner's insistence on classification and fact-finding and silently practise their resistance. These silent phenomena are found in the guise of worldly and otherworldly figures and even extend to inanimate objects, the most profound of these being the valley itself. Considered together with the instances of silence-as-absence as discussed above, I contend that *Devil's Valley* suggests that a reconciliation with the past may be achieved by revisiting it equipped with the insight that it has brought, as it refuses to be dismissed or fully known from a distance, mental or real.

The danger of dismissing the past out of hand, a danger expressed in Devil's Valley through the motif of the fantastic, lies in such dismissal making progress impossible. Lochner, and, through him, the reader, is exposed to this idea through the juxtaposition of the two meanings of silence: as suppression and as resistance. By the end of the novel, however, the reader is uncertain whether this fantastic juxtaposition has achieved a transformation in the

⁵⁹ Whether this is to be lamented or not would, of course, depend on the factors taken into consideration: although the aesthetic appeal of traditional Afrikaner farm life should not be over-sentimentalised in the context of the ideology it represents, the failure of many South African farming industries has caused not only farmers but also many rural farm workers, often casual labourers, to lose their livelihoods as a result.

narrator's perception of history, symbolised by the uncertainty with regards to his escape from the valley.

This uncertainty, I would argue, is productive, as it emphasises that a recovery of a silenced past does not guarantee a retrieval of human dignity, even in the context of postapartheid South Africa. As previously discussed, Nicola King's *Memory, Narrative, Identity* (2000) expresses this in her plea for the allocation of space, which allows for the unsayable to remain unsaid. Not for the sake of catching or capturing it, but for the sake of imparting a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. She states that "the unsayable prompts the attempt the articulate, to represent, but writing cannot unbury or recover the presence (of absence)" (126). In this sense, the uncertainty provided by a literature of the fantastic does justice to past silences as a necessary condition for being able to live in the present.

Chapter 5: Intertwined Texts: Between Narrative and Desire in *The Rights of Desire*

“I’m a stranger to the place that has made me what I am.”⁶⁰

The Rights of Desire (102)

André Brink’s 2000 novel *The Rights of Desire* purports to be “a meditation on ageing and on love” (from the blurb on its front flap) and takes its title from a line spoken in J. M. Coetzee’s 1999 novel *Disgrace*. Coetzee’s protagonist makes a claim for desire as lying in the realm of the “natural,” hence beyond ethical considerations.⁶¹ Both books were published within a year of each other, and both deal with a protagonist who attempts to dispel, or just alleviate, his disillusionment with life by embarking on a sexual liaison with a much younger woman. Both central characters are white South African males, middle aged and at the end of an intellectual career. Coetzee’s protagonist is lecturer at the University of the Western Cape who is suspended because of his affair with a student, and Brink’s is a retired librarian.

In her article on “The Politics of Shame and Redemption in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*” (2003), Sue Kossew verbalises the conclusion that the readers of these two novels may reach: they deal with the need for identity transformation in a post apartheid age, but from the point of view of the erstwhile bulwarks of apartheid, white South African males. Kossew cites the present-day “collision between private and public worlds; intellect and body; desire and love; and public disgrace or shame,” (155) as the realm wherein Coetzee’s novel explores this change. She suggests this infinitely “complex exploration” is the prerogative of the Coetzee novel alone, suggesting that the work by Brink deals with the same issue in the merely carnal sense.

Contrary to this opinion, I propose that Brink’s novel, too, complicates the process of re-defining a South African identity in the post apartheid era in a broader context, and makes use of desire as a framework. As previously explained in chapter three, Mieke Bal’s conception of a concepts as a framework or “systematic set of distinctions” through which an interpretation of cultural production may be arrived, is useful as it positions concepts in confrontation with, and not as an application to, the cultural object under examination (*Travelling Concepts* 23-4). In line with this, I consider Brink’s deployment of desire as a concept, before taking it as a thematic element in the narrative.

Brink’s use of the concept of desire homes in on the precarious negotiation that inhabits the relationship of every South African with her or his country. The form that this complication takes, I argue, is that of a perpetual frustration of desire. In the novel, the term “desire” is used to different

⁶⁰ All quotations taken from André Brink’s *The Rights of Desire*, London: Secker & Warburg, 2000, unless stated otherwise.

⁶¹ The quote as it is cited in Brink’s novel reads: “I rest my case on the rights of desire On the god who makes even the small birds quiver.”

ends and in the pursuit of different objects, each time following its protagonist Ruben in the formulation of a specific (subjective) understanding of its object under the pretence of a single encompassing premise. That this formulation occurs through the medium of language, in its textual appearance, plays an important role in Ruben's repeated disappointment. The separation from language that he feels, and the subsequent impact that this has on his conceptualisation of himself as a South African among fellow South Africans, is mirrored in an informative manner by Julia Kristeva in her *Desire in Language*. In this work, Kristeva investigates the dilemma that the modern (structuralist) perception of language as text allows for the excess of meaning created by what she calls "poetic language." This poetic language she relates to the functions of language that are translinguistic: they refer to the movement and sound involved in signifying practices that cannot be equated with language's symbolic and informative functions, although they contribute to it. In this chapter, I use Kristeva's insights to analyse Ruben's concurrent fear of, and desire for, this excess that is produced by text.

Both Kristeva's ideas and the structure of the novel lead me to read these excesses as "ghosts," elements that escape substantiality but nevertheless provoke an effect. It so happens that Brink's novel not only describes the haunting of Ruben's house by a ghost named Antje, but also houses an actual ghost in the sense that the narrative infers and then suppresses questions about South Africa's history, thus greatly impacting on our understanding of what is (not) said. By extending this idea of the ghost to an analogy with South Africa's history as the spirit that haunts present-day identity, I involve the inferred and unsaid both at the level of Kristeva's poetic implications and at that of the more recognizably symbolic, the ghost that haunts Ruben.

In his essay on literary history as a "ghost," Miguel Tamen explains the analogy by establishing that a ghost, in its intangibility, is always "a duplicated image" and "second to something" (297), pointing to the thing it stands for at the same time as it creates its distance from it in the way metaphorical language also functions. In my analysis of the ghost of Ruben's narrative, I pay special attention to the role the metaphor plays in its signification. Tamen also posits that history writing is a "re-vision" that revises, not an original that can lay claim to truth, but an original "vision" that triggers consequences without inhabiting a concrete truth to start with. In Brink's novel, Ruben reveals his ambivalence towards the versions of South African history he can, and those he cannot live with, in relating to the personages that symbolise different aspects of South Africa to him. Ruben links the presence of the ghost Antje, for example, to the discernible yet invisible of Kristeva's poetic language, when he says:

It was one of those occasions when *the weight of the unspoken is tangible below the spoken*. In a sense, to me at least, Antje's absence was more real than anything around us Like an

obscure moon illuminating our darkness from somewhere very far away, very long ago.
(emphasis added) (51)

Antje's absence, logical by reason of her death and her hailing from four centuries ago, is "more real" to Ruben than the presence of her bones, because her haunting the present accurately conveys the trauma that characterises South African society today. In contrast to this, Ruben's relationship with his housekeeper, who is a contemporary victim of South Africa's brutal inequality, is marked by ghostly distance: he concurs that his world and Margrieta's, although the same on the surface, are very different beneath, and he dubs Margrieta "as unreal to [him] as any ghost" (142).

Analysing the different manifestations of desire from the novel with the use of Kristeva's conceptualisation of poetic language as the ghostly subtext that is "is tangible below the spoken" (51), I focus on the relationship that its protagonist Ruben Olivier has with language, and in particular with literature; with the various women in, and outside of his life; and, ultimately, with South Africa itself. I interpret these relationships as initially framed as sexual desire – more specifically as a desire for sexual possession – and trace the way in which their (mis)reading camouflages their actual nature as explorations of shifting identities, leading to the unavoidable frustration that haunts both Ruben and Brink's novel.

In what follows I interpret key passages in the novel that set up and then destabilise the various relationships of desire over the course of the narrative, uncovering the disparity between different conceptions of desire in Brink's work, furthering the tragedy of inevitable frustration. To deal with this hypothesis, I invoke the approach of Julia Kristeva. In exploring the relationship between language and meaning, Kristeva identifies two layers within every text that both participate in its signification: that of a genotext and a phenotext, roughly transcribeable as the "semiotic" and the "symbolic." This confrontation between underlying drives and superimposed structures brings us back to Kossew's collision of private and public; disgrace and shame, and, most of all, of love and desire. By investigating those oppositions at the level of language in a reading of Brink's novel, its significance as an exploration of changing identities can be established.

In the three sections that follow this explication, I explore the layered nature of South African identity by analysing the novel's uses of desire in the three different relationships mentioned earlier between Ruben and language; women; and South Africa. My reading of Brink's novel takes the text's dual nature of surface and "deep" structure of drives (the "ghost" of a text) into account. The figure of the ghost will also be analysed through the literal appearance of the ghost of Antje of Bengal in the narrative, as well as as a metaphor suggesting the tangible absence of stories suppressed in South Africa's official historiography.

Intertwined Stories

The Rights of Desire is a novel that entails many stories, all of which bear on the life of its first-person narrator, the 65-year-old widowed Ruben Olivier. Ruben lives in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa in a large Cape house, where he is administered to by his housekeeper Margrieta as well as haunted by Antje, a seventeenth-century servant from Bengal, who was amorously pursued by her white master and subsequently killed in punishment for the sexual transgression. Both Margrieta and Antje belonged to the category of “coloured people” in the old South Africa. Their stories are related to the reader by Margrieta’s colourful and colloquial direct speech, addressed to her employer Ruben whenever she is in a particularly jovial mood. Aside from Margrieta and Antje, Ruben also comes to share his house with Tessa, who moves in as his tenant after the novel has started.

Margrieta’s narration in the novel, which often run to several pages and are oft-referred to in the surrounding narrative, serves as a secondary, embedded narration that transgresses the limits of what Ruben, whose experiences are distinct from that of most of his fellow South Africans, can convey to the reader. Ruben is removed from the full South African experience because his status as a privileged white South African male has protected him from any intimate knowledge of the country’s violent policies of discrimination. At the same time, his preference for keeping company with books rather than human beings is a self-imposed removal from his context that sustains Ruben’s romantic ideas about the country. With Margrieta’s no-nonsense accounts, delivered in stereotypical “cape coloured” language, a contrast is set up between the image of South Africa that Ruben constructs under the influence of his novels and books on romantic philosophy, and the South Africa that he and Margrieta actually live in.⁶²

In her narrative, Margrieta takes on the persona of spokesperson for those figures misrepresented in South Africa’s past. Acting as the mouthpiece through which the story of Antje is told (she purports to be the ghost’s long-standing confidante), and explaining the gender-specific obstacles that Ruben’s youthful tenant, Tessa, is forced to consider in making her decisions, Margrieta directs a puzzled Ruben to the gaps in his knowledge. Needless to say, it is this difference in perception, or, rather, this luxury of Ruben not *needing* to perceive, that accounts for the different forms that their South African-ness takes.

The novel is also the story of Ruben himself, who, in retirement from the library where he used to work, reflects on his Afrikaner youth in rural South Africa; his marriage to the conservative and deeply religious Riana; their estrangement after the loss of their baby-

⁶² The so-called “cape coloured” language is derived from Afrikaans, Malayan and English, and is represented as frequent intersperses of Afrikaans or slang words in the English novel.

daughter; and the plight of his grown sons, both of whom have chosen to leave South Africa and seek their fortune in other parts of the world. But most of all *The Rights of Desire* is the story of the upheaval Ruben experiences when he takes 29-year-old Tessa into his house as a lodger, and falls madly and unrequitedly in lust with her. All these stories are related in an entangled and even interchangeable way, as, for example, parts of Ruben's experiences with Tessa are overlapped by his reminiscences on Riana, as if they were interchangeable. These separate stories are set against the backdrop of the story of the unravelling South African society that, post-apartheid, is struggling with its divided heritage. Because of the multiplicity of intertwined stories, I take a closer look at the ways in which the novel's narrative strands and narrators create an intertextual knot, employing Kristeva's notion of intertextuality, and what effect this has on the conceptualisation of language as desirable.

Brink's novel announces itself as an intertextual work, because it entertains a variety of stories, in different media, and across different times and imaginings. These form a tapestry that is marked not so much by coherence as by what Ed Block, in his discussion of Kristeva's theories, calls the "messiness, confusion, and even anarchy" that are "part of the attraction of literature" ("Desire in Language" 1983). Roland Barthes writes in "The Death of the Author" that "[t]he text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (53). Here, the notion of "quotations" refers not so much to direct quotations from literary sources but to "different systems of signs," the transposition of which Kristeva, in her 1980 *Desire in Language*, sees "accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position" (15), or, in other words, of the position that emits language and the one that makes it signify.

Kristeva's conceptualisation of intertextuality is concerned with what is generated by these signs within the text. Taking into consideration that meaning is not a direct communication from the author to the reader but is mediated through sign systems of which both author and reader partake, the *process* of making meaning, rather than the static textual remnants of it, takes centre stage. The status of language as stationary is challenged.

Kristeva's "The Bounded Text," which was first published in 1969, marks the occasion where she first coined the term "intertextuality." Here, Kristeva argues that novelistic language is made up of discourses found outside of the novel, which it makes its own and which lend significance to its internal logic. "The text," she states, "is ... a productivity, and this means ... that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality" (46). Analysis of the novel's intertextuality enables one to examine the assumptions that it puts forward and simultaneously refutes by linking it to a different intertexts. The history of Antje, partly quoted by Margrieta from her personal conversations with the ghost, and partly quoted from the (fictional) historiographical sources that Ruben uncovers, comprises one such a system of signs, for example. The various

versions of her past that Tessa relates to Ruben in the sequence of conversations that Ruben recalls, would be another. Tessa's vacillation between various versions of her own story, none of which she seems able to recall, marks her as an unreliable narrator to the reader, and alerts this reader to the motility of meaning. Each system of signs works with a different conception of what constitutes meaning and each, I argue, relates to desire in a different way.

In her interest in desire as it is active in meaning-making processes in language, Kristeva focuses on the subject as the position from which discourse, and meaning, are made. Language, in this way, is a process, and studies of language an examination of this process. According to her observations on the relationship of language and meaning in her *Revolution in Poetic Language* of 1974 (English translation 1984), meaning is formed in the dialectic between the conscious and unconscious impulses of the articulating subject. This makes the body relevant to the discourse of language. Kristeva sees the logic of language functioning on a material, bodily level. She seeks to amend the structuralist neglect of the articulating subject by positing that any theory of language is also a theory of the subject.⁶³ Following Jacques Lacan, Kristeva sees the constitution of the subject in and through the medium of language. She amends his view, however, in stating that the acquisition of law-governed behaviour that accompanies the acquisition of language does not drown out the peculiarities of the subject-body.

This subject, like meaning in language, she sees as fluid and unstable, partially reasoning that the role played by extralinguistic elements such as rhythm and tone in establishing meaning cannot be accounted for by a subject that is stable and unified. In order to refer to this (artificial, theoretical) split between the two impulses in language, Kristeva uses the terms "symbolic" and "semiotic." Kristeva's symbolic stands for language proper, as we know it, with its rules and structure. The semiotic is what lies beneath this structure and, although extralinguistic, contributes to meaning in terms of, for example, rhythm, drive and affectivity. Whereas the symbolic provides coherence, the semiotic provides the motivation, or urgency, which causes the articulation to be made in the first place. The symbolic sees the adherence to (e.g. grammatical) rules that makes communication possible, but the semiotic provides meaning in a broader sense, making it *matter*. It is the interplay between the semiotic and the symbolic that makes signification possible.

Kristeva ultimately seeks an analogy with revolution on a political level. The poetic (literally) becomes political (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 26). In *The Literary in Theory* (2007), Jonathan Culler makes use of a similar, yet different, term, "poetics." The analysis of

⁶³ The structuralist insistence on analysing language solely in its manifestation as text of necessity ignores the signifying process instigated by the (extratextual) semiotic.

literary poetics, and not, for example, of literature taken as symptom or illustration of any contextual reality, as he laments that many socio-historical analyses do, could lead to “critical engagements with institutions of power” (11). Culler sees “poetics” as a “second level” of systemacity, over and above the first level, analysing the use of this system within it. This second level entails going beyond the individual work and studying the system of literary possibilities (conventions, expectations) that it arose from (8). The ways in which such conventions engage with certain institutions of power, either in enforcing or refuting it, becomes his object of interest.

