South African White Identity in André Brink's *The Rights of Desire* and *Imaginings of Sand*

University of Tampere
School of Modern Languages and Translation Studies
English Philology
Pro Gradu Thesis
Autumn 2006
Anna Tuusa

Tutkielmani tarkastelee valkoisuutta ja valkoista identiteettiä apartheidin jälkeisessä Etelä-Afrikassa kahden André Brinkin romaanin, *The Rights of Desire* (2001, suom. *Intohimon oikeudet*) ja *Imaginings of Sand* (1996, suom. *Hiekkalinna*), kautta. Mille valkoinen identiteetti rakentui apartheidin aikana, ja kuinka se on muuttunut 1990-luvulla tapahtuneen apartheid-koneiston purkamisen jälkeen? *Onko* se muuttunut? Kuinka kolonialistinen menneisyys vaikuttaa nykyiseen ajatteluun valkoisuudesta Etelä-Afrikassa?

Teoriakappaleessa tarkastelen, kuinka identiteetti rakentuu, mitkä ovat keskeisiä identiteetin määrittäjiä, ja millä eri tavoin sitä on teoretisoitu historiallisesti. Analyysini lähtökohtana on käsitys identiteetistä tiedostamattomasti vuorovaikutuksen kautta rakentuvana. Rakennamme itsellemme identiteetin narratiivien kautta, ja identiteettimme on yhtenäinen siitä huolimatta, että saatamme identifioitua eri aikoina täysin vastakkaisiinkin ajatuksiin. Tärkeimpiä identifioitumisen kohteita ovat kansallinen kulttuuri ja rotu. Molemmilla on Etelä-Afrikassa ollut keskeinen merkitys ihmisten välisten suhteiden säätelijänä, sillä apartheidin aikana valtio määräsi ihmisten identiteetistä ihonvärin ja kansallisuuden perusteella.

Valkoisuutta ei historiallisesti ole nähty rotuna, vaan valkoisen miehen on katsottu edustavan koko ihmiskuntaa. Tämä etuoikeutetun aseman näkymättömyys on vahvistanut valkoisten valtaa, samoin kuin se, että valkoiseen ihonväriin ja sitä kautta "valkoisiin" ihmisiin on liitetty ominaisuuksia kuten hyvyys, kauneus, puhtaus ja viattomuus. Etelä-Afrikassa jako valkoisiin ja ei-valkoisiin vietiin äärimmilleen apartheid-politiikassa. Myös toinen keskeinen identiteetin määrittäjä, kansallisuus, oli osallisena Etelä-Afrikan tilanteeseen. Afrikaanerit ovat koko historiansa ajan kokeneet olevansa uhattuina, ja säilyttääkseen identiteettinsä mobilisoineet kaikki voimavarat kansallisen yhtenäisyyden ylläpitämiseen. Koska uhka oman kansan katoamisesta koettiin suureksi, poikkeamia kollektiivisesta Afrikaanereiden identiteetistä ei katsottu hyvällä.

André Brink tuo romaaneissaan esille vaihtoehtoja dominoivalle, ylhäältä sanellulle Afrikaaneri-identiteetille. Kumpikaan romaanien päähenkilöistä ei mukaudu stereotyyppiseen kuvaan Afrikaanerista: Ruben Olivier on lukutoukka, tyytyväinen omassa maailmassaan kirjojen keskellä; Kristien Müller taas toivoo elämältään muutakin kuin miehen ja lapsia, hän haluaa olla osallisena maansa historiassa, ei vain sivustakatsojana. Ruben on lähempänä vanhaa valkoisen identiteetin narratiivia, kun taas Kristien ponnistelee löytääkseen uusia tapoja olla valkoinen ja Afrikaaneri Etelä-Afrikassa.

Brink käsittelee romaaneissaan myös Afrikaanereiden historiaa, ja kyseenalaistaa siitä kerrotut tarinat. Hän käyttää aaveita ja kummittelua välineenä, jonka kautta päähenkilöt löytävät uusia näkökulmia historiaansa ja uusia tapoja tarkastella valkoisuutta Etelä-Afrikassa

Asiasanat: Brink, Etelä-Afrikka, identiteetti, rotu, valkoisuus

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

1.1 Brink & Literature

Most people, when asked to name South African writers, know at least some white ones, such as J.M.Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer or André Brink. Given the country's history of apartheid, it is perhaps not surprising that no black writers come to mind. However, there are several who have long careers and are internationally recognized, such as Esk'ia Mphalele, Mongane Wally Serote and Lewis Nkosi; but, even though they write in English, their work is not known in the West, except in the specialist circles. The view of South Africa we acquire is therefore predominantly white, and the issues and problems raised up are concerns of the white population of the country.

This is also the only view of their country most white South Africans had until very recently. They were sheltered from the apartheid atrocities by the state, and many either did not know, or did not *want* to know how the majority of the population lived. Therefore the change of power, which took place officially in the 1994 elections, has brought major shocks. Many whites have guilty consciousness, and they are aware that the majority of the population was treated abominably; expectations of revenge or just a heightened sense of insecurity are what the whites are experiencing right now. Frantz Fanon thinks this is a common phenomenon among colonists: "Since the white man behaves in an offensive manner toward the Negro [sic], he recognizes that in the Negro's place he would have no mercy on his suppressors."[1]

In this light, I propose to investigate André Brink's representation of white identity in his novels *Imaginings of Sand* (1996) and *The Rights of Desire* (2000).

---

[1] Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks* (United Kingdom: Pluto Press, 1986) 177.

What was white identity built on? How has it changed since the fall of apartheid and change of power in the early 1990s? *Has* it changed? Does the colonial past affect the way white identity is now being thought of? It has been over a decade since the first democratic elections in South Africa and fifteen years since the racial laws were abolished in 1990. I believe sufficient time has passed for political and social changes to cause changes in identities, and for those to be translated into literature.

White population in South Africa is usually divided into two groups, Afrikaners and the English-speaking population.[2] I will mostly look at Afrikaner identity, because they were the ones in power during the apartheid era. This does not mean that the rest of the whites were uninvolved (even though they might like to think so), but that the blame of the past atrocities is mostly laid on Afrikaners. Also, Afrikaners are more clearly a unified group, and therefore it will be easier to analyse them as a group than the more varied white English-speaking population. Thus, when speaking of 'whites' in South Africa, I will be speaking of Afrikaners, unless otherwise noted.

In South Africa, literature has taken an active part in revealing the atrocities of apartheid and also in offering different interpretations of what whites and Afrikaners should and could be. Especially André Brink has been labelled a 'dissident' writer[3]; he has been continuously challenging "his own Afrikaner colonial background, questioning assumed perceptions of the right to rule and of Afrikaner values"[4], and therefore I believe his fiction might offer representations of the changes that have taken place in the Afrikaner identity since the fall of apartheid. He often

---

[2] Some Afrikaners do speak English as their mother tongue, but are still considered as, and see themselves as Afrikaners. Afrikaners descend from the early Dutch, German and French settlers in South Africa, whereas the English-speaking whites are mostly of British origin.

[3] See, for example, Kossew, Sue, *Pen and Power: A Post- Colonial Reading of J.M. Coetzee and André Brink* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) 5.

