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### Writing history : national identity in André Brink's post-apartheid fiction

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## 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?”<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

*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.”<sup>15</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>15</sup> 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 iudicio" (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.<sup>16</sup> 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,

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<sup>16</sup> 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 are 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.<sup>17</sup>

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

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<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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

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<sup>18</sup> 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:<sup>19</sup>

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".<sup>20</sup> 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"

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<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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).<sup>21</sup>

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

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<sup>21</sup> “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 *Imaginings 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.