The manner in which I interpret Kristeva’s and Culler’s approaches posits them as complementary. Culler’s vision of the revolutionary potential of literary analysis focuses on the system that makes the production of literary works possible, a system that makes use of features that are different from that of empirical experience, or any other system of conventions, and displays a kind of internal logic. This internal logic is what makes interpretation possible, Culler argues, not least in our ability to understand the ways in which individual works subvert it. In deviating from empirical experience, the idea of alternate possibilities, and, arguably, the possibility of revolution, is foregrounded. It is important to consider how such a system shifts and changes, because, as Culler states, “a rhythm that is new and startling in the literary system of one era will be banal, even nonpoetic, in another” (8). Culler’s poetics interprets works within this wider context of works being produced at all, and produced in always changing ways. Kristeva, too, sees formal features as providing content and allowing for interpretation, but focuses on production as process, and not as an end product. Her focus is specifically on the way in which a system, such as a literary system of conventions, creates positions for a subject from which to produce meaning. Kristeva’s speaking subject is a product of a shared system, which ascribes wider significance to the apparently personal breaks in language, such as misreadings and slips of the tongue. In Kristeva’s terms, these breaks constitute part of the semiotic, against the system that produced both the logic of the language that it breaks and the subject that broke it.

In examining the signification that occurs in the dialectic between the genotext and phenotext of Brink’s *Rights of Desire*, I concentrate first on the relationship that is set up, within this literary text, between the text itself and the wider context of literature. This is expressed in the relationship that the narrative of its protagonist, Ruben Olivier, establishes with other narratives. Subsequently, I shift focus to the connections between this speaking subject and the other narrators in the story, whose position as different speaking subjects, all women, relate to the main narrator in relationships that are complicated by different

perceptions of desire. Ultimately, I connect these to the perception of South African identity that the novel, I contend, seeks to confront.

The Magic of Words

One peculiarity of the relationship between the narrative of *The Rights of Desire* and the context of literature takes the form of self-consciousness about its status as a written work. This is evident both in its deliberate interaction with other written works and the repeated references to its identity as a text. The previously-mentioned relationship with Coetzee's *Disgrace* is taken up in the novel's selection of epigraphs. Epigraphs traditionally promise to express a feature of what is to follow, embedding it in a literary canon to procure a context. Confronted with an epigraph, a (practised) reader is prepared to contrast or compare the quoted text with the one that follows.

The Rights of Desire provides two epigraphs, one taken from Wallace Stevens's "The Motive for Metaphor" and the other ostensibly a quote from *Disgrace* that, in fact, turns out to be a misquote. The epigraph reads, "I rest my case on the rights of desire ... On the god who makes even the small birds quiver." Yet, the actual sentence in *Disgrace* runs: "[m]y case rests on the rights of desire ... On the god who makes even the small birds quiver" (Coetzee, 89, emphasis mine both times). The difference lies in Brink's making active an argument that Coetzee's protagonist David Lurie leaves passive: his defence "rests" by itself, whereas Brink roots the justification of desire in activity ("I rest my case"). This highlights the difference in the treatment of desire by the two respective narrators, Ruben Olivier and David Lurie. Both of them are older men who desire younger women, but David regards desire as "a burden we could well do without" (Coetzee, 90), while Ruben regards desire to be a godsend rather than a burden. At the same time, the phrase "I rest my case," in English, functions as a summation that claims self-evidence that requires no further elaboration. This expresses a far greater amount of confidence in its credentials than the precarious balancing act implied in *Disgrace*'s "my case rests." Both phrases, however, posit desire as "on trial," and to be defended.

Brink's pairing of Coetzee with Stevens is significant as well. Prefacing the Coetzee epigraph, *The Rights of Desire* opens with Stevens's lines:

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world
Of things that would never be quite expressed,
Where you yourself were never quite yourself
And did not want nor have to be.

The ambiguity expressed by these lines are a far cry from the clear-cut and semi-judicial assertion of the Coetzee quote, but it nevertheless deals specifically with desire. The stanza of the poem that follows the quoted lines runs:

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
The weight of primary noon,
The A B C of being.

The “motive for metaphor” of the title appears to be the desire for “the exhilarations of changes,” made possible by experimenting with figurative language, insofar as language aids the imagination and takes account of a reality that goes beyond “[t]he A B C of being.” This “A B C” plausibly refers to the rule-governed behaviour instigated in the subject with the acquisition of language, which imposes restrictions on the drives of the body, experienced as an obligation and a “weight.” Both the word “primary” and “noon” carry connotations of the fundamental, the basic and, by extension, the inescapably *obligatory*.⁶⁴ The desire for escaping from this weightiness through change or transference is suggested to bring exhilaration – the happiness of release. The means of the escape, it is implied, also lies in language, but in its figurative variant, represented by “metaphor” in the poem and by “poetic language” in Kristeva’s theoretical work.

Language, according to Kristeva, is, at its germ, comprised of a break between the symbolic and the semiotic, which, she posits, is an “always split unification” (43). This “break” in the signifying process occurs when a subject is identified separately from an object, a signifier from the signified, what she calls the “thetic break” (40). The thetic is produced at the same time that the subject is produced and both are what make language possible.⁶⁵ Kristeva sees the revolutionary potential of poetic language for questioning ideology as lying in its making visible of the thetic break, the opposition between the semiotic and the symbolic, as a construct. The thetic, which breaks language into an articulating subject and denoted object, does not simply “fix” drives into symbols, but is constantly interrupted and transformed by the semiotic, which is unstable. In this way, the symbolic is also constantly in flux, as is visible in poetic language (49). The meaning of a poem cannot be deduced from an observation of its surface symbols, which is what sets it apart from non-poetic language (poetry does not say what it says).

⁶⁴ The notion of “noon” as symbolising the pinnacle or climax of (life’s) achievements is particularly strongly recurrent in the works of Emily Dickinson.

⁶⁵ According to Kristeva, the thetic break occurs when a subject takes up position, or makes a judgement or identification, as made possible by the use of grammar and syntax. The thetic break therefore occurs at the threshold of the symbolic and heralds an entrance into the symbolic order.

In the same way, metaphor, as a form of poetic language, does not say what it says. Juliet is *not* the sun; and life is neither a walking shadow nor a poor player, but the state of mind of the subject shines through the words and makes them true. It is exactly what shines *through* the words, and not what meaning can be established by grammar, that Stevens's speaker, in "The Motive for Metaphor," and Brink's narrator, in *The Rights of Desire*, value and desire in language. This is clearly brought to the fore in the novel's description of Ruben's initiation into the magic of words, which happened when he was confronted, as a little boy, with a children's edition of *Don Quixote*. "I could barely read English," he recalls:

most of the book was well beyond my understanding; but the very strangeness of it, the mere rhythms and cadences of the language, cast a spell over me. In a certain village of La Mancha, which I do not wish to name, there lived not long ago a hidalgo. "La Mancha." "Hidalgo." Dear God. This was the meaning of magic. This made even the Bible sound true. (310)

Although recalling the literal text of the book, the narrator remembers being enchanted not by its phenotext, but by the genotext, the semiotic elements of signification. The "very strangeness" and the "mere rhythms and cadences" transfer the magic of words onto the young Ruben. This in spite of, or maybe even because, the words in English, which is not his mother tongue, and Spanish, with which he is not familiar at the time, do not make much sense to him in terms of grammatical structure and meaning. His pseudo-religious expletive: "Dear God," taken together with his sudden understanding of the relevance of religion, as even the Bible sounds true to him where, we assume, it did not before, continues to link this desire for the revelation conveyed by poetic, literary language with the semiotic, rather than with the symbolic.

Ruben's pseudo-religious experience can be interpreted as precisely that "motive for metaphor" to which Stevens' poem refers. The urgency below the surface of language that instils in the young Ruben a desire for expressing himself, parallels Kristeva's understanding of this drive as setting up the possibility for metaphor. In the same way that a metaphor expands meaning by activating an identification that relies on both similarity and difference, and not on sameness alone, the recognition of the self as being both bound by a common language and divided by discreet subject positions, can strengthen instead of threaten one's sense of identity. Kristeva proposes that the bodily logic of signification endorses the connection between the (poetic) language of metaphor, and love and desire (134).

Metaphor, according to Kristeva, is able to transfer meaning without calling upon the power of words to stand for or be equated with concepts, and without having to compensate for physical loss by means of symbolic empowerment, where the symbol acts as placeholder for

the concept. In Stevens' poem, metaphor is placed in the category of uncertainty and indistinction. At the same time, this vagueness and mutability is associated with the positive and the desirable. This is achieved both by means of positive words such as "exhilarations," and by the clear-cut contrast with denotative language (the symbolic) that the speaker describes the addressee as "shrinking from" and, in the final line of the last (fourth) stanza, describes negatively as "[t]he vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X."

Far from a neo-romantic extolling of "the primitive" as genuine and valuable, however, the poem reveals that the initial expectation that the inconstancy to which the addressee of the poem is said to be attracted, is disagreeable. It starts as follows:

You like it under the trees in autumn,
Because everything is half dead.
The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves
And repeats word without meaning.

The terms "half dead," "cripple" and "without meaning" convey experiences that are anything but pleasant, but because the speaker has already introduced the idea that someone, the addressee, likes these qualities, there is the presumption that their attractiveness will be explained. And this presumption is not disappointed, because the second stanza runs as follows:

In the same way, you were happy in spring
With the half-colors of quarter-things,
The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
The single bird, the obscure moon -

The mention of "spring," of "half-colors" and "quarter things," which have either positive or neutral connotations by themselves, sheds light on the attraction of the "autumn" and "half dead" (but not entirely dead) and "cripple" (but not entirely incapacitated) of the first stanza, as lying in their transcending and changing qualities.

The allure of that which is not clear-cut and rigorously defined is transmitted by the possibilities promised by "melting clouds" and an "obscure moon." Which returns us to the stanza of Stevens' poem used by Brink:

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world
Of things that would never be quite expressed,
Where you yourself were never quite yourself
And did not want nor have to be.

The “word without meaning” of the first stanza has here been given meaning according to Kristeva’s *signifiante*. Kristeva’s *signifiante* denotes the process of attributing meaning to articulations, not meaning as a product. It refers to the elements of language that allow it to communicate meaning in excess of the verifiably factual. In contrast with the requirements of *signifiante*, the “things that would never be quite expressed,” in spite of being extralinguistic, and therefore inexpressible, are nevertheless discernible, desirable, and of great import. The *signifiante* contributed by the semiotic element of signification is connected in this third stanza with the ability to liberate (where you do not *have* to be yourself) and to change. Recalling Kristeva’s idea of a poetic revolution, this stanza seems appropriate for a novel that looks at the change in the conceptualisation of South Africa as a nation and of its people as South Africans. Instead of relying on signification in establishing the criteria for South Africanness, the novel appears to forward the “sense” of being South African as a legitimate qualifier. I return to this in a later section of this chapter.

Both the novel’s epigraphs inextricably link desire and language and provide the key of the narrative that follows. The desiring relationship its protagonist Ruben has with literature and poetic language is set up as a complicated one. Ruben’s attraction to literature, as previously shown, is initiated by his recognition of the magic of its semiotic elements, the implications and suggestions that are inexpressible yet somehow discernible through language. In his desire to lose himself in language as a means of taking or abdicating control of his life, however, the element of power enters this desiring relationship and sets Ruben up for disappointment. I now turn to some of the instances in which this complication arises, taking the phenotext and genotext of the narrative into account.

Writing as a Rite of Desire

Aside from the epigraphs, the novel’s thematic connection with other texts is also made apparent in Ruben’s narrative, which is bejewelled with literary quotes as well as with constant reminders that it does make excessive use of quotes. Throughout the novel, Brink’s narrator appears obsessed with words, and seems keen to place language between himself and actual experience. He claims to find reassurance in the realm of knowledge and words because it is “where meanings are manageable precisely because they aren’t binding,” where “illusion is comfortingly real” (32). Whenever an upsetting event occurs in Ruben’s life, he retreats into the safe abstractions of language by musing on the symbolic versus the actual meanings of words, or by offering relevant or irrelevant literary

quotations, or by immersing himself in an “aside,” interspersed throughout the novel.⁶⁶ One of the most striking examples of out-of-place quotation occurs when Tessa is nearly gang-raped while taking a walk with Ruben in Newlands Forest towards the end of the novel.⁶⁷ After this experience and their narrow escape, Ruben retreats into literary signification and states: “I thought of Henry James...” which is, of course, anything but a normal reaction to a close encounter with violence and possible death (298).

In this way, language is presented as an escape, a way of avoiding the reality that does not seem real to Ruben or, at least, that cannot be handled by him as a real person – only appreciated in a mediated form by imagining himself and others as literary personages. Books, he posits, “never let you down, never say no, never offer a cold shoulder. And custom cannot stale their infinite variety” (23), appropriately using, in this contemplation on literature, a reference from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. In transposing the attractions of Cleopatra onto those of novels, Ruben equates his fascination with literature with a (sexual) longing for a desirable woman.⁶⁸ Ruben's conception of the feminine is pivotal to an understanding of his relationship with language and literature. He is attracted to women and sees language as desirable and magical because they both appear to promise something that is beyond his grasp. At the same time, he seeks to bring both his female and his linguistic objects of desire under his control, because he sees this as the only way to reduce his distance from them. In spite of having given Tessa his word that he would not interfere in her life should she come to live in his house, for example, Ruben investigates her workplace, traces back her calls, discourages her from dating other men and, eventually, chases her lovers off his property. Tessa does, therefore, have to adhere to his idea of her as available in order for him to accept her. In the same way, Ruben's writings are left unfinished and unpublished while he perpetually “chases footnotes” (144), trying to pin down his subject and bring it under his control before commencing with the actual writing. Ironically, this positioning of himself as the controlling subject, and his relegation of what he desires as subordinate to himself, foil his attempts at coming closer to what he wants.

⁶⁶ One of them reads “On Age,” another “On Desire.” All initiate a lengthy and oftentimes rambling diatribe on the meaning of these concepts through the ages and in various literary works, and all of them give the impression of functioning as a comforting distraction from the real crises occurring in Ruben's life.

⁶⁷ To the reader of the Coetzee novel, the (near-)rape of Tessa functions in contrast with David Lurie's (near-) rape of Melanie, who “had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away” (Coetzee, 25). Tessa, for her part, “was kicking and fighting like a cornered rat” and “went on screaming and screaming as if she'd never stop” (295-6) during her ordeal. It is when Tessa is confronted with Ruben's advances, and not those of her rapists, that she becomes “rigid,” though unresisting, and appears to be far away from the scene she partakes in (167). This well-known response to rape is called dissociation.

⁶⁸ This quote refers to Domitius Enobarbus's praise of Cleopatra which includes the suggestion that “she makes hungry/Where most she satisfies,” relating to Jacques Lacan contemplation of desire as existing only on the premise that it is never satisfied.

One reason for this is that the use of language to both express and circumvent desire is simultaneously inevitable and fruitless. As Judith Butler discusses in her essay “Desire” (1990), because language is tied up with desire, any investigation of desire through writing inevitably fails. It must give up its writerly features in order to approximate the features of desire, because language always, to some extent, displaces desire. Butler recognises that this tension, this “necessary ambivalence” (370), is perhaps partially to be attributed to the fact that Western accounts of desire (from Plato to Lacan) assume “an invariant structure to desire” based on a restrictive universal heterosexuality that maps out sexual desire in the same way that Ruben appears to do: as the male possession of the female. The signification of desire as found in the dynamic *process* of signifying, and of desiring, rather than merely in static remnants, arises in Brink’s novel on Ruben’s eventual discovery of Antje’s bones in his cellar. “Never before had I been faced with this ultimate essence of bone that both defies and defines humanity,” Ruben states, characterising it as “so indestructible, so obdurate, so firm, so bony” (280). The same is said of the non-physical:

Perhaps the miracle remains intractable. *Because* it decays, *because* it is mortal, *because* nothing endures but bone For nothing can match the memory of the lover. Nothing is as durable as desire. (281)

Ruben praises her with literary quotations and references, mostly from the Song of Solomon, until he stops himself: “I’m trying to use words to worm myself into what was pure bone, unmitigated reality. . . .it is a dangerous love I bear thee. Do not listen to me. Flee from me.” (281). Ruben arrives at the realisation that any attempts to define his desire through the symbolic will destroy that desire, as well as its object, because the durability of desire lies in its very volatility, transcending the tangible remains that he now sees before him. The significance of his adoring the bones of a ghost that haunts him will be considered in greater depth below.