[4] Kossew 6.

2

explores outsiders,[5] Afrikaners who go against their upbringing and the apartheid society, and it might therefore be expected that he would describe whites differing from the old apartheid identity also after the change of power in South Africa.

My analysis will concentrate on Brink's *The Rights of Desire* (2000). In addition, I will also take some examples from his earlier novel, *Imaginings of Sand* (1996), although mostly to contrast with or emphasize what has been found through the analysis of *The Rights of Desire*. Race relations are not the theme or central issue in either of them, but I believe they are still worth looking at from the racial point of view. As Richard Dyer says,

> to focus exclusively on those texts that are 'about' racial difference and interaction risks giving the impression that whiteness is only white, or only matters, when it is explicitly set against non-white, whereas whiteness reproduces itself as whiteness in all texts all of the time. ... [W]hiteness is of course always already predicated on racial difference, interaction and domination, but that is true of all texts, not just those that take such matters as their explicit subject matter. ... The point is to see the specificity of whiteness, even when the text itself is not trying to show it to you, doesn't even know that it is there to be shown. [6]

I believe these two novels to be well suited to analysing possible changes in white identity, since both of them have central characters somehow re-evaluating their past and the legacy of apartheid and past generations. In *The Rights of Desire*, Ruben Olivier goes through his life, decisions and the past of his house. He is a former librarian who has been forced to retire from his employment and has been replaced by a young black man. His wife long since dead, his one son living in Australia, the other about to relocate to Canada, and his only friend killed by a burglar, he falls passionately in love with his young lodger, Tessa Butler. During this rather peculiar

---

[5]   Meintjes, Godfrey, "A Chain of African Voices: The Prose Oeuvre of André P. Brink," *New Writing from South Africa: Authors Who Have Become Prominent Since 1980*, ed. Ngara, Emmanuel (London: James Currey, 1996) 5.
[6]   Dyer, Richard, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997) 13-14.

affair, he rethinks his life and confronts the personal ghosts rising from it. Aside from those, he has a 'real' ghost in his house, a slave girl, Antje of Bengal, who was killed after a trial on her mistress's murder in the eighteenth century. Antje is a symbol for the atrocities that took place under the colonial rule of the British, and later under the apartheid regime of the Afrikaners, and she has to be recognized in order for the past to be laid to rest. Tessa, the target of Ruben's passion, is also interesting in terms of identity: she seems to continually reinvent herself – the stories she tells about her parents vary from telling to telling, and she invents new identities to both herself and Ruben when they meet new people.

In *Imaginings of Sand*, Kristien Müller returns to South Africa after living in London for years. The reason for the return is her grandmother who is dying. She tells Kristien stories about their ancestors; stories, not history, because they blur myths with reality, and the historical time seems to be shifting as the grandmother's stories develop. In the background of the stories about her family, South Africa is approaching the first democratic elections and the tension between blacks and whites is high.

South African literature is now, at the turn of the twentieth century, going through a period of self-(re)definition. Under the apartheid, there was no such thing as *South African* literature; instead, along with every other aspect of life in the country, literature was divided according to racial and ethnic lines: literatures in Afrikaans, English, Xhosa, Zulu and so on. Since South African nation was synonymous with the ambitions of the Afrikaner group, *national* literature was written only in Afrikaans, by Afrikaners.

Major themes in white South African writing in the first half of the twentieth century included the question of belonging to Africa and the appropriateness of using

the old language(s) to describe the new environment and experiences.[7] According to John F. Povey,[8] race emerged as the central issue in South African literature already in the 1920s. Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), appealing for Christian compassion and understanding, is perhaps the most widely-known of these earlier works. However, the more famous accounts of the apartheid situation come from the later period. When apartheid grew more and more oppressive, the writers had an increasingly grim view about the situation in the country and less hope for an easy solution.

After 1948,[9] white writers started to respond to the apartheid politics in a larger scale, although at this point they were mainly English-speaking. It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that Afrikaner writers started to express differing views to the official apartheid policy. The most influential group of Afrikaner writers of the period[10] were known as the "sestiger", or sixties, group, which included, among others, André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Jan Rabie and Etienne Leroux. They experimented on modernist ideas in writing, and brought up issues that had been taboos in earlier Afrikaner literature, such as sexual relationships and racial issues. Their earlier 'radicalism' concentrated mostly on textual form, but in the 1970s they moved to overtly political issues.

Many white writers felt that it was their duty to bring the apartheid reality into people's consciousness, since censorship made newspapers choose their content very carefully in order not to be banned. However, the political content of their work was not always a personal choice, and those who were considered not to fulfil their

---

[7]   Chapman, Michael, *Southern African Literatures* (London: Longman, 1996) 173.
[8]   Povey, John F., "English-Language Fiction from South Africa," *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures,* ed. Oyekan Owomoyela (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993) 86.
[9]   The year of the Afrikaner National Party electoral victory. After this, South Africa was led by Afrikaners. More of this in chapter 1.2.
[10]   Povey 91.

political or civic duty, were criticized. Nadine Gordimer, who has been seen as the "artistic conscience" of South Africa,[11] started her career in the 1950s, and already her early works show awareness of the racial realities of the country. In the 1960s her novels are more or less direct social documents of everyday radicalised reality in South Africa, and the effects of political commitment in the family are a recurrent theme.[12] J.M. Coetzee is less obvious in his criticism, but, according to Chapman,[13] his novels, nevertheless, attack forms of imperial power through deconstructive readings of South African myths. Despite this, he has been criticized of ignoring the South African reality.

André Brink complained in 1971 that "No Afrikaans writer has yet tried to offer a serious political challenge to the system,"[14] and proceeded to do so himself. His novel *Kennis van die Aand* (*Looking on Darkness*, 1974) was the first book in Afrikaans to be banned, and as a consequence, he translated it to English himself. After that, he has used English to reach a wider audience, but continues to write in Afrikaans also. His books after *Looking on Darkness* are written simultaneously in Afrikaans and in English. As said earlier, he has been regarded as *the* dissident Afrikaner writer by some, although it has to be recognized that for example Coetzee is more valued by literary critics. However, Brink has in his books raised up important issues such as interracial relationships and the possibility of Afrikaners acting against apartheid.

Now, after the fall of apartheid in the first half of the 1990s, writers in South Africa have had to ask themselves what they are going to write about when bringing the apartheid reality into people's consciousness is no longer needed. Many have a

[11] Chapman 386.
[12] Ibid. 394.
[13] Ibid. 388.
[14] Quoted in Chapman 402.

need to find a new direction, to "reinvent themselves" as writers.[15] The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)[16] has given inspiration to many, and South Africa has seen numerous autobiographical texts and pure autobiographies, both from whites and blacks, from victims of apartheid to members of South African police force. Autobiographical tradition is long in South Africa, and now it is used to justify the part people played in apartheid regime in the case of whites and to bring forth alternate views on history by both whites and blacks. But, as André Brink points out, the role of fiction is not only or purely to find out the 'truth' of the past, but to "[reach] well beyond facts … What is aimed at [in literature] is not a reproduction but an imagining",[17] an interpretation of the 'factual' through an individual's experience. To understand the racial relations and individual experiences in South Africa, some background is needed. Therefore I will next briefly go through the period of white presence in South Africa, concentrating especially on Afrikaners.

