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

Lourens, S.T.

Publication date
2009

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Lourens, S. T. (2009). *Writing history : national identity in André Brink's post-apartheid fiction*.

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Summary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

somewhat like a fairytale or dreamscape. I argue that the novel, by means of both its structure and its contents, invites us to understand itself as a myth that develops performatively, and I propose that this invitation simultaneously proposes a disabling of the opposition between African mythology and Western rationality. On examining the narrative approaches it employs, I deduce that, rather than presenting us with Khoi mythology in a way that makes it appear “exotic,” the novel makes the mythology of the West seem “exotic”. In this way, I interpret the concerns of the novel as conflating with Robert Young’s notion of a “white mythology” (after Derrida). In this way I read *Praying Mantis* as a narrative that tells the story, not so much of South Africa’s past, as of a future South Africa that is empowered to refuse to make white its truth and, instead, is able to embrace the complexity of its history.

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