Through language, Ruben instils desirability in Antje that goes beyond her current appearance as skeleton, but his attempts are set up to fail. As Butler notes: “if the relation between writing and desire is strangely necessary, then the very effort of writing to present what is beyond itself, to capture or present a referent, will constitute the very trajectory of desire as the push towards necessary failure” (374). The need and failure of capturing reality into words is expressed by Ruben’s preoccupation with possession (of language, of women). After discovering the magic of words, the young Ruben recalls his joy at having words at his disposal in decidedly colonial terms:

To read, and to think, to trace the words back to their origins real or presumed; to invent; to dare to imagine. And then to reread, a new Columbus let loose on endless worlds beyond unnamed seas. (32)

His discovery is framed as a colonial discovery, and is extended to a Christian mythological discovery: “as I make my notes in the margins, I can pursue Adam’s first act of mastery: This is a meerkat, this a porcupine, this a young woman named Tessa.” (32). The magic of language and words are now not tied to the transformative powers of the semiotic but to the power and mastery of the symbolic – the colonialism of Columbus, the patriarchal power of the biblical Adam – and tied specifically to an attempt at mastery over Tessa (“reading her as if she were a book” 32).

At the same time, Ruben’s desire for the qualities of the semiotic remains undiminished, as he compares himself, on opening every new book, with Heraclitus, who claimed that the nature of everything is change itself, leading to the belief that change is real, and all stability illusory. Heraclitus’s avocation of war and strife as the means of change, however, introduces an element of power-struggle in the absorption of literary works. In this way, the novel places the desire for mastery alongside the realisation of impermanence as conditions of reality. As Ruben says:

Small mnemonic markings on paper, through which I may later rediscover the sense that had eluded me the first time around. (Of course it may be unreliable: that is the key to it Some secrets, they say, can only be lived, never understood...). (32)

Where the markings jotted down by Ruben imply permanence, or, at least, temporary stasis and an attempt to fix what had eluded him, his acknowledgement of the unreliability of those markings testify to an understanding of meaning-making as a process. Secrets, like experiences, can only be “lived” because that is when they are respected as processes rather than understood (certified, classified, known) as inert relics. The dialectic between static markings and shifting meanings produces signification.

During the course of the novel, Ruben explains his association of words with women, both of which he desires yet misconstrues. He tells of how he did not grow up with books: “Our reality was the hard, masculine world of the farm, where I grew up with no women nearby” (29). An association of books and language with the feminine is thus set up. “That farm world was strictly defined and permitting of no exception: rain, for example, was excluded. It was unreal, imaginary, miraculous” (29). The conditions of farm life could control reality to the extent of excluding rain because it would not permit its entrance into its worldview. Rain can be relegated to the realm of the ghostly, and of the blurriness of the “obscure world” of Stevens’

poem. In spite of this, rain as a phenomenon, and especially as the absence of a phenomenon, does impact on the hard reality of the rural South African hinterland. Its reality is a clearly prescribed, rule-bound experience as found in Kristeva's definition of the symbolic, with no place for that which is associated with the semiotic: those things defined as "unreal, imaginary, miraculous," to which tangible things like women and rain are on occasion also relegated. The durable context that prizes the quality of permanence (and relies on them for survival), consigns both women and rain to the realm of the semiotic out of the fear of their ability to effect transformation.

The way in which Ruben characterises the farm where he grew up reveals a strong dislike for the restrictions that accompany its way of life, which explains his instinctive appreciation of the indeterminacy of poetic language. He laments:

Everything was so endless, everything was so essential, nothing redundant at all. Every stone, every brittle stalk of grass, every tortoise, every thorn tree reduced to what was strictly necessary. It's just that we were too ill-equipped to deal with it. *We didn't belong there. And I still don't belong.* (emphasis added) (105)

Ruben's complaint intimates a horror of a hegemony that permits no excess. This explains his subsequent attraction to the overdetermination of literature. At the same time, his initial grievance that everything was "endless" bespeaks the fear of a lack of control that characterises colonial discourse in justifications of imposing authority. By this analogy, Ruben's contemplation that "they" did not "belong there" expands into a consideration of the position of white settlers in South Africa, who, through lack of local knowledge and through their very skin-colour, were ill-equipped to withstand the harsh light of an African sun that reduced everything to its essentials. The settlers are therefore framed as outsiders and intruders, who "stick out like sore thumbs" and answer their exclusion with a violence as unmitigating as that of the scorching desert sun.

The white Afrikaner rural community in South Africa is founded on the conception of a strong, tough, male struggle with a dry, arid and equally tough desert environment. The resultant justification for habitation of this unwilling land falls flat in the face of alternate possibilities as represented by the semiotic. Ruben understands this when he explains: "There was a time when people believed the earth was flat; in the Kalahari it has remained flat. No amount of science has changed it" (29). It does not matter that another way of perceiving materiality has become available if the perceivers are willingly blind to it. In the realm of the symbolic, perception succeeds an understanding of, and adherence to, the laws of the structure.

By admitting to the importance (or even existence) of that which exceeds the structure, the infallibility and hegemony of structure is undermined.

This, I believe, is what forms one of the paramount struggles for many South Africans of all races in coming to terms with the realities of post-apartheid South Africa: the acceptance that the structure of their convictions is an imposition rather than an inevitability, and therefore open to transformation. Brink's narrator expresses this recognition of the comfort that belief in an absolute provides at the same time as he refutes its permanence: "I'm often aware of an almost physical pang of nostalgia in me to go back." He continues: "[b]ut there is no entry possible into a flat world from a round one" (197).

In the same way, Ruben's relationship with women is complicated by the discrepancy between his desire for participation in their ungraspability and his response to this desire to control them. Ruben recognises, and appreciates, the "magic" promised by the obscurity that he relegates to women, as he does to rain and to poetry, but his attempts to capture this magic inevitably result in its dissipation and his frustration.

The women in his life are unreal to him precisely because they do not participate in his experience of reality. Hence, they are all, in a sense, ghosts, not just Antje. This is because his experience of reality is perceived from the vantage point of the privileged white South African male, who is unable to share the subject position, and thus the way of signifying, of either his coloured house keeper, his young female house mate, or the seventeenth century slave girl whose ghost haunts his house. In looking at the relationships between Ruben and these three women, I aim to reveal the links that are forged between them.

The central presence of a ghost in the narrator's dealings both with the women in his life and with present and absent texts artfully links the novel to the wider intertext of contemporary South Africa. In her 2001 work *Politics Out of History*, Wendy Brown examines what impact the current undermining of the legitimacy of narratives of liberalism and democracy have on contemporary political culture. "How do we live in these broken narratives," she asks in her introduction to the work, "when nothing has taken their place?" (14). Brown recognises that the dislodgement of the notion of progressive history for the sake of inclusiveness may not necessarily achieve inclusiveness at all. Especially in the case of those, like Margrieta in Brink's novel, who have based their identity on the "social injury" done to them, there is a reliance on the idea of progress as a way of redeeming this injury. Without the notion of progress, those who have become politically identified with suffering and exclusion would appear unable to liberate themselves from this identity. The questions of how agency can be derived from a reconsideration of histories of oppression (slavery, colonialism, even Nazism) and what significance these histories have in shaping the present, leads Brown to

a consideration of the figure of the ghost. “Ghosts,” she contends, “figure the impossibility of mastering . . . the past or the present. They figure the necessity of grasping certain implications of the past for the present only as traces or effects,” rather than as laws or structures (146).

As mentioned in the introduction, the ghost of a text could also analogously stand for Kristeva’s semiotic. Brown welcomes the notion of “living with ghosts” as a deconstructive device that disrupts the confining narratives and structures that set our conventional worldview in the same way that Kristeva hails poetic language. The way in which agency can be achieved for the social subject, as well as the way to build a productive relationship with the past, would therefore seem to comprise of thinking of the present as contingent. This posits the present as the result of political and social developments and, by extension, thinks of the past as concurrently present.

The way in which the three women that are part of the novel’s narrative treat the past and present and relate them to their specific experiences of living in contemporary South Africa informs the main narrative. This connects Ruben’s musings on literature and desire with the larger issue of his national identity. Margrieta, as an embedded narrator whose narration serves as an intertext, displays an easy acceptance of the contradictions that inhere South African reality, providing a foil for Ruben’s compulsive escape from these violent disparities. Tessa, too, offers flexible interpretations of reality in her constant reinvention of herself and her past, leaving Ruben upset at the overturning of order that simultaneously entices him. Both women exhibit an autonomy that culminates in the figure of Antje, whose palpable absence is the focus of Ruben’s attempts at arresting the past in order to make sense of the present, before he realises both the impossibility and the undesirability of doing this.

All three women are relegated to the realm of “ghost” or “absence” by Ruben in his definition of their distance to him. These women haunt more than just Ruben’s house and infiltrate his understanding of South Africa as a nation with a past and future that are both unsettled. In looking at the way that their narratives claim recognition of alternative interpretations of events, I first focus on Margrieta’s narrative embedding. The person most directly in contact with the country’s past, both in her attempts at redress from the new liberal government and in her repeated and close dealings with the novel’s ghost, who, I argue, functions as a metaphor for the country, Margrieta introduces a sense of the reality of contemporary South Africa into the novel.

Margrieta

Margrieta provides the reader with an alternative to Ruben’s use of quotes to turn reality into a containable literary experience. She asserts that the refined and restrained nature of literature

makes it entirely separate from reality; one that cannot “set foot” inside that reality nor should be expected to. Margrieta acknowledges that poetics follows its own logic, and that it is useless to try to recruit this logic to confront the outside world, as Ruben attempts to do. When she recounts to Ruben how she is marked for death by gang members in the neighbourhood where she lives because they suspect her of betraying them to the police, she tells him dry-eyed and firmly:

The Lord goes with us all the way to the valley of death. But there’s one place he won’t go en that is out there on the Flats. When the white people dumped us there all those years ago they made that place hell. En he won’t set his foot down in hell. He’s jus too scared. En you can’t blame him neither. (141-2)

Margrieta, who is a devout Christian, is able to reconcile her firm belief in the omnipotence and mercy of a Christian god with the injustice that she experiences in her daily life by admitting an apparent contradiction into her perception of reality. The existence, side by side, of the logic of religious belief and that of the observable world does not present a contradiction to her at all. She can believe that Jesus is merciful and able to perform miracles, but, just as she realises that white people would not set foot in the Cape Flats to which they unfairly consigned their coloured fellow South Africans, she finds it reasonable that the white Jesus would be reluctant to call upon it as well. In the same way, the apparition of Antje’s ghost presents no dilemma to her – the housekeeper perceives her and that is sufficient to warrant Antje a place in her reality.

On contemplating Margrieta’s relation of the events that befall her, Ruben admits that their experiences of reality are decidedly different. Although both inhabit the same country and even the same house, their subject positions and processes of signification differ dramatically. Ruben muses on the distance between himself and Margrieta, relegating his concerns about Tessa and his desire for her as one of those things (along with a leaking tap and a squeaking gate) that should merit no importance to a person living within a country where people are constantly exposed to violence. He also admits that, even when it does affect him personally, the reality of this violence is consistently screened from him. He is protected from experiencing it first-hand, because his privileged position sees such things become real to him only on reading about it in a legitimate source such as the newspapers. This is why, as quoted above, Margrieta is “as unreal to [him] as any ghost” (142).

In this sense, it does not really matter that Antje is an actual ghost and Margrieta a real woman whom he has known for nearly forty years, as both of them occupy a different, ghostly space from him. Relegating Margrieta to the realm of ghosts, Ruben is allowed to sidestep the

realities of the country that he lives in, as well as the reality of women in contemporary (or past) South Africa.

Margrieta's solidarity with women, whether white or coloured, real or unreal, comes to the fore in her narration. Margrieta is kept informed about the goings-on in the Cape Dutch house by Antje the ghost, who briefs her on what happens while she is away. She always selects to believe Antje's account of what has happened in the house rather than the placating explanations provided by Ruben. She says:

I take the word of a woman who knows what it is to be sucked out by a man like an orange en then thrown (*sic*) away. Because she was a slave and because she was coloured and because she was a woman they all treated her like shit. I can't let that happen in her house. (134)

Margrieta relates truth to hardship, as if victims have a greater ownership of the truth. She draws a parallel between Antje and Tessa, while Ruben believed her to disapprove of Tessa because of her "loose morals." However, Margrieta hints that she does not disapprove but believes that she, as a woman of the modern South Africa, has an obligation not to allow herself to be mistreated. This almost suggests that the freedom that was denied Antje must be reclaimed by Tessa as atonement for the slave girl's fate. In this way, Tessa comes to stand in for Antje, both of whom are given interpretative voice by Margrieta.

This conflation is made further apparent by Margrieta's linking of the increased frequency of Antje's appearance with Tessa's taking home of various paramours to spend the night. Margrieta comments that, on observing Tessa with her lovers, Antje "still see the same things happening what happened in her time." When Ruben tries to refute this parallel by reminding her that Antje was a slave, and Tessa is a free person, Margrieta retorts: "What woman is free, Meneer? You tell me" (248). In this way, she suggests that the reducing of women to bodies to be possessed, manifest in the institution of slavery, continues in a cloaked form in the present day. Ruben's deliberate distancing of the women in his life, relegating them to the realm of ghosts, could be argued to effect a similar reduction. The urgency of his desire for them takes the form of a desire for sexual possession, as one would desire to possess an object, not merge with an equal, something borne out by his attempts at controlling Tessa's sexuality by protesting the presence of her lovers in his house.

Tessa does however have her own voice in the novel as well through the conversations she has with Ruben that he records, in which he proves incapable of restraining her in either a bodily or a narrative way. By looking at these dialogues, I hope to illuminate the disparity inherent in Ruben's interpretation of his desire for Tessa: on the one hand, stemming from a

fascination with her free and easy manner and, on the other, engendering a desire to have and to hold her, as he puts it. I link this disparity with the dual nature of signification that forms the attraction of poetic language as well as with the contradictions that inhere Ruben's desire to possess what he, after all, sees as a ghost.

Tessa

Ruben's attraction to Tessa is initially framed in terms of her distance from him. She is young whereas he is old; she is spontaneous and outgoing where Ruben's life is orderly and mostly solitary. He admits that Tessa makes him act out of character, that she intrigues him. He calls her "this improbable girl, blown in by the storm, unconscionable, obnoxious, outrageous, beautiful. (A chance to practice the scales of my adjectives)" (24). His chance to enjoy the use of words makes him tolerant of Tessa's impertinence, or at least makes it manageable in the relegation of his experiences with her as something recollected in language, in hindsight. In this way, her existence is thrown into question; he describes her as "improbable."

At the same time, the pleasure that he takes in her is associated not with the rule-bound aspect of language but with the "rhythms and cadences" of the semiotic: he revels in the *scales* of adjectives: their sound and feel. The sense that it is not the descriptive, categorising capacity of adjectives that is admired here is also conveyed by the unusual choice of words, such as "unconscionable," and their ill-fittingness, juxtaposing the traditionally negatively connotated "obnoxious" with the positive connotations of "beautiful."

Ruben recognises that Tessa does not fit into any of his classifications when he attempts to categorise their relationship only to find it does not fit into a particular slot. "She does wifely things for me," he begins, continuing, "She does motherly things She does sisterly things," and also: "She does lovely things" (239- 40). In the same way, Ruben is unable to apprehend her by attaining her "story," as Tessa offers him various versions of her family background and past as well as of her present-day occupations each time they speak. On asking after her parents, Ruben is initially told that Tessa's father was murdered during a bloody burglary and subsequently that he died from an illness. The third time that her father is brought up in conversation Tessa tells Ruben, with intimations of *Disgrace*'s David Lurie, that he was a university lecturer who disappeared from her life when he took off with a nineteen-year old student. When Ruben responds with a baffled "I thought you said your father got killed?" Tessa responds, without blinking an eyelid, that she was "speaking metaphorically" (78).

The notion of the metaphor brings Tessa's texts onto the level of poetics and the semiotic. Her stories, whether they are of the different professions she makes up for herself and for Ruben on meeting new people in bars, or the lies that she tells Ruben about her reasons for

leaving her previous boyfriend have an internal logic not comparable to an observable reality. The unreasonableness of Ruben's perturbation at Tessa's "lies" is made palpable to the reader in the dialogues between the two. For example, a comparison is set up for the reader between Tessa's proclamation of constant foreign travels under the care of an infatuated boyfriend, which she subsequently and easily contradicts with an angry complaint that he never took her anywhere, and Ruben's contention that his most important travels have been in books. Ruben's version of reality fails to attain unequivocal authority in this comparison, even when based on his own criteria, because even the real trips were to the classical concerts, museums and libraries of certain countries, keeping them in the abstract realm of experience (52). Ruben's assertions of experience are as real or as unreal as Tessa's, in that Ruben refuses to leave the world of books and Tessa refuses to be contained by it.