1.2 Historical context

First whites in South Africa were from the Dutch East India Company, who used Cape Coast as a refuelling station in 1650s. In 1806 the area came under British control. The government started a program of Anglicisation, which made some of the earlier settlers of Dutch, French and German origin – or Afrikaners, as they had begun to be called by then – leave the colony for inland. Their journey became known as the Great Trek, and it later formed one of the central myths of the history of the Afrikaner

---

[15] Davis, Geoffrey V., *Voices of Justice and Reason: Apartheid and Beyond in South African Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003) 281.

[16] TRC was set up to investigate the human rights violations in the apartheid era, and it set out to get as full a picture as possible. It heard witness testimonies from all involved, victims as well as those accused of human rights violations. Those who gave full account of what they had done were given amnesty.

[17] Brink, André, "Stories of history: reimagining the past in post-apartheid narrative," *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, eds. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998) 30.

people. The Trekkers founded two independent republics of their own, Transvaal in 1852 and Orange Free State in 1854. By this point, the original inhabitants of the area were brought under the control of whites. Slaves were imported from other African countries and from elsewhere and their descendants together with those of mixed origin later formed the coloured population of South Africa.

The discovery of diamonds and Gold in Transvaal demanded cheap labour, which was supplied by the native "tribes". Labourers were housed in closed barracks and were able to leave them only to work. Thus, "[e]mployers no longer had to fear that their workers would desert to others paying higher wages, and wages were therefore depressed."[18] This was an important step in disempowering the black population. After the discoveries of diamonds and gold, the British saw the development of the Boer republics[19] as a threat to their economic and political control over Southern Africa,[20] and this led to the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1901). The Afrikaners gradually lost the war, and in 1902 the British took over the Boer republics and turned them into the Transvaal and Orange River Colonies.

Now fully in control of the South African area, the British again started to anglicise the colonies and encouraged further settlement from England. Dutch was banned as a teaching language (Afrikaans was not taught at school yet). As a result of this and the defeat in the Anglo-Boer war, the Afrikaner political and cultural attitudes underwent a major change. The Second Afrikaans Language Movement was born to encourage the usage of Afrikaans and to create a more unified identity to the people.[21]

---

[18]   Ross, Robert, *A Concise History of South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 56.

[19]   'Boer' is another name for Afrikaners, but nowadays rarely in use except among those who want to keep 'the only indigenous white tribe of Africa' alive.

[20]   Ross 69.

[21]   Davenport, T.R.H. and Christopher Saunders, *South Africa: A Modern History* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000) 146. The first language movement took place in the early 1800s, as a result of

This movement created "[a] new Afrikaner nationalism … [among people] who were finding ways of explaining the defeat of the Republics in the war … To the extent that this was already seen as a threat, it had to be contained by incorporation, as far as possible, of those who had emerged as the leaders of the Afrikaners."[22] The four colonies in Southern Africa were incorporated into the Union of South Africa in 1910, and because the British wanted to diminish Afrikaner separatism, Afrikaners gained significant positions in the government.

The next important step in the ascendance of Afrikaners to power was the electoral victory of their National Party in 1948. The Party's slogan was apartheid, a combination of the earlier segregationist policies, but it was also a more institutionalised form of segregation. According to Ross,[23] the National Party saw the different nations of South Africa as God-created entities, and thought that they should be kept pure. This was the function of the state. There were laws concerning different entitlements of races already before the National Party victory, but after it South Africa produced an astonishing amount of legislation concerning race relations and the way people were supposed to act and where they could live and work. Everybody was allocated to a racial group, all future marriages between whites and other groups were made illegal and sex with a member of any other race was a serious crime, residential and business areas were reserved for particular race groups only, to give some examples of the areas of live dictated by the laws.

Black opposition started already in the nineteenth century, but the more effective protests begun in the 1950s. The African National Congress (ANC) is the most well-known instance of opposition to apartheid. Its membership included whites,

---

similar situation of forced Anglicization.
[22] Ross 81.
[23] Ross 116.

also Afrikaners, but it was for obvious reasons mostly a black movement. I will not go into the detail of the struggle here, just note that the apartheid state depressed most demands for change violently. The turning point came with the 1977 student demonstrations, which spread to the whole country. In the beginning, the government reacted with repression, but when the revolts went spasmodically on all over the country, they had to begin cautiously moving away from the strictest form of apartheid. During the 1980s, the government tried to reform the apartheid system in a way that would still keep its essential character. This did not work out, however, and due to continuous demonstrations and open violence, South Africa was under state of emergency legislation for most of the late 1980s.

When Frederic W. de Klerk came into power in 1989, he realized that the country had reached a checkmate. International pressure and sanctions, as well as internal pressure for reform influenced him to announce, on 2 February 1990, that the ANC and various other banned organizations were unbanned and that prisoners, among them the ANC leader Nelson Mandela, would be released. The Population Registration Act was repealed in 1991, which removed the possibility to deprive people of rights on the basis of racial classification. The ANC and the government started official negotiations about the change of power. Political violence still continued: in present-day KwaZulu-Natal, the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) of the Zulus fought over power, and right-wing Afrikaners all over the country opposed the negotiations. Despite this, an agreement on the interim constitution was reached in December 1993, and the first democratic elections were held in April 1994. The ANC won over 60 per cent of the votes and formed the government of national unity together with the National Party and the IFP, and Nelson Mandela was inaugurated president. The new government inherited deeply divided and troubled

society: social inequalities, deep-seated racism, violence, poverty. The jubilant mood of the elections and Mandela's inauguration soon changed when the slowness of the change became clear to the people.

After the change of power, many white South Africans have experienced a sense of alienation from the country, and especially Afrikaners feel that they have been marginalized and discriminated against. There is a general feeling among whites that the country is less secure, and that violence has increased. This is very likely due to the fact that whites are now exposed to the violence that the other parts of South African society had to live with already under apartheid. Affirmative action, which favours black workers over white and coloured, has caused whites to feel discriminated against. On the other hand, many whites are relieved to be able to have opinions contradictory to, or differing from, the Afrikaner establishment, and despite the initial threat of armed resistance, most have resigned to the changed reality. From this point of view the affirmative action is inevitable, because the apartheid system clearly privileged whites and something has to be done to change this.

Questions of race have been prominent throughout the South African history, as is obvious from the above. Under the apartheid rule, the overriding identity for all in South Africa was that of race or ethnicity. The state dictated very forcefully which race people belonged to and what they could do and have as members of that race. Other possible identifications, such as class, profession or gender were swallowed by the official division to black, coloured and white, and for example class did not really emerge as a uniting factor since it was so strictly tied to race. Whites were the owners and more skilled workers in businesses, while belonging to the other races automatically meant that people were non-skilled workers and mostly poor.

