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

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

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

The First Life of Adamastor (62)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁹ See Kohn, 2006.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Invoking the Reader: Contact between Narrative and Reader

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

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

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

The framing narrator opens and closes the novel with an account that provides a context for the narrative and enfold the story proper. This narrator definitely but almost imperceptibly sets himself up as an authoritative voice on the opening page of Brink's novel. Words such as "formula," "narrative forms," "tradition" and "genealogy" ease the reader into the story of Adamastor, and appear to set up a type of theoretical justification for what is to follow. The opening paragraph, punctuated by qualifications such as "I believe" ("An old Spanish tradition, I believe...") and "to my knowledge" ("Rabelais, to my knowledge the first to introduce Adamastor in a story...,"¹) is marked by the distinct impression that the reader has been sat down to learn the contextual history from an authority on the subject.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Intersecting Miscegenation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Miscegenating the Nation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion: Opening up National Identity from the Landward Side

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

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

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

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

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

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