Tessa, like Margrieta and Antje, is a ghost to Ruben, an absence that he can sense but not contain. He goes on to say that, when Tessa is absent, "...the shadow of her absence falls over the whole house. Yet it is a curious luminous shadow. Because when she is not here I can imagine her more perfectly than when she is with me" (240). Tessa's physical presence and real-life behaviour defy Ruben's expectations. When she is not there she can remain more constant in his mind. This explains his anger when Tessa does something that is entirely characteristic of her but contrary to Ruben's ideal, like bringing men home to sleep with them.

Tessa vehemently positions herself outside conventional South African identity. To the question what she would "really like to do?" Tessa answers with a scathing, "Whatever it may be, it won't be a cherished husband, three and a half children, a mortgage and shooting lessons on Saturdays" (80). This calls up an image of South African (white) suburbia in its invocation of appropriately sentimental/romantic emotions ("cherished husband"); its responsible filling of the white-population quota ("three and a half children"); and its matter-of-fact insistence on the protection of this (white) family unit by means of a brand of violence that would be shocking to its European counterpart ("shooting lessons on Saturdays"). Tessa sets herself up as an outsider to this South African idyll, not because she cannot attain the ideal described but because she claims not to subscribe to it as an ideal.

Tessa's evanescence frustrates Ruben's desire for order, and when she continues to escape his definitions by her constant changing of her story, Ruben changes tactics and channels his desire for her into a physical direction. Their relationship is not that of lovers, as Tessa does not allow Ruben to make love to her. But, intent on forcing her into a recognisable classification, he sets his sights on physically penetrating her to resolve his insecurities about their relationship. It is out of fear of lack of control, and the premonition that this comes paired with a loss of the identity he has shaped for himself, that Ruben phrases his desire for Tessa,

emanating from an attraction to her unbridled nature, in order to curb it. He desires her because she eludes him, which is why he wants to control her to end the torment of his desire.

After thwarted attempts to convince Tessa of the need for consummating his sexual desire, Ruben comes closer to his goal at the end of section two of the novel. She appears to him in tears, saying that she needs him. "I misunderstood," he admits in hindsight, "I thought she meant sexually" and he undresses her (166). Before she is fully naked, however, she stops him and confesses that she needs to have an abortion. Section three opens with her lying in the hospital bed after the procedure: "Monday, 14 September. This is unimagined territory and still unimaginable. It is now, it is here" (171), Ruben reports as he sits beside a pale and sleeping Tessa. Her disclosure of the need for an abortion had interrupted his consumption of her body, both because of the shock at the news and the realisation that what Ruben was about to claim was already (or at least had been) possessed by someone else. Tessa's own unwillingness (she was crying and clearly not in the mood for sex) does not seem to have entered his consideration. As the present invades Ruben's thoughts ("it is now, it is here") it is compared to a territory that cannot be imagined and explored because it forms part of the real that remains unreal to Ruben. The intimation here is of a colonialism that maps out a territory, capturing it by abstract means rather than, or in addition to, concrete ones.

At the same time, Tessa, more than the "unexplored territory" of colonisable landscape, is compared to a ghost. Ruben comments on her body as "white and clothed in white," relating this image (strangely, considering the context) with an "image of chastity, haunting me, stalking me as surely as any ghost" (178). The image of chastity that Tessa presents to Ruben is a projection that remains convincing as long as Tessa is passive and inert. It is also plausibly a way for Ruben to hold on to her now that Tessa is "further removed than ever by this experience which excludes me, the male, the old man" (171). The reproductive responsibility of women excludes men in the biological sense - men cannot experience an abortion first-hand - but also by the deliberate mystification and concealment of the fact of abortion in social discourse and, in particular, from the discourse of male experience. Ruben is barred from Tessa in his frustration at being unable to partake of what she experiences and, more concretely, in having had no part in her pregnancy.

In this sense of escaping him, she is compared to his wife Riana, who spent some time in hospital after the stillbirth of her daughter and who, now dead, could be argued to take the position of an actual ghost in his narrative. Ruben's ruminations address the dormant Tessa as a "you," which sometimes transforms into a "you" more likely to refer to Riana. "To live forward and understand backward: Kierkegaard," Ruben states (186), when he draws clear parallels

between Tessa and Riana.⁶⁹ He succumbs to the idea that his past life with Riana can only be interpreted after it has been experienced, as the past informs one's grasp of the present. His narrative begins to conflate the experiences of sitting beside Tessa after the abortion and beside Riana after she lost their daughter: “‘Don’t talk now,’ I said, to Tessa, to Riana. Neither paid attention to me” (186). And: “Neither of them spoke on the way home” (188). The way in which these sentences are phrased give the appearance of Riana and Tessa sharing a same space which, on a metaphorical level, they do. Ruben’s narrative continues the conflation:

“It’ll be like a new start,” I said as I carried Riana across the threshold, a dead weight in my arms.

“If only one could make a fresh start,” she said and started crying again.

“Somehow it does feel like a new beginning,” said Tessa as I carried her into the house, which amused her hugely. (188)

Even Margrieta partakes in this doubling up of the past and present. “Margrieta was there, as always,” Ruben describes, “[f]ood for Riana food for Tessa.” (188).

The women who live in the house on Paapenboom Road are drawn into contact with each other by means of the parallels in the minds and actions of the constant factors of context, experience and location. Riana and Tessa seem to cross the threshold of the house at the same time and receive nourishment and care from Margrieta simultaneously, even though Riana has been dead for eleven years by the time that Tessa arrives. The fact that they share a location and a context, Ruben and Margrieta, allows them to share the temporal space as well. Tessa becomes Riana and Ruben reverts to his former self in the narration of the story of Riana and Ruben’s troubled marriage. Ruben recognises that the women he is surrounded by share a connection to each other across time and space. He also assesses a difference that excludes him from possessing them, but he does not yet attribute this distance to his very insistence on possession as his condition for relating to women.

“What annoys me is the way they exclude me,” Ruben ruminates on Margrieta and Tessa’s discussions of Antje. “As a man, but even more significantly as someone operating on a different level, from which the access to theirs is barred” (133). This denial of access is what troubles Ruben in all his relationships, and he constantly allocates some secret power to the condition of being a woman, akin to the mystical power he ascribes to literature. The “different level” he refers to relates to the level of signification of the semiotic, which provides meaning in a way irreducible to, although not entirely independent from, structural logic. In looking for

⁶⁹ “It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it - backwards.” (Kierkegaard, 137).

meaning only in the surface words of a text and by disregarding the passions that drive language and mark the transference of meaning from a signifying subject to an other, Ruben becomes estranged from himself as a human being.

During the course of the novel it becomes clear to Ruben that he remains barred from participating in the human experience because he forcefully demonstrates his presumption of a right of dominance and ownership. “[H]ere I am,” he continues his complaint, “they make me feel, with a ghost in my own house, yet the only way I can gain access to her is vicariously, through books, through the notes I’ve made over the years” (133). This contrasts strongly with Margrieta and Tessa’s personal encounters with the ghost. Ruben unconsciously phrases his frustration in terms of a lack of access and possession that runs contrary to his sense of ownership as implied in the phrase “in my own house.” This suggests that possession of the house means possession of Antje in the same way that Willem Mostert could legitimately “own” Antje because she was his slave. In these colonial terms, Ruben feels that the written possession of Antje’s person by means of his “book-knowledge” of her falls short of actual physical experience. In my final consideration of Ruben’s relationship with women, I look at his fascination with the ghostly figure of Antje, and argue that it is in his pursuit of her, and his ultimate failure at capturing her, that Ruben gains insight into his understanding of being South African.

Antje

The novel starts with the sentence, “The house is haunted” (3). The novel is haunted by the palpable presence of its most manifestly absent character: the seventeenth century slave girl Antje of Bengal. On her first visit to the house, Tessa is confronted by Antje, whom she runs into on making a stop at the bathroom. Ruben gives her Antje’s background (40-49), and so introduces South Africa’s colonial history into the narrative. Antje, he explains, was brought from Batavia in 1696 at the age of seven and sold off to William Mostert, a previous owner of the house on Paapenboom Road, at the age of eighteen. What follows is a tale of sexual obsession that leaves unconfirmed whether Antje was a willing partner, or even instigator, or a slave girl at the mercy of her owner. Instead of clearly specifying Antje’s position, the tale introduces sexual desire as framed by political and power inequalities. The way in which these historical events are recounted, although at first presented as a story told by Ruben to Tessa, is given the character of a text that is constantly rewritten.

For, in spite of the construct suggesting that this tale is told by Ruben, the language is writerly and almost formal, lacking the interruptions characteristic of spoken conversation. In

addition, a reference is provided whenever a source is used.⁷⁰ Tessa objects to Ruben's reduction of Antje's story to the few written historiographic sources that he has managed to dig up and explains her misgivings when she says: "[i]t's supposed to be Antje's story, but she hardly features in it," at the same time coming to the conclusion that this oversight can probably be attributed to "all those historians [being] men" (51). Ruben ignores her summation on the gender-bias of historiography and counters her complaint by speculating that this, precisely, may be why Antje is still around.

In spite of her "hanging around," however, Ruben fails to experience her presence on anything but a strictly textual level, as she never appears to him. Similar to his determination to possess Tessa in response to his attraction to her detachment from him, Ruben is resolved to capture Antje, which eventually takes the form of his discovery of her bones in his cellar. On being confronted with her remnants, however, he understands that her allure lay beyond the empirically observable. In comparison with Ruben, Antje's material "absence" as representative of all South Africans subject to abusive power *is* "more real."

The "obscure moon illuminating our darkness from somewhere very far away" (51) that Ruben detects on finding Antje's bones, cites Stevens's "obscure moon" that lit an "obscure world" of metamorphosing potential in a way that is even more dramatic than in the poem. Antje's moon "illuminat[es] our darkness" and hints at the need for salvation from something negative, as darkness is associated with ignorance and evil. The illumination that Ruben interprets Antje as providing is that of acknowledging injury, and preventing continued wrong. Even those that fail to fall under the categories of what constitutes abuse in terms of, for example, the definitions of "victim" drawn up during the TRC proceedings explain, or the lack of acknowledgement of coloured discrimination by both the previous and present government. Stevens's "half-colors of quarter-things" that are "never quite expressed" deserve consideration still wanting in South Africa, and for this reason, as Tessa states, "perhaps we need our ghosts as much as they need us" (250).

In *Desire and Language*, Kristeva links wanting to longing. She recognises that all literature is structurally incomplete – not finite but rather a process. This incompleteness, she posits, is what engenders desire (55). She states that:

To complete the novel as literary artefact (to understand it as discourse or sign) is a problem of social practice, of cultural text, and it consists in confronting speech ... with its own death – writing. (57)

⁷⁰ e.g. "Even in the fullest and most recently published account of Antje's life in Geoffrey Dugmore's *A Sparrow for Two Farthings: Slavery at the Cape, 1657-1795* (Juta, Cape Town) there is little more than conjecture" (40) or "cf. Dugmore, pages 109-11" (42).

The death of speech, or conversation, as an interaction between subject and object that is prone to change as the relationship between subject and object oscillates, occurs when writing, whose symbolic nature still sees constant interruption by the semiotic, is regarded as complete and an artefact. Ruben is in danger of doing this when he seeks comfort in the lie of the stability of language. The true nature of Ruben's desire for literature, and for Tessa, and for the ghost, lies in their transformative potential, and can thus only exist under this perpetual provocation. The incompleteness that marks South Africa's history, as symbolised by Antje, requires acknowledgement so that the "obscure world" can be illuminated.

Under the influence of the narratives of the women around him, Ruben eventually transforms his relationship to Antje and, by extension, to the country that he lives in. Tessa points out the analogy between the two on discussing the state of the country one evening. When Ruben customarily lapses into abstraction and says: "... this country makes it hard to win," Tessa heats up:

It's no use thinking of "this country" is if it were some great abstraction, Ruben. It's all of us The country is not just crime, and corruption, and failure, and whatnot. We must believe there's something more to it, something larger than all of us, a kind of hope, a kind of potential. It's something like Antje of Bengal: even if one doesn't see her, we must be prepared to believe in her. (206)

Antje here represents South Africa not only as a relic of a past that will not stay put, but as a reminder of the need to keep looking beneath the surface of the visible and continue to reconstrue it in order to effect (revolutionary) change. This message, at last, appears to reach Ruben.

Conclusion

At the end of *The Rights of Desire*, both Margrieta and Tessa have left Ruben. But, he contends, he is not alone because Antje of Bengal is there to help him face the reality of the country outside of his study. The conclusion of Ruben's narrative suggests that, because he has "no doubt about her continued presence anymore," he no longer has to assuage this doubt by the futile means of tangible material evidence. As the palpable material of texts, or (ghostly) appearance, is always contingent on change effected by the intangible layer of signification beneath it, meaning lies with the signifying subject responsible for this dialectic, and not with its surface symbols. Ruben has therefore ceased to ascribe importance only to texts as residue, and has transferred his comprehension of the importance of the bodily component of signification to a realisation of the importance of bodies as fellow (South African) subjects. Ruben is determined to remedy the problems faced by the country that he lives in by remaining

part of it, and opposes his sons' arguments to emigrate by stating that South Africa needs him. His closing summation is "My desire is intact," which, in this context, submits a new perception of desire as fuelled by a sense of perpetually being needed, and perpetually being responsible.

More than "a meditation on ageing and on love," the desiring relationships in *The Rights of Desire*, on closer reading, denote a desire for participation, or even immersion. This desire for engagement is, however, continually thwarted because its subject, inevitably complicit in the country's power structures, remains tragically caught between his intuitive desire to connect and his inability to conceive of that desire as anything other than a means of control. By examining desire in *The Rights of Desire* in terms of Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic, I have laid bare the discrepancy between its narrator's enchantment with signification effected at a semiotic level and his crediting of the symbolic with the sole ability of meaning-making. I argued that those aspects of language and of women that escape Ruben, although he is drawn to them, inhabit the position of an invisible yet discernible "ghost." This figure was eventually linked to South Africa as a nation with a past that continues to haunt its present.

Only by acknowledging this "ghost" for what it is – a reality underlying his surface perception of reality – and by recognising the difference between his cognitive conception of desire as an imposition (what he "wants") and his intuitive perception of desire as an aspiration to "belong" or to "fit," can Ruben Olivier's desires finally be addressed and is he able to confront his South African identity. The analysis of this conceptualisation of a national identity that can envision the potential of transformation continues in the following chapter.

Chapter 6: Moving Myths: Mythology and Metaphor in *Praying Mantis*

“There is life in this thing they call writing. And it can run further and faster than you ever did.”

Praying Mantis (22)

In his 2005 novel *Praying Mantis*, André Brink returns to the world of Khoi mythology as previously explored in his *First Life of Adamastor* of 1993, this time juxtaposing it with the colonial landscape of eighteenth-century South Africa. As with the earlier novel that presented a Khoi protagonist, the focalisation of *Praying Mantis* is characterized by a marked shift in worldview from Brink’s other novels, and reads somewhat like a fairytale or dreamscape. I argue that the novel, by means of both its structure and its contents, invites us to understand itself as a myth that develops performatively.

While the novel provides a narration of the conversion of its Khoi protagonist Cupido from his Khoi beliefs to the Christian religion and of his subsequent fate, I argue that the complicated narrative structure of the novel, with its various speakers, focalisers and narrators instead enacts a conversion on the part of the reader towards a realization of Western convention as a myth itself. In this way, it proposes a conceptualisation of myth that disables the opposition between African mythology and Western rationality. In this sense, *Praying Mantis* performs “myth” rather than simply describing or transmitting a particular myth, and I will explore how, and to which effect, it does this.

Because myth is “a mode of signification” that is “open to appropriation” by its nature as speech or discourse, as Roland Barthes puts forward in his 1972 *Mythologies*, the interpretation of history and religion as unyielding sureties is discarded by the novel. Instead, the structure of history and religion as made up of stories and narratives that are inconstant and subjective is stressed, as is their value in interpreting the South African context in their very changeability.

Before commencing with an analysis of the novel as myth, not even so much of South Africa’s colonial past, I will argue, as of its present, I first comment on the narrative structure chosen to present the reader with the story of its protagonist and that, I argue, invites us to read the novel as a performative utterance. After this, I examine the concept of myth in terms of discourse and as semiological system as proposed by Roland Barthes. This leads to a specific consideration of mythology in terms of language and metaphor as evident from Derrida’s “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” and then to the distinctively colonial critique of metaphor, myth and discourse in Robert Young’s *White Mythologies*. I connect this to the use made of metaphor for understanding colonial history in *Praying Mantis*, at last returning to the consideration of the book as the story of South Africa today.