11

Despite this former preoccupation with race, white South Africans have recently been distinctly unwilling to talk about race as a social category, says Melissa Steyn.[24] She points out that

> if the structures of feeling that informed the old South African institutions are to be dismantled, an approach that takes cognizance of the long-term effects of colonialism and concomitant of racialization is essential. ... [W]hite South Africans cannot move forward unless they confront the extent to which their identities and personal expectations have been shaped through asymmetrical power relations, both internally within South Africa, and globally, through enmeshment within Western processes and ideologies. The construction of race has been used to skew this society over centuries. If we prematurely banish it from our analytical framework, we serve the narrow interests of those previously advantaged, by concealing the enduring need for redress. [25]

Finally, a note on terminology. I will be using the terms 'race', 'native', 'coloured', 'white' and 'black' throughout the thesis. This by no means implies that I stand behind the ideas and ideologies that have produced them, or that I acknowledge any truth in essentializing people according to their physical characteristics. The use of 'native' and 'coloured' is, I believe, justified in the South African context, because they are the terms that have been used in the country when describing parts of the population, and, in the case of 'coloured', are still used despite the negative connotations.[26]

---

[24] Steyn, Melissa E., *"Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be": White Identity in a Changing South Africa* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001)

[25] Steyn xxxii.

[26] The following insert might clarify the reasons why the 'coloured' population has opposed being called 'coloured'. These are definitions of the population groups according to the Population Registration Act of 1950:
"-A white person is one who in appearance is, or who is generally accepted as, a white person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a coloured person.
-A 'native' is a person who is in fact or is generally accepted as a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa
-A coloured person is a person *who is not a white person nor a native.*"
Quoted in Posel, Deborah, "Race as Common Sense: Racial Classification in Twentieth-Century

Thus, in my thesis I will look at representations of Afrikaner whiteness in André Brink's *The Rights of Desire* and *Imaginings of Sand*, and try to find possible changes or deviations from the identity which was prominent in the apartheid era. I will also examine the ways in which the colonial past affects the contemporary identities. The next part of the thesis will focus on theoretical issues. I will mostly use Stuart Hall and Benedict Anderson's ideas on identity and nationality. Richard Dyer's theorization on whiteness and Melissa Steyn's recent research on white identities in South Africa will clarify the way whites, in South Africa and elsewhere, have managed to achieve and keep their position of power and privilege. Collective white identity will be investigated in the light of Postcolonial Gothic and what it has to say about colonial haunting.

South Africa" (*African Studies Review*, Vol 44, No 2, Sept 2001) 102 (my emphasis).

2 Identity: How to define who you are?

Identity and nationality are central to postcolonial theory, but it might be less obvious why the third concept in this chapter, the Gothic, should be connected with it. Postcolonial theory and the Gothic, however, share the basic idea of disrupting established ideas; the haunting of the past or of that which is suppressed - a common theme in the Gothic – together with postcolonial ideas of acknowledging the past and giving voice to the suppressed, create various possibilities for discussing the effects of colonial domination on both the colonizer and the colonized. In this chapter I will, firstly, look at how identity is formed in general, and secondly, investigate in more detail two aspects of identity: nationality and race. I will mostly use Stuart Hall's and Benedict Anderson's ideas on identity and nationality, and Richard Dyer's and Melissa Steyn's on whiteness. Finally, I will examine the notion of postcolonial Gothic, and what it has to say about haunting and ghosts of the past.

Defining identity is not a simple thing. People can identify themselves on the basis of race, class, gender or nationality, to name but a few. These identifications can be interconnected, enforce each other, or even be in direct opposition to each other. Most researchers today agree that identity is a process, rather that a stable 'thing' and that it is constructed in interaction with others.[27] Some, like Stuart Hall,[28] believe that the old stable identities are in decline and being replaced by new plural identities and fragmentation of the unified subject. National identity is also in a similar situation; it

---

[27] See for example Irvin Emil Schick, quoted in Wolfreys, Julian (Ed.) *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), and Alcoff, Linda Martín "Introduction: Identities: Modern and Postmodern," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality,* eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta (Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003).

[28] Hall, Stuart, "The Question of Cultural Identity," *Modernity and its Futures,* eds. Stuart Hall and Tony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

is no longer clear that national identity can be seen as a unified block, common to all citizens. Instead, some see it as forced on the minorities by the ruling groups, and trying to suppress all differences.

According to Hall, there have been three central definitions of, or ways to theorize, the subject in Western history[29]: 'Enlightenment subject', 'Sociological subject' and 'Post-modern subject'. These trace the change from a unified and coherent identity to the dislocated identities of today. This is a simplified view of the changes in the conception of subject, but, as Hall argues, a justified simplification, because it highlights the changes that have taken place in the thinking.[30] Others, however, do not divide thinking on identity on such clear periods, but present the developments as more continuous.[31]

Thinking on what Hall calls the 'Enlightenment subject' emerges in the beginning of the modern period, when the idea of the sovereign individual was born. The individual subject was seen as an indivisible and unique entity, it had a centre, a stable identity, which he or she was born with, and which stayed the same throughout a person's life. This constituted a rational and, most importantly, conscious subject,

---

[29] In Hall's thinking, 'a subject' is something that has 'an identity'. However, the two terms are close; the inner core of the subject is synonymous with its identity, and thus the terms are almost interchangeable.

  There are also different notions of the relation between subject and identity. The following comes from Etienne Balibar: "There is identity only by and for subjects ... 'subject' is not just another word for identity (or self-identity) ... It seems to me that we can say that 'subject' is, first of all, a name for the possibility of assigning *a referent to the persons distinguished by the language*, thus of saying 'I', 'we' and 'they' in context. ... In this sense the question of identity is first of all posed in an entirely formal way, because 'I', 'we' and 'they' are *equivocal* expressions of subjective position ... , because the subject as such is originally *no more* 'I' than 'we' or 'they,' and can never be definitively attributed to any of these persons, but continually 'floats' or 'circulates' between them." (emphasis in the original)
"Culture and Identity (Working Notes)," *The Identity in Question*, ed. Rajchman, John (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 183.
In this thesis, I will follow Hall's usage, where 'subject' and 'identity' are almost synonyms.

[30] Hall 281.

[31] See for example Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, who divide their collection, *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality,* into two parts, the foundations and what came after. The first include thoughts from Hegel, Marx, Freud and George Herbert Mead, and the rest range from Frantz Fanon to Said, and from Simone de Bouvoir to Donna Haraway.

around which the processes of life centred.[32] Theory of the second of Hall's subjects, 'the Sociological subject', was created as a result of modern state and the more complex interactions and social contacts it created. In contrast to the Enlightenment theorizing on identity, sociological theory sees identity as not something in the person's essence that he or she is born with, but as formed in interaction with others. It does not stay the same for the whole of a person's life either, but people are still considered to have the inner core or essence that is 'the real me'. This type of thinking sees identity as being formed in the interaction between self and society, "in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds 'outside' and the identities which they offer."[33]

George Herbert Mead, who wrote at the turn of the twentieth century, wrote in this vein: "Selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves. ... The individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group."[34] Individuals take part in social relationships and are formed by them, and, on the other hand, sustain them by the roles they play in those social structures.[35] The idea of an 'orderly' core in humans is clear in Mead: he talks about "the organised self", "unity" and "structures of the self".

