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

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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 *Imaginations of Sand* is entitled "The House of Usher", and refers to the famous haunted house story written by Edgar Allen 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. *Imaginations 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*.