Hatched from stories

As asserted above, Brink's narrative ostensibly concerns itself with the history of Cupido Cockroach (or Kupido Kakkerlak, as he was actually known), who, as historiography would have it, became the first Khoi person to be employed by the London Missionary Society as a missionary at the Cape of Good Hope in the early years of the nineteenth century.⁷¹ The novel was written over a period of twenty years, as its author confesses in his endnote, and, perhaps partially because of this, retains a somewhat schizophrenic character that nevertheless corresponds fittingly with the interpretation of myths as what Joseph Campbell calls "productions of the human imagination" (27), in that they refuse to follow a logical sequence or outcome. Campbell sees myth as a means of coordinating the different forces that dominate our life by giving them a place within a mythological system that allows for the coexistence of diverging elements. The three parts that make up Brink's novel also appear discordant at first glance, representing various narrators and a plethora of linguistic conventions, but by examining the novel in terms of myth, a fruitful connection can be made between conceptions of history, religion and narrative that the three parts all foreground.

The novel is divided into three separate parts, not only typographically but also according to narrative voice. Part one makes use of an omniscient narrator, who instantly frames the story as fable rather than history, in spite of dealing with the child- and boyhood of the historically verifiable character of Cupido Cockroach. This narrator confirms the potency of narrative from the onset. The first line states: "Cupido Cockroach was not born from his mother's body in the usual way but hatched from the stories she told." (3). Stories, like origin myths, have the power to transcend the physically real to create their own reality. This reality forms the background of the reader's understanding of its protagonist.

The narrator of Part One also confronts the reader with discrepancies and tensions that make for uncomfortable, but alert reading. This part, in the way of traditional novels, Bildungsromans and true-to-life stories, deals with "The Early Years" of its protagonist: Cupido being born and growing up. However, the documentary nature of this section is destabilized by the first line. We are placed in the realm of myth, in the classical sense, as a sacred story of origin that precedes recorded history. Even this myth, however, is unstable, as the reader is confronted with various versions. The initial story of Cupido's birth is complemented (or destabilised, depending on your point of view) by at least four other versions. The narrator describes Cupido's unmarried mother as offering various explanations for her son's appearance, each time depending on her audience and mood. One

⁷¹ The London Missionary Society was an Anglican (non-conformist) missionary society formed in England in 1795 with missions in the islands of the South Pacific and in Africa.

of these sees Cupido as having been dropped in her lap by an eagle. The reader later understands that the motive of the eagle carries great significance throughout Cupido's life, since he continues to link the foretold reappearance of this eagle to his future fortune.⁷² Another version sees the baby Cupido being stillborn and close to burial when a praying mantis settles on his winding sheet and halts the burial proceedings. The baby draws breath and is "born again," and the figure of the praying mantis, too, reappears throughout the novel as a harbinger of destiny that aids Cupido in making crucial decisions.⁷³

We readers of fiction are unperturbed by these discrepancies, because it is, after all, fiction. The dreamlike, almost surreal nature of what is told is accepted effortlessly because the (erudite) reader experiences the narrative as the unfolding, or, more specifically, the *performance*, of a myth. Here I refer to the theory expounded by John Austin in his influential *How to Do Things with Words* of 1975. Austin's theory discusses the notion of utterances already accomplishing, or at least performing, that which they describe or designate, which proves useful in thinking about literature and literary language, and especially in analysing the unusual arrangement of *Praying Mantis*.⁷⁴

In his article "Philosophy and Literature" (2000), Jonathan Culler asserts that literary language can be considered performative in Austin's sense, even though, ironically, Austin himself precludes literature from his theory by saying that performative utterances have to be "serious" and not, as he puts it, a joke or a poem (9). Culler believes that literary language can never be reduced to its truth-bearing function and, instead, has a world-creating capacity that exemplifies exactly what the performative in language deals with. Literary language *does* as much, or more, as it *says*, and this holds true for Brink's *Praying Mantis*.

Brink's novel unfolds a whole new world before us. Just as Austin considers that illocutionary acts cannot be judged by their status as true or false but, rather, by whether they are felicitous or infelicitous, the tales told by the novel appear felicitous because we are, after all, dealing with an exotic otherness. This otherness will, a bit later, include Khoi gods leaving their divine realm and hunting and swimming alongside Cupido, all of which we absorb without problem. We understand that these stories shape Cupido's expectations for the future and take on solid form in the events that befall him at later stages. As he grows into manhood, for example, Cupido's status on the farm is affected materially when the Khoi God Heitsi-Eibib leaves the confines of the stories told to him by his mother and appears to him in person, helping to transform

⁷² By the end of the novel, the desolate, neglected and emaciated Cupido is finally facilitated in leaving his deserted missionary outpost by a runaway slave whose name is "Arend," translated in English as "Eagle."

⁷³ The praying mantis also figures as the embodiment of the Khoi god Heitsi-Eibib, the son of the good god Tsui-Goab of Khoi mythology.

⁷⁴ Austin's theory, named "speech act theory," makes a distinction between the illocutionary act, which he defines as an act performed *in* uttering; the locutionary act, which is the act *of* uttering; and the perlocutionary act, which sees an act performed *as a consequence of* the utterance.

him into a successful and respected hunter. Cupido braves lions, speaks to meerkats, and comes to an understanding with a water sprite. These occurrences receive the same dry consideration by the narrator of the first section as do, for example, his nausea on first discovering alcohol or his attempts to have intercourse with various farm animals.

At a certain point, however, the first section of *Praying Mantis* does begin to seem infelicitous, and this is when Cupido converts to Christianity. In the same way that Cupido's relationship with Khoi mythology is physical, his understanding of Christianity is also material. This becomes clear because of the emphasis placed on the Christian religion as a religion of The Word. The abstract power of the word, transmitting its material power and creating images in the head, runs parallel to language as performing what it designates. That Cupido adheres to an alternative consideration of the logic of words becomes clear in the following anecdote.

Cupido is sent by the wife of his master to the homestead of her sister with a gift of pomegranates and a letter. On his journey to the outlying farm, Cupido becomes hungry and eats two of the pomegranates. When he arrives and hands over the gifts left in his charge, he is flabbergasted to discover that the sister deduces that he has eaten two of the fruits because, as she explains, "[t]his letter says your Madam sent twelve pomegranates" (20). The subsequent occasion on which Cupido is sent out with a basket of fruit (quinces this time) and he intends to take some of the fruit, he makes provisions for this power of the letter:

he first takes the letter and hides it under a flat stone behind a large boulder. Only after he has finished the quince and obliterated all signs of his feasting does he remove the folded letter from under the flat stone and set out on the rest of his journey. (21)

When, in spite of these precautions, the letter still proves capable of reporting on his conduct, Cupido is converted to believing in the power of the word. "This is strong magic," he concludes. "There is life in this thing they call writing and it can run further and faster than you ever did" (22). Cupido's description of the power of language places it in the realm of physical and material power. This tension between the abstract nature of the power of words, endowed with the ability to place certain images and thoughts into our minds, and the material concept of the power of language brings us back to the performative.

I maintain that this anecdote is not presented to cause hilarity at the shortcomings of the Other, who is seen to interpret as physical what Western thought knows to be abstract.⁷⁵ I believe that, instead, the novel effects a shift in the reader's perception that normalizes Cupido's response and makes strange the notion of letters on paper being capable of turning informant. Although the

⁷⁵ Such as occurs, for example, in the popular 70s movie "The Gods Must be Crazy" and other Western products of popular culture that put their conception of a "primitive" mentality on display for entertainment.

narrator who relates this incident to us is a third person outsider, the focalisation of the first part is mostly that of Cupido. As a consequence his deductions seem reasonable to us, rather than laughable.

The turnaround in this first section arrives not so much with a change in attitude towards the credibility or materiality of these stories as with the transformation of their content. On becoming enamoured of a visiting preacher, Cupido's physical immersion in the story world of Khoi mythology is replaced by his material participation in the stories of Christianity. This, the narrator recognises, is achieved by means of three specific devices, which he terms "magic tricks" in the language of Cupido, and which he tabulates as follows: "The mirrors are the first of these. Music is another. And the third is stories" (44). All three of these reach across the gap between the material and the abstract and combine something of both reality and myth that Cupido deems magic. The association of these magical things with Christianity motivates Cupido's conversion, as he ponders that:

[h]e could no longer be quite sure about Heitsi-Eibib anymore. Not even about Tsui-Goab or Gaunab. It was beginning to look as if there might be more to the world than he had known before. The very thought made his chest contract (52).

The physical discomfort Cupido feels at the upheaval of his view on the world due to the intrusion of another mythology into his Khoi belief-system, exemplifies the function of myth as a structure that helps us interpret the world, or as "tools with which we organise the mass of incoming data," a phrase taken from Mary Midgley's study of myth (4). Because myth functions as the prism through which experiences are viewed and interpreted, suspicion cast on its performance upsets the consciousness of the one looking through it. Yet, to the extent that myths are tied to historical context, they can, and often are, modified when circumstances change.

As Midgley notes, "myths do not alter in the rather brisk, wholesale way that much contemporary imagery suggests," because, as she recognises, "[t]hey are organic parts of our lives, cognitive and emotional habits, structures that shape our thinking, so they follow conservative laws within it" (4-5). This perversely accounts for both Cupido's preservation of habits such as relying on the appearance of portents from the natural world for making decisions, and for his violent rejection of his old belief system as is displayed, for example, in his upturning of the stone monuments to Heitsi-Eibib as he encounters them throughout the South African landscape. During the period of his most expressive rejection of his old way of life, and his manifest insertion into the new mythology, the second section of the novel commences and the narrator is replaced.

As suggested previously, *Praying Mantis* pictures Western ideology as just as much of a mythology as African myth, and makes it appear just as unreasonable. The absurd character of

Western thought is brought to the fore to a greater extent with the onset of section two, which has a first person narrator in the form of the Missionary Society's Reverend James Read, who tells the story of Cupido's conversion and his appointment as first Khoi missionary in a hesitant, awed and self-conscious voice. His narration presents a different voice from that of the first narrator, making self-conscious use of the "I"-form and repeatedly voicing his insecurity about the language he has at hand. At the same time, Read follows the first narrator in placing his narrative in the service of the telling of Cupido's life. He treats Cupido as if he were some sort of demi-God, leading the reader to expect that Cupido, in his capacity as Missionary, is going to do something heroic and important. Read qualifies his daring in taking it upon himself to start this account by saying things such as that he was "allowed" to be near Cupido, and that he was "afforded glimpses of him," showing he is aware of the importance of his recollection as a historical recording of a person of note (114). This becomes quickly absurd, because all that Cupido does is become a harsher and more anti-Khoi Missionary than other missionaries. Read opens his narrative as follows:

The first time I may be said to have properly made the acquaintance of Cupido Cockroach (although I had been afforded glimpses of him before) must have been at his baptism in the Sunday's River at Graaff-Reinet on that stormy day at the end of 1801. (114)

The careful evocation of place and time, as well as of the deviant or foreshadowing conditions, communicates his awareness of the importance of his recollection.

The story Read narrates is valued according to its ability to explain Cupido's fate. Indications of this abound. "How could I ever, then, have foreseen...?" (114), Read asks, also using phrases like "I know now, too late perhaps" (127) and "Where did we go astray?" (183). Hindsight plays a significant role in the mythologizing of Cupido's story. The use of perception after the fact allows for meanings that may not have been available on first experiencing events. Partially through this use of visionary language, the Christian idea of prophecy as indicator of divine authority is ridiculed.⁷⁶ The dramatic emphasis that Read places on minor incidents and effects, which subsequently fail to live up to their status as significant portents, lends his assertions of the magnitude of Cupido's missionary deeds the quality of a myth of its own. Read's allocation of divine significance to the disasters that befall the first Khoi missionary for the London Missionary Society can thus be read as a way of making sense of the mission in South Africa, which was beset with difficulties and must often have seemed futile. By attributing unpleasant events such as the forced removal of the mission station from location to location and the missionaries' defeat at the

⁷⁶ This by reason that, as mere humans cannot see into the future, it can be deduced that they are guided by signs from heaven.

first circuit court of the Cape Colony to a higher power, they could be endured without a loss of faith in the myth of the just cause.⁷⁷

After the sense of foreboding instilled by the second section of the novel, ending as it does with Read's voicing a "sad premonition" with regard to Cupido's fate (215), the third section returns to an omniscient narrator. This, however, is not the same jocular storyteller passing on a legend for posterity of the first section. The third is quieter, more serious and often relinquishes his focalisation to Cupido himself, who battles with the disillusionment that befalls him as he realises that the conclusions he had drawn about the hard lessons learned throughout his life have left him without certainty in interpreting the world around him. All that is left to him is the isolation of his missionary outpost of Dithakong, where he spends the last years of his life. In the excerpts written by Cupido himself in which he communicates with God, he gives God a stern talking to, not shirking the most blasphemous of expletives.⁷⁸

This irreverent attitude towards God returns us to the perception of Christianity as a myth on equal footing with Khoi myth. Cupido's first-hand experience of Heitsi-Eibib is that of a figure who hunts alongside of him, and so his interpretation of God (whom he calls "Reverend God," titling him after the other Christian figures he has encountered) is that of a figure who can be reached by letter (as he can be reached by The Word), and who may be reprimanded for negligence. Rather than presenting a semi-nostalgic and endearing but ultimately dismissive view of Khoi mythology as inevitably to be surpassed by Western understanding, *Praying Mantis* in this way presents Western conventions *as* conventions, and as a series of practises ruled by a particular ideology in much the same way as mythologies.

The account that would seem historically most accurate is the second section, with its narration in first person by an eye witness to the events described. This account, however, shows a discrepancy of world view in relation to the other two. The interpretation of belief as based on abstract symbolism as forwarded by the second section does not align with the conceptualisation of otherworldly powers as materially present in our world in the other two narrative parts. In the following section, I take a closer look at the way in which the conceptualisation of Western convention as myth is characterised. I argue that the narratives of the novel oppose the notion that singularity and simplicity stand for truth, which is a myth perpetuated by Enlightenment according to Mary Midgley's *The Myths We Live By* (2004).

⁷⁷ Derogatorily known as the Black Circuit, the circuit court case of 1812-1813 saw Father Van der Kemp and the Reverend James Read attempt to bring white farmers to justice for the cruel treatment of converted Khoi. The case was lost by the missionaries due to lack of testimony – the assumption still ruling in the colony that Khoi could not give testimony because they could not swear on the Bible, regardless of their status as Christian converts.

⁷⁸ "I know that you are a busy man," he writes to God at one point, "[b]ut this is crushing my balls" (257).

The name of Hottentot

Aside from the division of the novel into three sections, other features give it the character of a complex structure that opposes history as chronologically verifiable or comprehensible. In this way, it opposes the idea that simplicity stands for truth, which Midgley sees as a myth that became disseminated during the Enlightenment. Midgley isolates this idea as one of three myths that continue to influence intellectual and moral thinking in the Western world today. In a section entitled “Complexity is not a Scandal,” Midgley exposes the conviction, held in the social sciences as well as in much of the humanities, that “only one very simple way of thought is rational,” as a misleading doctrine (21). This Enlightenment myth, which she dubs both “imperialistic” and “strangely ambitious,” is described by Midgley as centring on two claims, that of infallibility and of unity of thought. In fact, she states, “[r]ationality does not require us to be infallible, nor to have all our knowledge tightly organised” (23). She goes on to argue that “we need scientific pluralism – the recognition that there are many independent forms and sources of knowledge – rather than reductivism, the conviction that one fundamental form underlies them all and settles everything” (27).

This, perhaps, is the aim of *Praying Mantis*'s complexity. By juxtaposing, and thus equating, Western and Khoi ways of organising the world, the status of Western discourse as a “white mythology” that becomes invisible as mythology because it is normalised, is suddenly made visible. In the same way that Richard Dyer, in his study *White* (1997) cited in chapter four, reveals white culture to be a construct that has become invisible because it has set itself up as the norm, *Praying Mantis* forwards white ideology as naturalised and therefore seemingly incontrovertible.⁷⁹ The novel's structure performs the pluralism of vision that is needed to combat the silent assumptions that accompany such normalisation. At the same time, its narrative structure is marked as a metafiction because of the many fictions and texts that interrupt its surface. The use of various narrators, literary devices and citations draws attention to its status as a work of fiction, and allows for the problematisation of the invisibility (and “whiteness,” in Dyer's term) of literature as an artefact that responds to, but is removed from, reality.

Literary references are made by means of a series of epigraphs that open the novel and set up expectations about its content. One of them dates from the time in which the narrative is set, and comprises a nineteenth-century commentary about the insignificance of the “name of Hottentot,” believed by the cited article to be one of “little note.” The effect achieved by this citation is a contrary one. It anticipates that these low expectations will be refuted by the narrative that follows. Considering the fact that the subject of the novel is “the first ‘Hottentot’ missionary enlisted by the

⁷⁹ I will return to the concept of “white mythology” in the next section of this chapter, where I discuss the conceptualisation of Jacques Derrida and its subsequent development by Robert Young.