What was central in the individualist and social conceptions of identity was that they assumed that a person's identity was basically unified and that one's own identity was formed and stayed in the mind that was fully conscious and rational. This changed fundamentally with Freud. He argued that "a state of consciousness is

---

[32] Hall 281-283.
[33] Ibid. 276.
[34] Mead, George Herbert, "The Self," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta (Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003) 40.
[35] Hall 284.

characteristically very transitory,"[36] and that even the coherent organisation of mental processes – the ego – which had been thought to be the part of mind to which consciousness is attached, undoubtedly has parts that are unconscious.[37] Mead seems to be aware of Freud's discovery, but what is unconscious for him are the habits which are not consciously observed, but which still affect our behaviour.[38] Mead's unconscious, however, can also be thought consciously. Freud's unconscious is something that is repressed and *cannot become conscious* without great effort.[39] This has a fundamental meaning to a person's identity, and the idea is part of the wider changes in social theory which result in the third definition of the subject in Hall's list, 'the Post-modern subject'.

'The Post-modern subject' has no fixed or essential central core or identity, but is, instead, a composite of several even contradictory identities. There is no coherent 'self' which would stay the same throughout the person's life, although people construct a coherent story, 'narrative of the self', to feel more comfortable.

> Thus, [Hall argues] rather than speaking of identity as a finished thing, we should speak of identification, and see it as an ongoing process. Identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from the *lack* of wholeness which is 'filled' from *outside us*, by the ways we imagine ourselves as seen by *others*.[40]

Identity is formed, and gets its meaning only in contrast to others.[41] Ernesto Laclau states that not only are groups different, but that they construct this difference by

---

[36] Freud, Sigmund, "Consciousness and What is Unconscious," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta (Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003), 29.
[37] Freud 2003, 30-31.
[38] Mead 39. For example, we can sound joyous when speaking, but we do not consciously think what we have to do to achieve this.
[39] Freud 2003, 30.
[40] Hall 287 (emphasis in the original).
[41] See for example Hall 288.

exclusion of other groups.[42] However, the identity of an individual or a group is dependent on its other, it cannot exist without what it excludes and this other is therefore a part of its identity: "the subject is subject to, and of, others; in fact, it is often an 'Other' to others, which also affects its sense of its own subjectivity."[43]

All in all, it is recognized today that identity is formed in social interaction. What researchers do not agree on, however, is whether identity is continuous or whether it is de-centred and fragmented with no permanent core. In my analysis, I will use the idea of identity as something that cannot be consciously formulated; it is not rationally built, and there are unconscious aspects of our minds that affect the way we see each other and ourselves. We build a picture of ourselves that is coherent, even though the ideas we have about ourselves might be contradictory.

2.1 Nationality

People's identifications are often done in terms of cultural identity, and, according to Hall, one of its primary sources in modern world are national cultures.[44] This has not come about on its own, however, but it a result of "a good deal of rhetoric and not inconsiderable amount of blood"[45]; national identities were and are consciously built, and built so that allegiance to them seems natural and inevitable.

Modernity brought changes in society; there is no longer a clear centre from where all is controlled or regulated. Instead, "[l]ate-modern societies … are cut through by different social divisions and social antagonisms which produce a variety

---

[42] Laclau, Ernesto, "Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta (Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003) 363.

[43] Gagnier, Regina, quoted in Wolfreys.232.

[44] Hall 291.

[45] Poole, Ross, "National Identity and Citizenship," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta (Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003) 271.

of different 'subject positions' – i.e. identities – for individuals."[46] Societies can, at

points, be united, because the different identities can be "articulated together", but the

identification with a certain unified identity is always partial. Also other subject

positions affect a person's behaviour and his/her view of him/herself. I will next look

at the history of nationalism and the idea of a nation, before going on to discuss

national identities and their construction.

Even though nationalists see nations as something rising out of antiquity,

nation and nationalism are fairly recent concepts. According to Benedict Anderson,[47]

they came into being in the eighteenth century. Anderson defines nation as "an

imagined political community", imagined, because most of its members will never

know, meet, or hear of most of their fellow-members. The community exists, because

people *believe* they form a community. Nothing tangible separates the people on

different sides of the border between Austria and Germany, for example, but still

these people consider themselves to be of different nationalities.

Nationalism was born in connection with other fundamental changes in

European society in the eighteenth century. The discovery of other ancient religions

and the replacement of Latin by local vernaculars brought a possibility of questioning

the European religious community. "[T]he sacred communities integrated by old

sacred languages were gradually fragmented, pluralized and territorialized."[48] Also

the old dynasties, formerly seen as ruling by divine order, lost their automatic

legitimacy during the same era. However, a more significant change was taking place

beneath these: change in the modes of apprehending the world.[49] According to

---

[46] Hall 279.
[47] Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
[48] Anderson 19.
[49] Ibid. 22.

Anderson, medieval communities had no sense of history as a chain of events, or the separation of past and present. Today, clock and calendar are central to our view of time. We also have an idea of "homogenous, empty time", in which people are aware of other people doing something at the same point of time.[50]

What made the "homogenous, empty time" possible was first and foremost print-capitalism. It gave fixity to language, created unified fields of exchange and made people gradually aware of others in their language-field. During the nineteenth century, interest in European languages created grammars, dictionaries and histories of language. This, combined with the spread of literacy and the easier availability of the printed word, spread the idea of a language community. Poole, as well as Anderson, sees the sense of community as central to the formation of nations and national identity. Vernacular print language is important in creating feelings of belonging together, but regional communities might override the sense of larger community if it is not consciously promoted. What is thus needed is "the mobilisation of linguistic and other cultural resources to create a representation of the *nation* to which those who shared a language and culture belonged."[51]

So why then, if language is so central in creating nations, do Germans and Austrians see themselves as separate nations? Because of official nationalism, which was created by the elites, is Anderson's answer. Language communities were created at the time when the ruling dynasties had to face loosing their legitimacy. The borders of language communities did not usually coincide with those of dynasties, and thus the ruling elites were in danger of loosing their power; to keep it, they adopted nationalistic ideas to give them legitimacy. The result was official nationalism, which

---

[50] Anderson 24
[51] Poole 272 (emphasis in the original).

20

thus modified the popular ideas of a unified language community so that the community which was formed through a shared language would be unified only within the existing borders. Therefore, even though the Austrians and the Germans speak the same language, they are of different nationalities. Later it came clear that nations can be created even in the absence of common language. It is the creation of allegiance to nation and national identity that will be discussed next.

Even though national identities are not in our genes, they are thought to be a part of our essential natures. "Nation-ness is assimilated to skin-colour, gender, parentage and birth-year – all those things one can not help."[52] It is so central to the way we see ourselves that it is difficult to describe who we are except on the basis of a national identity.[53] According to Hall, national identities are formed and transformed in relation to representation – nation is not only a political entity, but also a system of cultural representations, a way to produce meanings.[54]

National culture is a discourse, a way to construct meanings and organize our conceptions of ourselves. "National cultures construct identities by producing meanings about 'the nation' with which we can *identify*".[55] It is not only the actual events or rituals that bind the nation, but the representations of them.[56] Hall identifies five elements that are central in the construction of a national culture.[57] I will look at these in connection to the Afrikaners in South Africa.

Firstly, *narrative of the nation* is told in national histories and literatures, which provide a set of images to represent the shared experiences. These give

---

[52] Anderson 143.
[53] Poole 272.
[54] Hall 292.
[55] Ibid. 293 (emphasis in the original).
[56] Featherstone, Mike, "Localism, Globalism and Cultural Identity," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta (Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003) 348.
[57] Hall 293-295.

21

significance to our everyday lives, and connect them with a national destiny. National histories are often said to have an element of myth in them, but, emphasises Poole, this should not be exaggerated. They are subject to debate, and it is not inevitable that the most flattering, or "mythical", version will win.[58] Secondly, *an emphasis on origins*, continuity, tradition and timelessness gives the idea that the essentials of national character are eternal, and national identity primordial. Thirdly, *invention of tradition* seeks to give certain practices, norms and ideas the air of having their origins far in the historical past. This gives them legitimacy. Fourthly, *a national myth* locates the origin of a nation, and the national character so early that they are lost in the 'mythical' time. In colonial and postcolonial context, the national myths might be read as giving disenfranchised people a possibility to express resentments and offer their own version of what has happened and what they were like before colonization. These are usually myths, because pre-colonial societies were not "one nation, one people". The fifth and final element in the construction of national identities is the *idea of pure, original people*.

The Afrikaners have a combination of these elements, which gave them and their cause legitimacy. They have claimed to be the first inhabitants in South Africa, and they have their own version of South African history. The Great Trek and the Anglo-Boer War provide them with heroes and images to represent the shared experience, such as the wagon train pulled by oxen, the hardy farmed or the brave male ready to go to battle to defend his land and family. They have thought themselves to be a pure folk (or *volk* in Afrikaans) despite their origins in the mixture of German, French and Dutch settlers, and in need of protection from miscegenation – hence the whole gamut of laws against intermarriage across races. Afrikaners have

---

[58]   Poole 274.

had a very strong narrative of the nation, and the apartheid state promoted a picture of a people under siege and in danger of being overwhelmed in order to keep the 'races' separated.

Even though national identity is so central to the way we define ourselves, it is usually latent; it provides the background to everyday lives, but is not their central focus. It is only mobilized when necessary.[59] National identities are in between past and future, and in times of trouble, national cultures are sometimes tempted to look into the 'golden age' of the past. This is often done "to mobilize 'the people' to purify their ranks, to expel the 'others' who threaten their identity, and to grid their loins for a new march forward."[60] This has been done by Afrikaners, too, when the volk has been perceived to be in danger from outside. This happened, for example, after the Anglo-Boer War, when the British tried to anglicise the colony, or when the labourers felt threatened by the competition offered by natives. As was said above, apartheid governments also used the feelings of fear to tighten the hold of white Afrikaner identity on people.[61]

National identity is a binding factor within a nation, and it "seeks to unify [differences of class, gender and race] into one cultural identity, to represent them all as belonging to the same great national family."[62] But, says Hall, besides being a symbolic identification and a point of allegiance, national culture is also a structure of power: the ruling factions use their power to represent the nation in the way they want to. Despite their use of power, however, national cultures *are not* and *cannot be*

---

[59] Poole 276.

[60] Hall 295. See also Featherstone 347-349.

[61] For example H. F. Verwoerd, who led the government in the late fifties and sixties, used the threat of *svart gevaar* (black peril) to mobilize Afrikaner support. This, and other examples of an outside threat used in unifying Afrikaners in Marx, Anthony W., *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of South Africa, the United States, and Brasil* (Cambrigde: Cambridge University Press, 1998), for example pages 85, 103, and 106.

[62] Hall 296.

unified, for several reasons. Usually nations consist of different cultures which were unified only after a process of violent conquest, and they are composed of different social classes, and gender and ethnic groups. Nations "are cross-cut with deep internal divisions and differences, and 'unified' only through the exercise of different forms of cultural power."[63] The use of national symbols is arbitrary, "[a]ny old shred would have served as well"[64], as long as those constructing the national unity could have used them.

Hall's interpretation of national identity runs on the same lines with Homi Bhabha's; in order to form a nation, its participants needed to forget their violent past and suppress disagreements. This forgetting constituted the beginning on the national narrative.[65] Bhabha also points out that the concept of a homogenous national culture is now being redefined. "Increasingly, 'national' cultures are being produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities".[66] But this is not enough alone: the national identities of the colonisers depended on the other being defined as inferior, and, according to Bhabha, "[t]he western metropole must confront its postcolonial history ... as ... *internal to its national identity*"[67] before it can step out of the totalizing past of national identity.

2.2 Whiteness

> [B]eing white automatically ensured … greater economic, political, and social security in the long run. … Becoming white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being the object of others' domination.[68]

---

[63] Hall 297.
[64] Gellner, E (1983), quoted in Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 142.
[65] Bhabha 160. See also Hall 297.
[66] Bhabha 5-6.
[67] Ibid. 6 (emphasis in the original).
[68] Harris, Cheryl I.,"Whiteness as Property," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, eds.

The above describes the benefits of passing – of presenting yourself as white even though you were black – in the United States. Those benefits associated with whiteness are not unique and restricted to North America, however, but apply to all whites around in the world. The benefits may not be similar in all circumstances, but in comparison to non-whites, white people are usually in a position of structural domination. In this chapter, I will look at how whiteness gained and kept its hegemonic position in general, and specifically in reference to South Africa.

Racial imagery is central to the organization of modern world, and race is never not in play when we make judgments about people. Whiteness however, as Richard Dyer points out, is not usually seen as a race. Even though there is much research on race, it usually centres on non-whites, and the hegemonic position of whiteness is ignored. But, in order to be able to see how non-whites have been oppressed, we need to look at how whiteness was and is able to keep its position.

One of the ways in which whiteness is able to do this is its invisibility. Especially in the West, references to whiteness are absent from habitual speech and writing; in descriptions of people, if a person's race is not mentioned, he or she is automatically taken to be white. Whites tend to speak of themselves as representatives of 'people' in general, as people who are "gendered, classed, sexualized and abled",[69] not as a part of 'the white race' but of the human race. Richard Dyer points out that "[t]his assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white culture."[70] The notion that whiteness is, on the one hand nothing in particular, and on the other representing the whole human race, is entwined with the inability of white

---

Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta (Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003) 76.
[69] Dyer 3.
[70] Ibid. 2.

people to see their privilege. Seeing nothing that accounts for the position of power and privilege is, according to Dyer, crucial to the security of that position.[71]

Looking at whiteness, then, is a way to bring whites to the same 'level' with the other races, to downgrade them from 'the people', from the human norm, to just people. This is what needs to be done especially in South Africa, where the whites have so strongly made themselves 'the people'. According to Steyn,[72] despite the need to go through the past, there is considerable resistance to talking about race as a social category in South Africa, and people want to disassociate the country from its racialized past. But, unless it is dealt with, it can never be surmounted.