London Missionary Society” in a colonial country beset with racial barriers, this expectation takes on a special urgency. The full quote runs, “The name of Hottentot will be forgotten or remembered only as that of a deceased person of little note.” The use of the adjective “deceased” prepares indignant readers for an encounter with the racist colonial mentality of the early nineteenth century. Because of the accent placed on this sentiment, a concomitant expectation of its readerly reception as aberrant is also implied, making *this* brand of Western mythology, at least, seem strange from the onset.

The second epigraph dates from 1984, the year, as we read in the endnote to the novel, in which Brink began this novel. The quote comes from a work by Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, which deals with the meaninglessness of modern-day life as seen through the prism of the experiences of an American professor of “Hitler studies,” who becomes contaminated by an unknown toxin and faces his death in the meaningless surroundings of small-town America (“white noise” refers to random or uncorrelated signals). The quote plays believers and non-believers out against each other in an unexpected way in the assertion that the existence of non-believers grounds belief. The unorthodox proposition that “[i]t is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously” again provides an alternative to Western mythology, this time referring to the convention of siding “tasks” and responsibilities with what is serious, and not with what “no one else takes seriously.” Here, the value placed on rationality as a way of understanding the world around us is thrown open to question. Instead, the imagination is forwarded as an important tool for interpreting the world.

The third and last epigraph dates from the time at which Brink again took up writing the novel, after a long period of neglect (this was in 1992), and comprises a deliberation on Erasmus’s concept of “free will.” It begs the question whether a man can choose to be mad, and, more importantly, of whether he can choose not to be. Like the other two epigraphs, this deliberation offers an insight that is reached by turning around what is conventional, destabilising the presumption that what is normal is considered as such because it is the wisest option. Concurrently, this last citation sets up the implication of being “compelled” to a way of life or course of action by something beyond mere human “will,” in the same way that the subsequent narrative of the first part makes clear that accident, or fate, can invalidate intentions.

The implications of the quotes prefigure the implications of the other narrative voices of the novel. All of them contribute to conjuring up the story of Cupido, but no one voice is presented as having “the last word,” least of all The Word itself. As mentioned, aside from the variety in narrative voice and focalisation discussed earlier, an interspersed of other textual devices occurs within the three narrative voices, influencing their interpretation. One of these forms is that of the endless lists that appear in the first and third parts.

In the first part, the reader encounters lists of, variously, wild game that Cupido's first master shoots on a hunting trip; names of places he encounters on his journey into the hinterland; and the unlikely items transported by rogue missionary Servaas Ziervogel on his visits to lonely farmer's wives.⁸⁰ At first glance, these tabulations take on the appearance of the pseudo-scientific charts of colonial record, associated with a colonial power structure that lends the overarching metanarrative the framework of an ideological grid of colonial documentation. The first such encountered list reads:

eleven lions
 forty-two elephants
 seven hippopotamuses
 ninety-eight springbok
 twenty-three hartebeest
 two rhinos
 seventeen zebra
 thirty-one wildebeest
 a single camelopardalis (a rare beast, almost as
 improbable as a unicorn)
 and eight Bushmen (5)

The list provokes distaste at its dry and objective tone, and ends on a repulsive note when it includes human death as well.

In her consideration of scientific myth, Midgley characterizes the use of the list as a "favoured way of appearing scientific policies can be called scientific if they involve counting or measuring something, never mind whether that particular thing needs to be counted or not, and never mind what use is being made of the resulting data" (19). The pretence of objectivity that accompanies scientific appearance is exposed in the novel as grotesque, considering the brutal practices that must have preceded this tabulation. At the same time, the narrator of the third part of *Praying Mantis* also undermines the (Western) association of lists with order by including in his catalogues both reasonable and unreasonable items.

In his final capacity as missionary of Dithakong, Cupido tells a group of visiting travellers of his own travails by recalling various place names:

...
 Okavango and the lake at Ngami
 as well as Kgalagadi and the Chella Mountains
 and Lebebe and Omabonde
 and the Okawabga River and Andra and Humpata (230)
 ...

⁸⁰ Including, among the recording of "sugar and coffee" and "needles and cotton," items such as "the skull of St Peter as a child" and "two white-plumed wings of an angel from Macedonia" (40).

He goes on with his list until he comes to:

Samarkand and Sumatra
 Vladivostok and Nizhni-Novgorod
 and the Great Bear and Orion with his girdle and the
 Southern Cross
 and, for all one can tell, Saturn and Uranus
 and the New Jerusalem (231)
 ...

All pretence to scientific objectivity is abandoned with this use of the list, and the erstwhile tool for colonial control begins to take on the form of a song or chant, which evokes the mentioned places rather than try to capture them in a catalogue.

Another variation takes the form of the letters that Cupido writes to God. These vary in quality and language as his mastery of written language improves and his emotional state vacillates, and give a view of events different from the way they are described by the other narrative voices. Through this first-person account, we can trace the progress from his desire to adopt a single mythology to cope with the world to his acknowledgment of the folly of linking his life to any one single narrative. In his last letter to God, for example, Cupido conflates the “Dearest Beloved Revrend God” (sic) with the Heitsi-Eibib of his previously-abandoned Khoi belief. “[Y]ou who live in the Red Sky of dawn” he continues his address, “...who struck Gaunub on the hip to cripple him and cause him to die” (271). This equates God with the Khoi hunter god Heitsi-Eibib, who challenged Gaunub, the god of evil and death, to single combat and won.

This espousal of a syncretistic worldview only comes towards the end of the novel, when every kind of misery and misfortune has already befallen him. It is strongly linked to Cupido’s changed understanding of the workings of stories and words. Where, at first, he had extolled the magic inherent in words, which could “run faster and farther than [he] ever did” (22), his last reflection is that “the Word is no more I got to go past Him” (271). This conveys a renewed understanding of the power of language as lying not so much in the solidity of Western letters as in their articulation of the world beyond.

Introducing the reader to Western attempts to order the world, like religion, letters and lists, and making the reader aware of the seductive promise of control that they offer, *Praying Mantis* points to the correlation between what is perceived as history, and what as fable. It presents us with a concern for complicating our systems of ideological imposition, making use of the dual meaning of mythology, both as a way of making sense of the world and as a way of conjuring up a new world.

In his book *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space* (1986), Joseph Campbell believes that “[t]he life of a mythology derives from the vitality of its symbols as metaphors,” and that these metaphors, as images that embody our conceptualisation of experiences, deliver “not simply the idea, but a sense of actual participation in such a realization of transcendence, infinity, and abundance” (18). In this way, the abstract *is* material, as (symbolic) conceptualisation affects, and *effects*, our (material) experience. By allowing the reader to immerse herself in the world view of Cupido, Brink’s novel goes beyond a narration of the idea of Midgley’s pluralism of vision, and actually allows us to participate in different ways of making sense of the world. The reader is not only immersed in a story presented as myth, but invited to probe its propositions, both in the sense of an interrogation *and* an incorporation of its viewpoint.

I now take a closer look at these propositions, and at the way in which Western conceptualisations of mythology have travelled into new territories. As Mieke Bal writes in her *Travelling Concepts*, the development in the interpretation of concepts (such as that of mythology) as they travel, does not require a resolution of discrepancies in reading, but, instead, can be used in laying meaning open to questioning. By refusing to subdue alterity in the allocation of meaning, concepts that travel circumvent the naturalisation of assumptions, which, as discussed, is itself a “white mythology.”

I first turn to Roland Barthes’s conceptualisation of (Western) ideology as mythology, and extend this to Jacques Derrida’s notion of conceptualisation itself as a myth, before turning to the specifically postcolonial critique of mythology as “white,” in various senses of the word, by Robert Young. I then use Mieke Bal’s concept of “metaphoring” to link this to the narrative of *Praying Mantis* as both performing a myth and bringing to light a presumption about South African history as shaped by a white mythology.

Remaking the Khoi world

Although Brink’s novel profiles itself as an exploration of the stories that explain the nature of reality in Khoi culture,⁸¹ its underlying concern aligns itself with Roland Barthes’s conception of mythology as naturalised power in a specific cultural context. In this case, the specific cultural context is that of colonial South Africa, and, by extension, that of South Africa in the present-day. The distance between the two perceptions of myth is not that great. Both focus on what Mircea Eliade terms sacralization, yet, the importance of language as a structuring device is underplayed in the first. The role of religion in this novel, as perpetuated by colonial oppression, however, remains uncontested in both.

⁸¹ In the sense, for example, of narratives traditionally passed down about divine and heroic beings and linked to the spiritual life of the Khoi community.

In the still widely-read *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion* first published in 1959, Mircea Eliade shows how religion emerges from myth. The desire to explain and control the world gave rise to the desire to experience the world as sacred, which actively called a world into being: “the experience of sacred space makes possible the ‘founding of the world’: where the sacred manifests itself in space, *the real unveils itself*, the world comes into existence” (63). Eliade foresees later considerations of myth as constructed, and acknowledges that socio-historical factors play a central part in this. “[T]here are,” he begins, “differences in religious experience explained by differences in economy, culture and social organisation – in short, by history” (17). The development of writing in the West, for example, partially explains the metaphysical nature of Christian beliefs, just as the proliferation of oral transmissions in Khoi culture influence the conceptualisation of divinity in Khoi mythology, where intervention by the Gods is experienced in a material way. Historical context influences perception, and history, indeed, is what directly gives rise to myth for Roland Barthes.

Myth, for Barthes, is “a system of communication, a message” (109) closely tied to the workings of history. Barthes challenges the “naturalness” of cultural practices and texts by demonstrating how they are artificial constructs subject to an imposition of meaning. These constructs create a mythological reality intended to maintain existing structures of power. “[M]ythology can only have an historical foundation,” he states, “for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (110). Barthes places myth within the realm of semiology, where language is interpreted as conceptual rather than referential. “Semiology has taught us,” he says, “that myth has the task of giving historical intention a natural justification” (142). By uncovering the hidden myths that mask power structures as truths, Barthes’s brand of mythology inevitably engages with political issues.

One scholar who delves into this engagement between mythology and politics in the specific context of missionary intervention in nineteenth-century South Africa, is Elizabeth Elbourne. In her article “Word Made Flesh: Christianity, Modernity, and Cultural Colonialism in the Work of Jean and John Comaroff,” Elbourne responds to Comaroffs’ seminal *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (1991), which previously formed the pinnacle of analysis of South African missionary influence. In her reply to their interpretation Elbourne puts forward the intriguing proposal that, rather than seeing missionary undertakings from the vantage point of the christianisation of Africa, they can be interpreted as bringing about the Africanisation of Christianity.

Elbourne believes that a reading of missionary work as essentially furthering the oppositions that served colonialism focuses too much on the Western origin of Christianity, which “contains deeply embedded culturally specific assumptions” (43), ignoring African agency. Interpreting

Christianity as a language of cultural domination, gives an oversimplified view of the performative process of “colonizing [African] consciousness” (8).

Elbourne asserts that conversion was “an act, with attached rituals and beliefs” (35), and follows the Comaroffs in reading missionary endeavours as *performances*. By performing civilisation it was hoped that South Africa’s indigenous population would follow suit and adopt Western practices. By the notion of one universal truth, the rejection of existing traditions would ostensibly also be achieved. Elbourne complicates this situation, however, when she notes that it was not the straightforwardness of its world view that converted Khoi people to the Christian faith, but the promise of power that its exclusive vision implied. This is also what motivates Cupido to learn to read and write, as this written language can run “farther and faster” than his spoken word (22).

So whilst an immersion into the Christian word to a certain extent achieved the adoption of a Western world view and, by extension, an acceptance of Western authority, it concomitantly gave Khoi converts a way of negotiating a better position for themselves in the colonial context, even to the extent that, as Elbourne notes, “prophetic figures emerged from time to time to use aspects of the Christian message in a context that suggests how quickly its language became unhinged from missionary guardianship” (26). The context referred to here was that of the Christian doctrine of equality, which was used by indigenous converts to oppose assumptions of authority by white farmers. This “African prophetic innovation” (26) caused much anxiety among white South Africans who, in order to re-establish authority, forwarded race, and not religion, as the determinant of colonial status. Christian ideology and language, once unhinged, proved impossible to re-attach to the idea of exclusivity.

Language inevitably plays a role in our observation of the world and language is always complicit in structures of power. Thomas MacLaughlin explores this idea of language as “a conceptual grid, a system of values, through which we experience reality” by linking this conceptual grid specifically to figurative language (86). Metaphor, which stresses connections based on the logic of words as they refer to aspects of the outside world, plays a central role in this.

In “White Mythology” Jacques Derrida challenges the traditional opposition between concept and metaphor in philosophical theory. Metaphor, he argues, has been regarded as a “loss of meaning” and a “detour” from “proper meaning” (270). But as a matter of fact, Derrida argues, philosophy exists precisely by means of metaphor, as assertions of truth are made in the form of metaphors. This admission does not necessarily devalue a statement or finding, because meaning does not diminish simply because it is transported by means of language. Metaphor, in this way, is not alien to metaphysics but is itself a metaphysical concept. As Derrida states: “Metaphor remains, in all its essential characteristics, a classic philosopheme, a metaphysical concept” (218). It is not

possible to speak about metaphor non-metaphorically. This is so because a metaphor must be performed in order to grasp its meaning. The very word “metaphor” itself, as Mieke Bal notes in her article “Metaphoring: Making a Niche of Negative Space” (2006), is a metaphor.⁸²

Bal’s article on “metaphoring” proposes a development of Derrida’s deliberation on the absence of a clear distinction between literal and figurative language. Where Derrida infers that a purely literal language may not exist, but only a language where the figurative origins have become invisible (or “white”) because of over-use, Bal puts forward the concept of “metaphoring” to reconceptualise metaphor within the context of a performative understanding of language (164). Metaphoring, as a verb, performs a transferral of meaning that does not necessarily rely on referentiality. Instead of assessing the appropriateness of a metaphor by its proximity to what is referred to, the act of metaphoring, Bal contends, does not transfer “meaning in a referential or representational sense, but a preoccupation that *requires re-enactment* in each event of occurrence” (165, emphasis added).

Bal warns against what she terms the “disabling abstraction” of generalisations. Instead of essentialising truth claims that, as she warns, “easily mislead... us into believing that states and situations are inevitable,” and so deny “the possibility of political agency” (165), she pleads for agency and performance as entailed in the act of metaphoring. By metaphoring the particularity of one idea or experience onto another, whilst retaining the connotations specific to their configuration, the gap between distinct situations *can* be bridged. The meaning of both elements augment each other in the dynamic process of metaphoring, without one connotation acting in the service of another. This retention of particularity returns us to what Campbell called “the vitality” of [a myth’s] symbols as metaphors” (18), allowing for an immersion in myth by participating in its central ideas, such as the idea of transcendence, infinity or, in the case of the nineteenth-century Khoi, the idea of a radical equality among Christians.

Extending this train of thought, I argue that the understanding of God that Cupido demonstrates in Brink’s novel is not presented as simplistically literal in a laughable, quasi-primitive manner, but shows a sophistication of conceptualisation that renders Western traditional notions of a divide between the literal and the figurative comical. Cupido’s amalgamation of the Khoi way of making sense of the world with the textual conception of reality of the white missionaries, not only makes *visible* the invented nature of both, but makes perfect *sense* in the context of the Khoi missionary. Robert Young, in his *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990), takes this idea a step further.

Young departs from Derrida’s notion of metaphor as the inescapable (both excessive and deficient) access point for western philosophical thought to a consideration of Western history as

⁸² Its Greek translation is “to carry from one place to another.”

the inevitable point of departure for considering all histories. Hence, history is a “white mythology” that sets the limits for any project for knowledge about history. So-called “world histories,” whether Marxist or capitalist or liberal or conservative, are always histories of the west, seen from a Eurocentric viewpoint. In this way, Western ideology is a mythology that is both “white,” in the sense that it becomes transparent as a mythology, and in the sense that it is a mythology that “makes white,” that erases divergence. Young takes a quote from Derrida’s essay:

Metaphysics - the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own logos, that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason (Derrida, 213).

In his examination, Young posits colonialism as the “dislocating term” in the debate between theory and history, as both of these are implicated in the history of European colonialism, and both continue to provide the contemporary framework for the conditions of institutional knowledge and practice (vii). The field of postcolonial study, Young also seems well aware, provides the terrain needed to do justice to the complexity of history and its multifaceted composition in political, social and linguistic terms. The simple oppositions of Hegel’s binaries, such as that of masters and slaves, colonizer and colonized, can be circumvented in the spirit of Foucault’s critique of the sovereign model of power, which presumes that, as power resides on a single basis, can easily be reversed (5). “You cannot get out of Hegel by simply contradicting him,” Young posits, “for your opposition is likewise always recuperable, as the workings of ideology or psychic resistance”(6). Contradiction, in Young’s analysis, is replaced by Derrida’s deconstruction in effecting a decolonisation of history, brought about within the realm of language.