White skin was not always seen as a sign of superiority, however. In the early medieval period, the contacts between European and African people took place in a spirit of "mutual discovery and often partnership,"[73] and even after the slave trade begun in the fifteenth century, blackness did not automatically denote a slave. At this point also whites were used as unfree labour. By eighteenth century, however, blackness had come to be seen as the natural marker of a slave, and whiteness had been invented as a unifying factor within Europe: "Europeans … develop[ed] a common identity by using Africans as the main foil against which they defined themselves. …race was established relationally."[74] The European thus became the one against which everyone else was compared and found lacking.

The formation of whiteness as the dominant social category draws from different discourses.[75] Dyer arranges these issues around the concept of embodiment, by which he means that whiteness is partly something *in* but not *of* the body. The

---

[71] Dyer 9.
[72] Steyn xxxi.
[73] Ibid. 4.
[74] Ibid. 5.
[75] See for example Dyer 14-40 and Steyn, chapter 1.

embodiment is constructed of three constitutive elements, Christianity, race and enterprise/imperialism, which provide the cultural register of whiteness.[76] Steyn, on the other hand, discusses the influences of religious, cultural and scientific ideas on the formation of whiteness. The most important of these influences, according to her, come from Christian mythology, the notion of the chain of being, and the division between savage and civilized which arrives from ancient Greece. However, adhering to either of these classifications would not be useful to this study; instead, I will discuss the characteristics which seem most relevant in the case of South Africa and whiteness there.

Christianity gives the narrative of whiteness some of its central meanings and associations. According to Steyn, its most important contribution is the practice to think of all in dual opposites.[77] God is good and the devil bad. But more importantly, the bad came to be symbolized by black colour, which gave "innate moral authority" to whites.[78] Through Manichean allegory, Christianity created pairs such as light-dark, civilized-savage, or self-the Other. And white and black.[79] This connection between white and everything that is good and desirable is what Dyer calls the symbolic connotations of whiteness.[80] As a moral distinction, this applies also to people within the same racial group: the whiter, or fairer (blond hair, dressed in light colours) is usually the good one, and the darker (dark hair and clothes) the bad.

---

[76] Dyer 14.
[77] Steyn 12.
[78] This creates statements like the following used as examples by Frantz Fanon:"The black man is the symbol of Evil" (p.180), and "Sin is Negro as virtue is white."(p.139).
[79] Fanon describes Manicheanism and its results brilliantly: "I am white: that is to say that I possess beauty and virtue, which have never been black. I am the color of the daylight...
I am black: I am the incarnation of a complete fusion with the world, an intuitive understanding of the earth ... I am truly a ray of sunlight under the earth..." Fanon 45.
[80] Dyer 60.

Race and the way it has been theorized are of course central to perceiving

whites as superior to all others. Concepts of race are always grounded on the body and

its characteristics, but white people are seen to have a special relationship to race.

Biological approaches to race have been unwilling to consider the racial

characteristics of whites, because that would reduce white people to no more than

their bodies (which is, however, what is done with other races). Whites are understood

as more than that: "Intangibilities of character, energy and high ... mindedness ...

constitute the white race-soul and distinguish white people from all others. ... [T]he

white spirit [can] both master and transcend the white body while the non-white soul

[is] prey to the promptings and fallibilities of the body."[81] Perhaps as a result of this,

representations of white people tend to focus on other things than race, and as such,

might be stereotypical in terms of attributes like gender or nationality, but less so in

terms of race. "[S]tereotyping ... does characterize the representation of subordinate

social groups and is one of the means by which they are categorized and kept in there

place, whereas white people in white culture are given the illusion of their own

infinite variety."[82]

The idea of the great chain of being and social Darwinism together

established Africans as the link between humans (whites, that is) and animals, and as

a separate species. Scientific measurements could be used to determine everyone's

biological characteristics and thus their race, and they would, neutrally and

impartially, determine everyone's lot in life. Outside characteristics became gradually

associated with the social status of a group, and were seen as "the intrinsic cause" of

[81]   Dyer 23.
[82]   Ibid. 12.

their place.[83] When this association was complete, the different positions different races held came to seem as unavoidable, "just the way life is". The scientific language disguised the way whites used power to keep their position.[84]

The position held by whites, however, was inherently unstable. This both creates problems and also partly explains the success of whiteness as a dominant category. An example of problematic instability is connected to the fact that whiteness creates its identity mainly through othering; it identifies itself with desirable characteristics and projects the undesirable ones, those that it rejects, to the other. "The other, perceived as teeming with all the devils one most wants to disassociate from, therefore becomes extremely threatening, and a focus for hate and aggression."[85] This creates whiteness where the full identity is achieved only in relationship to its other. The oppressor is psychologically dependent on the oppressed for his (for it was mostly his) identity, and "the purer white the identity, the more dependent it is on its black other. The power given to the other in this psychological dynamic is immense, and serves to explain the paranoid need to control, the feelings of fear and threat, that white identity is subject to".[86]

Another instance of problematic instability is described by David Lloyd, whom Dyer paraphrases.[87] Lloyd's idea is that white identity develops most crucially in attaining a position of disinterest, distance, separation and objectivity. This provides the basis for the view of whites as everything and nothing, although it also provides what he deems the fundamental instability of whiteness; for, to be the norm

---

[83] Guillaumin 1995, quoted in Steyn 20.
[84] Steyn 17.
[85] Ibid. 14.
[86] Ibid. 16. Fanon, though, sees the relationship between blacks and whites differently. According to him, they are unequally dependent on each other, and only the black man is defined relationally: "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics ... remind us that this position has a converse. I say that this is false." Fanon 110.
[87] Dyer 38-39.

29

and a subject, the white person needs to be seen, and cannot be totally without

properties. This is negotiated in various ways, but it cannot be taken for granted, and

thus creates instability. Dyer observes:

> White identity is founded on compelling paradoxes: a vividly
> corporeal cosmology that most values transcendence of the body;
> a notion of being at once a sort of race and the human race, an
> individual and a universal subject; ... a stress on the display of
> spirit while maintaining a position of invisibility; in short, a need
> always to be everything and nothing, literally overwhelmingly
> present and yet absent, both alive and dead.[88]

On the other hand, the instability of whiteness also feeds its power. Since

there are so many shades of white skin, and it is not possible to say exactly when

white turns to yellow, for example, whiteness seems achievable. "[W]hite people are

who white people say are white. ... whiteness is more an ascription than a fixed

given,"[89] says Dyer. In between the white and black there is a variety of skin colours

which can, at times, be included in the white race, and at times in the black. This

instability "enables whiteness to be presented as apparently attainable, flexible, varied

category,"[90] worth fighting to be included, because with the status you get included in

the power and privilege. This is apparent in the process where people were classified

as a part of one race or another in South Africa: if you were not happy with the

classification you got, an appeal could be made, and depending largely on the

recognition of the community you lived in, you could be 'transferred' from coloured

to white race. On the other hand, you could be demoted to non-white, if the

community you lived in did not accept you as white.[91]

---

[88] Dyer 39.
[89] Ibid. 48-50.
[90] Ibid. 57.
[91] Posel 106-109.

30

Whiteness in South Africa has its own special characteristics. An important influence has been the fact that whites in South Africa are a minority, "vastly outnumbered by the indigenous population, which they subjugated, but never decimated."[92] They were never comfortably sure of their survival, and thus, discourses of resistance are common.[93] Another distinctive characteristic is the presence of two white groups in South Africa: Afrikaners and the English-speaking whites. They have never really assimilated, although there have been efforts to achieve this. The major cause for this is the strong nationalism of the Afrikaners, which has been discussed above. There are, however, still some aspects of the Afrikaner nationalism which should be brought up here, in connection to the English-speaking whites.