The realisation that dialecticism can never be opposed by its reversal (as it would preserve the dialectic) formed the focal point of Elbourne’s analysis of the historical interpretations of South African missionary endeavours, too. Her insight that the christianising of indigenous South Africans did as much to alter the nature of South African Christianity and *all* South African Christians (not only the indigenous members) as it changed the world view of those it newly converted, goes a long way towards making sense of the attitude towards the Word exhibited by Cupido Kakkerlak in Brink’s narrative.

Considering The Word

Brink’s novel fights the war waged by language and words in the creation of myths that uphold the political status quo on the battlefield of religion. The conflation of the meaning of “the word” and “The Word” plays a central role within its narrative, in the same way that the dual meanings of “mythology” are brought to life within its pages. According to Jonathan Culler, in *The Pursuit of*

Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction, metaphor expands its reach in modern considerations of language, and has become the “figure of figures, a figure for figurality” (189). The myth that metaphor is capable of transcending the oppositions it straddles to access a truth undermines the power of metaphor, as demonstrated by Derrida and Bal’s considerations discussed above.

Thomas MacLaughlin attributes to metaphor the capacity for a “magical sharing of meaning.” Unlike metonymy, which relies on connotations built up over time in a specific historical context, metaphor creates associations “on the basis of a deep logic that underlies the use of words” (84). This “deep logic,” whose connotations, for MacLaughlin, already seem to approximate those traditionally aligned with magic, characterises the performance of myth as it is borne out by *Praying Mantis*. As Cupido becomes increasingly aware of the power that resides in the tenacity and flexibility of words, he connects their deep logic with his conception of magic in that they are both able to construct and change reality. The magic that Cupido detects in words, and, specifically, the written word, can be attributable to his finding their “logic” not so much “deep” as unreasonable.

This inappropriateness also characterises metaphor, as Jonathan Culler explains (1981). In this piece, Culler explains metaphoricity as the result of interpretative processes that are performed on being confronted with “textual incongruity” (232). The suggestion is that surface descriptions sometimes fail to express what is salient, and require the enhancement of figurative conceptualisations. Again, this would point to a clear-cut distinction between the real and the figurative, of which Derrida and Bal remain unconvinced, and which do fail to acknowledge the real as constructed by language in the first place.

Cupido, in pointing to the artifice inherent in the white mythology of textual associations, differs in his understanding of words from those used in his mother’s, and later his wife Anna’s, oral stories, as these are set up in the text as participating in a different logic, one that engenders rather than describes. When Cupido’s mother’s describes the land “far away” that she came from to her young son, she tells him:

“It is a bare place”

“How bare?”

“Just bare. No word has come to lie on it yet to say how bare it is. So it is just bare.” (17).

This exchange appears to hark back to a world before words at the same time as that it characterises these words as unnecessary in recalling a history and maybe even obstructive to the process. Marshall McLuhan, in his 1962 *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, asserted that the advent of print culture caused the cultural predominance of the visual over the oral by its

privileging of writing over speech. “The technology and social effects of typography,” he notes, “incline us to abstain from noting interplay and, as it were, ‘formal’ causality, both in our inner and external lives. Print exists by virtue of the static separation of functions and fosters a mentality that gradually resists any but a separative and compartmentalizing or specialist outlook” (126). The domination of writing over other forms of language is, in itself, a mythology of the west, and acts prescriptively in the way in which it frames perception of the world. This bias of writing over speech has been called *graphocentrism* or *scriptism*. McLuhan argues that its effect extends to social organization, especially in terms of the “specialist outlook” he mentions.

When Cupido adopts the written form of language as his new god because of the magical powers he attributes to it, this absorption of power turns out to be anything but empowering, as it ties him to a restricted set of values and ultimately leads to the narrowing of his worldview. In taking The Word of Christianity at its word, Cupido displays violently intolerant behaviour in his aggressive conversion of non-Christians and his destruction of non-Christian sacral sites. The progress and development that graphocentrism attributes to writing is undercut. Cupido contributes to this immobility by counting on the solidity of words. After Reverend James Read has presented him with a bible of his own, he encounters Cupido one day sitting on the ground with a much-depleted bible on his lap, intently reading every word on a page and then, when reaching the end of the page, tearing it out, crumpling it and stuffing it into his mouth. Read is horrified and confronts Cupido, at which Cupido replies:

I am consuming the Word of God. . . . There is so much that I still do not understand, Brother Read, . . . So I decided I must eat it and swallow it to absorb it in my body. Only then will the Word of God be fully part of me. Then no one can ever take it from me again. (185)

The need for material absorption is at odds with Read’s understanding of written language as transmitting value via an abstract absorption. Yet, the tension found in the symbolic language of the Christian bible, with its bread and wine becoming blood and body, and its word being made flesh, provides an apt context for Cupido’s questioning of the boundaries between the physical and the abstract.

In *Transfiguration* (1983), Frank Brown makes an analysis of metaphor and religion in a way that opposes this idea of an inhibiting conflict between literal and figural meaning. He disagrees with the conventional characterisation of both poetic metaphor and religious language as sign-systems that are purely “self-authenticating” (149). Instead, he argues that “however self-referential or noncognitive some function of religious language may be, the ‘game’ played by such language as a whole becomes trivial and even incomprehensible unless it is understood as concerned, ultimately, with more than itself” (150). Because he assumes that these systems of

symbolic language are neither trivial nor incomprehensible, he deduces that the complex relationship between experience, words, and what he calls “a higher or deeper Word” can be successfully explored. The way in which he foresees this happening is by the realisation that our sense of reality is related directly to the language we use, and that metaphoric and conceptual discourse both mediate what lies beyond the confines of language (151). He speaks of “the dynamics of metaphor” as serving “to incorporate and help create the vital tensions and awareness fundamental to the religious dimension of human experience” (173) in the same way that Derrida recognises metaphor to function as a “transfiguration,” both remaining within language and pointing to that which is beyond it.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have argued that, by telling us the story of first Khoi missionary at the Cape, Cupido Kakkerlak, *Praying Mantis* performs a myth, one that proposes a conceptualisation of myth that disables the opposition between African mythology and Western rationality. Rather than trying to present us with the mythology of the Khoi in a manner that exoticises and makes laughable their practises, the novel concerns itself with the mythology of the West and, specifically, with what Robert Young (after Derrida) calls a “white mythology.”

As Culler states in the previously-cited “Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative,” literature, even more so than non-literary language, exemplifies Austin’s performative in that it “accomplishes the act that it designates” (503) and creates for us the world that it describes. The world of *Praying Mantis* is the dry and barren hinterland of South Africa, where overt activity and incident seems lacking, but where narrative reveals much to be going on beneath the surface.⁸³ The narrative of *Praying Mantis* is desert-like in that not much occurs in the way of material events, but the shifts in perception and understanding of its protagonist, Cupido Kakkerlak, first with his conversion to Christianity and later with his realisation that Christianity performs its own mythology, literally *creates* a world of difference for the reader.

By examining the narrative structure of the novel, its multiple narrators, as well as its employment of self-consciously literary devices such as citations, tabulations and epistolary interludes, I was able to analyse the way in which Brink’s novel prepares us to understand Western conventions, both linguistic and ideological, as mythologies that are made “white” and thereby indiscernible. In this way it became possible to read *Praying Mantis* as a narrative that tells the story, not so much of South Africa’s past, as of a future South Africa that is empowered to refuse to make white its truth and, instead, is able to embrace the complexity of its history.

⁸³ Its last section, consisting of 55 pages or so, are, in fact, entirely taken up with the protagonist’s residence in Dithakong, a missionary outpost in the desert without church, houses, or inhabitants.

Epilogue: Writing the South African Self

“We still need the mess of forgiveness.”

“I always thought forgiveness was a tidying up.”

“It depends. True forgiveness opens you up to all the darkness in yourself.” *Imaginings of Sand* (265)

The refusal “to make white,” as borne out by my consideration of *Praying Mantis*, can be extended to the critical acknowledgment of darkness in the other works I have discussed in this study. The insight provided above is from an exchange between the narrator of *Imaginings of Sand* and a local member of the ANC preparing for the 1994 General Elections. It encapsulates the predicament of contemporary South African identity as imagined in the post-1991 novels of André Brink. The “darkness in yourself” stands for the abhorrence of contamination, the realisation that one’s identity is not just defined by one’s forebears or loyalty or birthright, but by the experience of the encounters—with others, with the land, and with the self—that refuse definition or consistency. This experience is characterized as darkness because it admits to the dependence, and therefore to vulnerability, that being a South African among South Africans brings. It is also defined as darkness because it refuses attempts to whiten the experience by naturalising, and thus making invisible, the imposition of Western norms.

The fascination with darkness is not limited to Brink’s post-1991 narrators, however. It is already found in Joseph Malan, the protagonist of the pivotal *Looking on Darkness*, discussed in my introduction. Malan, too, sees “[t]ruth...not [as] a collection of facts which can be narrated but a landscape through which one travels in the dark” (34). The difference between Brink’s earlier and the later novels lies not so much in the correlation of national identity with a connection to the land, nor with the ascription of darkness to both this land and the people who inhabit it. Simply stated, in all of the novels a struggle takes place with the anxiety of identity, which is followed by the realisation that the land defines the person, provoking a sense of being that can be sensed and recognised but not necessarily fathomed or explained by qualifications of birth or race. In this study, I argue that the difference between the pre- and post-Apartheid conceptualisation of this struggle and this realisation lies, rather, in the different way language is imagined to play a role in it.

Language comprises the arena in which Brink’s post-1991 narrators wrestle with their identity. In *On the Contrary*, Barbier plays with the idea of language as an assumption of authority, first using language for purposes of aggrandisement, and then discovering that, as the self-confessed liar he is, his own inability to keep track of the versions of his story prevent him from truly participating in it. This dilemma is solved when Barbier becomes sensitive to the stories that are told by the land, which he connects with the slave-woman Rosette, after which he resigns

himself to being a mere component of the land's narrative, being told as much as telling. The link between reliability and authority being severed, Barbier can resign himself to the death sentence that is his fate. Kristien, in *Imaginings of Sand*, is also initially baffled by the conundrum of language. The women's stories that her grandmother passes down to her contradict dominant historical discourse as much as they contradict each other. Only after a cathartic confrontation with the Gothic sublime, comprising a distress that is simultaneously a release, Kristien achieves the insight that conflicting memories and histories can co-exist without presenting a threat to one's sense of self. *The First Life of Adamastor* takes the form of a self-conscious literary exploration of conflicting and connected viewpoints that co-exist in the context of a land that endures, making individual fates subordinate to the continuance of South African identity.

Devil's Valley's Phillip Lochner's misgivings about his identity as a South African, the products of his disillusionment with its repressive history, are similarly transformed by his confrontation with language and stories, and, in particular, with the silences that inhere in them. After acknowledging the co-existence of fantastical and realistic elements in the valley that he visits, and after seeing them performed by the landscape that surrounds him, Lochner abandons his journalistic fervour for unearthing the truth and admits to himself that those elements have made him what he now is: "Less than [he] was, or more" (368). Ruben, in *The Rights of Desire*, inverts Lochner's frustration with the lack of journalistic clarity in stories by regretting the presence of factuality, not fictionality, in the story of his life. But Ruben also experiences a transformation in his understanding of himself when confronted with the contradictions of language. Instead of providing the safe haven he has always longed for, his retreat into literature separates him from what he desires rather than allowing him to merge with it. Only when he acknowledges that "[t]here is a world outside ... which requires me and strangely concerns me" (306), can he experience South Africa, and being South African, as something more than an abstraction, keeping his desire intact. Finally, Cupido proves in *Praying Mantis* that the barrenness of the land harbours the richness and complexity of the story of who he is. The dawning of this realization releases Cupido from his exile in the desert, and closes the novel on a hopeful note as he moves forward on a cart. "[I]t does not seem to grow dark," he observes, because "high above streaks the star, its dazzling course showing them where to go" (275).

The existentialist resignation to oppression as displayed by Joseph Malan makes way for hopefulness of a joint South African future in these later novels, conceived in relation to a change in the understanding of language. Brink's later narrators play with language, with contradictions and impossibilities. In contrast, Malan has no access to words, and therefore no access to hope. He is an actor, who uses the words of others, and who regrets not being able to use his own in private as well as public. He is scolded by his lover for addressing her with quotes, making her unsure as to

whether she is making love to him or to John Donne. When he stands on trial for murder and is expected to relate the transpired events “in his own words,” he fails to do so. Malan’s triumph comes in the form of death, a fate that, he believes, does not make him a “victim of [his] history,” because he willingly abandons himself to it, finding release in the termination of oppression (393). He remains “dark” in that the “invisible opponent that watches us day and night...with diabolical finesse” (366) fails to get the better of him. Yet, he can appreciate darkness only as a way of ending his fate, not as the start of something new.

In contrast, Brink’s post-1991 works envision a new way of being South African. While the apartheid-era protagonists were pictured as tragic heroes fighting an invincible evil, the end of apartheid sees a new type of protagonist in Brink’s work, one who questions his or her identity in a manner that is playful and dialogic. In this way, these works reflect the process of imagining a new kind of identity for the non-literary South Africa as well.

After all, not only literary language forms a contentious issue in debates on South Africa, but language as a medium of communication as well. My choice for Brink’s English-language novels is by no means an accident in this respect. Although South Africa has eleven official languages, English assumes an almost hegemonic position in South Africa. The use of English is a central political issue, not least because of its perception as perpetuating a neo-colonial ideology. English is set up as a neutral and transparent medium of communication, supposedly available to all. Yet, the use of a language within a country has a great impact on representations of public space and national identity. In this sense, English carries great symbolic weight. I believe it important to weigh that acknowledged problem against that of the use of language as a critical resource. Becoming sensitive to how the English language is deployed in literature, and in Brink’s work specifically, can be a means of decolonising language, and, by extension, decolonising the people who speak it. The form that English has taken in Brink’s novels draws attention to the institutional and colonial logic of the language, setting up alternative narratives that facilitate postcolonial agency. Brink’s novels confront the language with its past, and try to do away with notions of idealised purity or correctness.

The purity of the ideal community, put to the fore in *Devil’s Valley*, for example, is repeatedly undercut in Brink’s novels. The aesthetic variations that the Devil’s Valley community displays (women having four breasts, men no arms, grandmothers looking like owls) ridicule the purity that that community enshrines. In the same way, *Imaginings of Sand* criticizes the notion of an unambiguous and comprehensive South African historiography, making the case for overlapping histories instead. More than making a case for tolerating diversity, all the novels emphasise the need for embracing contradiction; contradiction no longer seen as a perpetrator of divisions and social

stratification. Through literary imaginings, authors like Brink help discard the unhelpful fatalism of apartheid-era writing in favour of an anticipation of the future.

Summary

The main aim of this dissertation is to research how “South African-ness” is conceived of after apartheid in (a specific corpus of) the contemporary literature of the country. My first hypothesis in researching this issue is that the country’s history, both official (in terms of historiographical records) and unofficial (in terms of personal memories), is mobilised in current literary explorations of what it means to be South African. A second hypothesis is that literature is an appropriate medium for exploring such questions.

In my introduction, I explain that debates on cultural identity are reflected in both the country’s political and cultural initiatives, which is why South African literature can be seen as a participant in the country’s power debate. Initiatives such as the apartheid-era Publications Advisory Board, which acknowledged the political power of literature by banning certain works; and the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which empowered personal memories and published memoirs; comprise only some of the examples that make apparent this intersection between politics and literature.

I also make clear in my introduction that the way in which I initiated my investigation into this topic, was, first, to select an identifiable body of fictional work in which a dialogue with the past is produced to these specific ends, and secondly, confirm that this body of work embodies what I interpret as the South African predicament of a simultaneous need for reconstructing *and* deconstructing national identity. Reconstruction, because the imbalances caused by the previous separation of population groups need to be redressed, and deconstruction, because any attempt at restoration needs to beware of merely substituting one form of dominance for another. I have chosen the later work of André Brink because it is here that I encounter the manifestation of both aspects of this dilemma. By looking at six different post-apartheid works by Brink, each engaging a protagonist that exhibits different sides of the South African identity conundrum, I examine what South African identity is made to “look like” in these literary products.

In my first chapter, I take a closer look at Brink’s 1991 *On the Contrary*, where an eighteenth-century Frenchman, Etienne Barbier, becomes one of the Cape Colony’s first residents, *and* one of its first prisoners. I show how *On the Contrary* plays with conceptions of authority and identity by focusing on the impossibilities forwarded by text. One way in which it does this is by drawing the reader’s attention to the fact that Barbier’s narrative is not what it seems. Nothing about the narrative in *On the Contrary* is “straight”. Barbier’s account is filled with so many contradictions and impossibilities that it becomes unfeasible for the reader to distil the truth from all the various versions of events with which the reader is presented. In *On the Contrary*, the reader is presented with the idea that the language of force used in response to a land that seems alien, and

that remains infuriatingly unyielding, fails to establish an identification between self and place. The assumption of an interdependence between language and authority proves unproductive in the search for a complete and consistent narrative of identity. Via Brink's narrator, it is suggested that is precisely the willingness to forgo a definition of the landscape that can prove an asset in identifying with it. I therefore offer that the novel's destabilisation of the connection between language and authority informs the larger narration of identity and race in public dialogues in contemporary South Africa.

In the second chapter, Brink's 1996 novel *Imaginings of Sand* allows me to explore a different aspect of post-Apartheid identity. One of its protagonists, Kristien, is a South African who left the country during the Apartheid years and struggles to recognise the country, and herself as South African, after she returns to it. In my examination of this novel, I choose to pick up on its use of Gothic motifs and interpret these as a representation of the uneasiness with the past in terms of the anxieties of Gothic fiction. I set out to demonstrate that such a use of Gothic sensibilities puts forward the proposition that the confrontation with South Africa's past, as a confrontation with suppressed angst, can lead to a cathartic resolution, as happens in the Gothic. I first look at how the novel's characters, in the throes of the fears and suspicions surrounding the 1994 elections, exhibit an unwillingness to relinquish the division employed during the apartheid era because they fear a loss of control, and link it to the self-destruction that the Gothic novel predicts in the case of such incapacity. I then discuss how the use of Gothic motifs, such as the past "haunting" the present and the "liminal" as a space of uncertainty and apprehension that marks the transition from one state to the next, sees the novel insinuate that South Africa's dreadful historical legacy can be overcome by reengaging with the past.

In the third chapter, I consider how the 1993 *The First Life of Adamastor* allows us to consider contemporary South African identity by imagining the country's pre-colonial past. I argue that, in an attempt to grasp the complexity of the country's history, this novel makes a statement about the tangled nature of South African identity today, and that it does so through the integration of ludicrous stereotypes and obvious fallacies. I read its descriptions of the first recorded contact between Europeans and South Africa's early inhabitants (dating to the fifteenth-century Portuguese voyages of exploration) as a self-conscious comment on its own *Western* nature and character, and I argue that its use of exaggeration and stereotypes in making its characters come to life, comprises a critical comment on the shortcoming of a purely Western understanding of South African identity. I extend my preposition by framing these shortcomings in terms of forms of "contact" offered by the novel, which I analyse for their metaphorical reach and conceptual potential. These instances of contact take the form of contact between the Khoi male protagonist and his Portuguese female love-interest; between the reader and the novel's various narrators; and between the various

(literary) texts that make up the source material for the story. Again, I conclude that these contradicting and overlapping narratives of contact make a statement about the logic of binaries as useless and unproductive in characterising South African-ness.

In my fourth chapter, on *Devil's Valley* (1998), I explore how the novel's depiction of an isolated community of valley inhabitants, severely conservative and unaffected by modernity, is linked to a vision of South Africa as a nation that inevitably continues to bear the marks of its repressive history. In this chapter, I read the novel's descriptions of a revisiting past as a feature of Todorov's fantastic, in that it situates itself somewhere between the real and the improbable. I examine some of the features that suggest the fantastic in this novel, and link them to a treatment of the concept of "silence". I argue that the fantastic offers the capacity to point out the possibilities for hearing and seeing that which was silenced in South Africa's history. I contend that *Devil's Valley*, in the way that it makes use of fantastic motifs, points both to the danger of dismissing the past, as this makes true progress impossible, and to that of replacing the past, as the mere recovery of a silenced past does not guarantee a retrieval of human dignity. In this sense, the uncertainty provided by a literature of the fantastic does justice to past silences as a necessary condition for being able to live in the present.

In the fifth chapter of my dissertation, I look at the way in which *The Rights of Desire* (2000) expresses the need for identity transformation in a post apartheid age by utilising a protagonist that represents those erstwhile custodians of apartheid, white South African males. I propose that this novel complicates the process of re-defining a national identity in the present era by looking at the precarious relationship that Ruben Olivier, its central character, has with his country. The form that this complication takes, I argue, is that of a perpetual frustration of desire. I read this frustration as taking place in the realm of language, because the detachment that Ruben feels from words that he reads and language that he uses, is seen to impact on his conceptualisation of himself as a South African among fellow South Africans. In examining this phenomenon, I make use of Julia Kristeva's concept of poetic language, relating Ruben's estrangement from words and concept to his inability to recognise the translinguistic elements of language: the excess produced by text that cannot be equated with language's symbolic functions, although it does contribute to its significance. Both Kristeva's ideas and the structure of the novel lead me to read these excesses as "ghosts," elements that escape substantiality but nevertheless provoke an effect. By extending this idea of the ghost to an analogy with South Africa's history as the spirit that haunts present-day identity, I conclude that Ruben's desire for the excess, and for the "ghost" of language, is a desire for engagement and an aspiration to "belong" to a South African community.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I consider the significance of the unusual focalisation of *Praying Mantis* (2006), which is characterized by a marked shift in worldview and reads

somewhat like a fairytale or dreamscape. I argue that the novel, by means of both its structure and its contents, invites us to understand itself as a myth that develops performatively, and I propose that this invitation simultaneously proposes a disabling of the opposition between African mythology and Western rationality. On examining the narrative approaches it employs, I deduce that, rather than presenting us with Khoi mythology in a way that makes it appear “exotic,” the novel makes the mythology of the West seem “exotic”. In this way, I interpret the concerns of the novel as conflating with Robert Young’s notion of a “white mythology” (after Derrida).

In this way I read *Praying Mantis* as a narrative that tells the story, not so much of South Africa’s past, as of a future South Africa that is empowered to refuse to make white its truth and, instead, is able to embrace the complexity of its history.

In my conclusion, I return to this refusal “to make white”. The realisation that South African identity is not just defined by one’s pedigree, but by the experience of encountering other South Africans that refuse to be subsumed into your definitions, is what I see as a valuable notion whose complexity could only receive fair treatment within the realms of literature. Mostly because this experience admits to the dependence, and therefore the vulnerability, that being a South African among South Africans brings. Such an admission has previously proven too uncomfortable to engender anything but antagonism in the country’s past, which is why I appreciate the post-Apartheid works of André Brink as a safe, yet relentless haven for those ideas that are able to inform our understanding of South African national identity.

Samenvatting

Het doel van dit onderzoek is om na te gaan welk beeld weergegeven wordt van de Zuid-Afrikaanse identiteit na apartheid in (een beperkt corpus van) de hedendaagse Zuid-Afrikaanse literatuur. De eerste veronderstelling die ik daarbij maak, is dat deze weergave van het “Zuid-Afrikaans-zijn” samenhangt met een bepaalde interpretatie van de geschiedenis van het land – of dat nu de officiële geschiedschrijving, of het aanhalen van persoonlijke herinneringen betreft. De tweede veronderstelling die ik gebruik, is dat de literatuur een toepasselijk medium is bij een onderzoek naar de complexiteit van nationale identiteit.

In de inleiding van mijn proefschrift leg ik uit dat in Zuid-Afrika het debat omtrent een nieuwe, verenigde nationaliteit plaatsvindt in zowel politieke, als in culturele uitingen. Hierdoor kan de literatuur van het land ook gezien worden als een deelnemer aan deze discussie. Oude initiatieven zoals de Adviesraad voor Publicaties, die literaire werken de status gaven van politiek invloedrijke stukken door ze te verbannen; en nieuwe initiatieven zoals de Waarheidscommissie, die persoonlijke herinneringen en memoires deel lieten nemen in de politieke afwikkeling van de nalatenschap van apartheid; zijn maar een paar van de voorbeelden die dit verband tussen literatuur en politiek duidelijk weergeven.

Verder verduidelijk ik in mijn inleiding dat ik ben begonnen met mijn onderzoek naar dit onderwerp door een literair corpus af te bakenen. Ik zocht daarbij naar werken die de dialoog met de geschiedenis aangingen *en* die mijn interpretatie van het Zuid-Afrikaanse dilemma belichaamden – namelijk, de behoefte aan een gelijktijdige reconstructie en deconstructie van nationale identiteit. Reconstructie, omdat de vroegere imbalans tussen bevolkingsgroepen moet verdwijnen, en deconstructie, omdat het vervangen van de ene eenzijdige definitie van wat het betekent “Zuid-Afrikaans” te zijn door een tweede geen oplossing biedt. Ik heb voor zes van de latere werken van André Brink gekozen omdat deze volgens mij voldoende aandacht schonken aan deze twee aspecten van het dilemma, en het is in deze werken dat ik bestudeerde hoe Zuid-Afrikanen gerepresenteerd zijn in de hedendaagse literatuur.

In mijn eerste hoofdstuk kijk ik naar Brinks roman uit 1991, *On the Contrary*. In dit verhaal, dat zich afspeelt in de achttiende eeuw, staat een Fransman, Etienne Barbier, centraal. Barbier reist af naar de Kaap kolonie en wordt er één van de eerste Europese inwoners, en later ook één van de eerste gevangenen. In dit hoofdstuk laat ik zien hoe de roman speelt met de verhouding tussen identiteit en autoriteit door nadruk te leggen op de onmogelijkheid van iets vastleggen in tekst. Ik benadruk dat de lezer constant gewezen wordt op de tegenstrijdigheden van Barbiers verhaal, waardoor het verkrijgen van een duidelijk beeld van gebeurtenissen de lezer uiteindelijk onmogelijk gemaakt wordt. Ik stel voor dat het destabiliseren van de autoriteit van een tekst zoals het in dit

boek gebeurt, bijdraagt aan de wijdere discussie rondom identiteit. Ik lees daarbij de roman als een commentaar op het gebruik van forserende, autoritaire taal in reactie op een land dat vreemd en ontoegeeflijk is, als nutteloos in het bewerkstelligen van een identificatie tussen zelf en plaats. Dit laat zien dat de veronderstelling dat taal ook op het onbeschrijfbaar macht kan uitoefenen vals is, en nutteloos in een zoektocht naar nationale identificatie. Mijn interpretatie van de uiteindelijke conclusie, getrokken door Barbier, is dat juist het loslaten van die behoefte aan controle identificatie mogelijk maakt.

In het tweede hoofdstuk geeft Brinks roman uit 1996, *Imaginings of Sands*, mij de kans een ander aspect van de verwickelingen rond Zuid-Afrikaanse identiteit te belichten – namelijk dat van de geemigreerde Zuid Afrikaan die na de val van Apartheid terugkeert en zowel haar land, als zichzelf als “Zuid-Afrikaanse,” niet meer terug herkend. De gebeurtenissen in *Imaginings of Sands* vinden plaats ten tijde van de eerste vrije verkiezingen van 1994, die twee periodes (apartheid en post-apartheid) scheidden. In het bestuderen van het verhaal koos ik ervoor het gebruik van *Gothic* motieven in de roman te interpreteren als een indicatie van *Gothic* besef over, bijvoorbeeld, de voortdurende invloed van het verleden op het heden; en de “liminale” (overgangs-) ruimte tussen twee eenheden als één van talloze onzekerheden maar ook van nieuwe mogelijkheden. Ik kijk eerst naar hoe de beschrijvingen een beeld geven van de angst die toeslaat als de heldere scheidingslijnen aangebracht door het apartheidsbewind losgelaten moeten worden. Ik onderzoek hoe dit samenhangt met de angst voor zelfverlies, en beschrijf dan hoe de *Gothic* belichting van deze angst door de roman de mogelijkheid tot een cathartische, gelukkige uitkomst aanwijst.

In het derde hoofdstuk kijk ik hoe *The First Life of Adamastor*, uitgebracht in 1993, een brug slaat tussen vragen rondom Zuid Afrikaanse nationale identiteit en het pre-koloniale verleden van het land. Ik leg me vooral toe op het gebruik van belachelijke veronderstellingen en uitvergrootte stereotypen in de roman, en interpreteer die als commentaar op de Westerse belichting van het “eerste contact” tussen Europeanen en inheemse Zuid Afrikanen in de vijftiende eeuw. Ik stel dat de zelfbewustheid van de roman als Westers, en als postmodern, deze interpretatie in de hand werkt. Door de beschrijving van het eerste contact in de roman te lezen als ook een geval van contact tussen verschillende (mythologische en oorsprongs-)teksten en van contact tussen de lezer en de verschillende vertellers, zie ik de roman als pleiten voor de nutteloosheid van binaire denkwijzen als het gaat om het begrijpen van Zuid Afrikaanse identiteit.

In mijn vierde hoofdstuk kijk ik naar *Devil's Valley* uit 1998, en verbind ik de beschrijving van een groep valleibewoners die, afgesloten van de rest van de wereld nog volgens oude, kerkelijke en conservatieve principes leven, met het idee van Zuid Afrika als een land dat noodgedwongen ook nog steeds de kenmerken draagt van haar repressieve verleden. De historische motieven in de roman lees ik in termen van Todorovs concept van het “fantastische,” dat ergens

tussen het verklaarbare werkelijke en het onverklaarbare magische inligt. Ik kijk in detail naar een aantal van deze gevallen van het fantastische, waar nog het één, nog het ander in de roman bevestigd wordt, en zie deze dan weer als weergaven van verschillende soorten “stiltes” of leemtes waar de Zuid Afrikaanse geschiedenis rijk aan is. Ik beargumenteer dat *Devil's Valley*, in de manier waarop het deze thema's bewerkt, waarschuwt tegen zowel het verdringen van het verleden, omdat dit voortgang onmogelijk maakt, als de terugkeer naar het verleden, omdat het oprakelen van een pijnlijk verleden op zichzelf niet afdoende is voor de teruggave van menselijke waardigheid.

In het vijfde hoofdstuk van mijn proefschrift kijk ik naar de manier waarop *The Rights of Desire* (2000) uitdrukking geeft aan de behoefte voor verandering na de apartheidperiode door gebruik te maken van een hoofdpersonage afkomstig uit de groep die voorheen de machtshebbers van het apartheidsbewind vertegenwoordigde – blanke, Afrikaanssprekende mannen. Ik stel voor dat het hoofdpersonage van de roman, Ruben Olivier, een moeizame relatie heeft met zijn land van herkomst en met zijn mede-Zuid-Afrikanen, en dat deze relatie uitgebeeld wordt door de afstandelijkheid die hij voelt ten opzichte van de taal die hij gebruikt. In het bestuderen van dit fenomeen maak ik gebruik van Julia Kristeva's concept van *semiotics* – de onderdelen van taal die buiten het symbolische en inhoudelijke staan, maar het gezegde niettemin betekenis geven. Ik interpreteer Rubens verlangen naar een betekenisvolle taal als een verlangen naar deze semiotische elementen, die zich niet laten vangen in het keurslijf van grammatica en die, naar mijn mening, een verlangen naar deelname in een ongecodeerde Zuid-Afrikaanse ervaring vertegenwoordigen.

In mijn laatste hoofdstuk bestudeer ik de ongebruikelijke focalisatie van *Praying Mantis* van 2006 – één die afwijkt van de andere romans en meer weg heeft van een mythe dan een roman. Ik stel dat de structuur en inhoud van deze roman, gefocaliseerd door een Khoi hoofdpersoon, de tegenstelling tussen Westers ratio en Afrikaanse mythologie ondermijnt ten gunste van een Afrikaanse visie op gebeurtnissen. Dit gebeurt, beargumenteer ik, door het Westerse “vreemd” en exotisch te maken, en zo een *white mythology* te creëren - naar het evenbeeld van Jacques Derrida (en, na hem, Robert Young). Op deze manier leest *Praying Mantis* als het verhaal, niet over een Zuid-Afrikaans verleden, maar over een toekomst die de complexiteit van haar geschiedenis omarmt zonder poging het “blank” te maken.

In de conclusie van mijn proefschrift kom ik terug op het concept van een *white mythology*. Het besef dat de Zuid-Afrikaanse identiteit niet alleen bepaald wordt door afkomst, maar door de ervaringen van mede-Zuid-Afrikanen die niet ondergebracht kunnen worden in eigen ideeën en ervaringen, zie ik als een belangrijke bijdrage aan het debat omtrent nationale identiteit in Zuid-Afrika – en tevens één die nergens anders behalve in de literatuur van het land onderzocht kan worden met behoud van gewicht en complexiteit.

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