As pointed out above, national identities are usually dormant, and are only mobilized in times of trouble. In South Africa, Afrikaners have perceived themselves as being under a threat almost continuously, whether from the British or the native populations. According to Steyn, Afrikaners had to fight to be recognized first-class citizens in South Africa[94] - the British colonizers, with their closer ties to Europe ("back home"), originally treated Afrikaners with little more respect than the natives. Afrikaners did identify with Africa (hence their name), but only to the extent that they thought they had as much claim to the land as the natives.[95] Their lifestyle was also similar to that of the natives,[96] but Afrikaners only saw this as a reason to keep a strict

---

[92] Steyn 24-25.
[93] Ibid. 25.
[94] Ibid. 26.
[95] Official guide at the Voortrekker Monument, one of the central icons of Afrikaner nationalism put it in this way: "The Bantus penetrated from the north almost at the same time as the white man entered the south. They had equal title to the country." Quoted in Harrison, David, *The White Tribe of Africa: South Africa in Perspective* (Halfway House: Southern Book Publishers, 1993), p.15.
[96] Both were mostly subsistence farmers, close to the land, and Afrikaners even lived occasionally as nomads. Steyn 28.

distinction between themselves and the natives, not to be treated like them. The British were also seen to be defending the natives, and the abolition of slavery was a severe loss to many Afrikaners. They saw their right as whites to "be masters of the heathens,"[97] and when the British denied this, Afrikaners left the colony.[98] Later the Boer War increased the feeling among Afrikaners that they were treated unfairly, but after the war, there were conscious efforts to placate Afrikaners and create a unified white population.[99]

This was possible because both Afrikaners and the English-speaking whites defined themselves mainly in disassociation from the non-whites.[100] Despite their differences, both groups had a paternalistic attitude towards natives, and they saw it as their right to rule them; their ideas did not thus differ from the 'main-stream' European thinking on race. Afrikaners based their right to rule on the Bible: they were the chosen people, "a pastoral people wandering among the 'heathen',"[101] and God had given them a superior status to the natives. The English-speaking whites based their attitude to vaguely social-Darwinist ideas about white superiority.[102]

According to Steyn, whiteness in South Africa meant essentially the entitlement to the land and everything on it.[103] Laws restricted the ownership of land and natives were only allowed the use of 13 per cent of the land as reservates.[104] Labour and its connection to capitalism were also central in keeping whiteness

---

[97] Steyn 32.
[98] The Great Trek, explained above.
[99] Steyn 34.
[100] Ibid. 26.
[101] Ibid. 29.
[102] See for example Steyn pp.30-31.
[103] Steyn 35. This is not unique in South Africa: whiteness is often associated with property, see for example Harris 2003. Harris even sees whiteness *itself* as property: if one means by property all of a person's legal rights, whiteness, or the right to white identity fulfils the criteria. Whiteness and all it entails was (is?) protected by law, and every white person can expect certain privileges because he/she is in possession of whiteness. Harris 76-81.
[104] The Natives Land Act (1913). See Ross 88.

dominant.[105] Fanon, too, sees wealth as central when defining whiteness: "One is white above a certain financial level."[106] And when their wealth is threatened, whites react, like in South Africa. When the white (especially Afrikaner) working class grew after the Boer war, they started to worry about their jobs and about the competition from the blacks. As a consequence, new laws restricted black workers to pre-industrial, non-skilled jobs, and whites kept the jobs which needed skill and thus paid more. This combined with the way all of the population was registered in 1950 made race in South Africa closely tied to class and social standing. Benefits of whiteness functioned to stifle class tensions among whites, and moved them to relations between whites and other races, instead.[107]

According to Deborah Posel, race in apartheid South Africa was "a socio-legal construct rather than a scientifically measurable biological essence."[108] Everyday discourse drew from myths and racial science, but in official circumstances, lifestyle and social standing were central in determining race. Different races were thought to have biologically different ways of living,[109] though, so the connection to biology was present even in official discourse.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, different laws could place a person in different races, but this changed with the Population Registration Act in 1950. It was an attempt to create fixed and stable racial identities, which would not be dependent on a particular piece of legislation.[110] The decision was to be made

---

[105] See for example Steyn 38.
[106] Fanon 44.
[107] Harris 83. Nadine Gordimer was quick to notice this ; she wondered already in 1959 "how much of [South African] colour-prejudice is purely class-prejudice"? Gordimer, Nadine, "Where Do Whites Fit In ?", *The Essential Gesture : Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. Stephen Clingman (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1988) 36.
[108] Posel 88.
[109] Ibid. 94.
[110] Ibid. 98.

"according to the views held by the members of [the] community"[111] where the person lived. This worked to assimilate the social status and superiority of whites already present in society: "conventions of race" were to be adhered to in order not to disrupt white privilege. The decision of anyone's race could be disputed by members of his or her community, as already pointed out, which served to make the classification similar to the popularly held beliefs of who was white and who was not.[112]

The official definition of whiteness was so strong in South Africa partly because whites, especially Afrikaners, did not often have access to outside information about their way of life: "[T]he government's manipulation of the media to obfuscate the real consequences of their policies ... increasingly screened whites from contrary interpretations of their society."[113] There was resistance to apartheid system among whites too, of course, but most whites were content to go on as they were and ignore the protests. This is why they were not prepared for the change when it came, and their first response was to dig in and defend their white way of life.

There have been changes is race relations, however: for example socio-economic inequality is now greatest within the African population, and some think that South Africa is now a society based on class difference, rather that race.[114] Still, most agree that the country has a long way to go in decentering whiteness: "[E]very South African (and especially the whites) still has a huge task to rid him/herself of racial prejudices"[115]

---

[111] Posel 102.
[112] Ibid. 108.
[113] Steyn 40.
[114] See for example Alexander, Neville, *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002) 68-69 and Terreblanche, Sampie, A *History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2003) 29.
[115] Terreblanche 45.

Melissa Steyn's study *"Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be": White Identity in a Changing South Africa* tries to do this by looking at white identities in today's South Africa, and at how they might have changed since the abolishment of apartheid rules. She concludes that" [d]ifferent narratives of what it means to be white are vying for legitimation in the hearts and minds of South Africans."[116] The five narratives,[117] or identities, which emerge from her study are composites of actual answers to a questionnaire she distributed among acquaintances. The answers came from people of various backgrounds, social positions and ages. Any one narrative does not represent any existing person, but is a collection of characteristics which Steyn deems sufficiently close to make up a coherent 'identity'. Many of her interviewees have characteristics from two or more identities.

The first of Steyn's narratives, "Still Colonial after All These Years", is "the same old story about whiteness" and its subscribers believe that "whites are [still] in a position to define themselves and the 'other' more or less unilaterally, and that intervention needs to take place on 'white' terms".[118] They believe in the superiority of the white race and their attitudes towards other 'races' are paternalistic. There are some differences in attitudes towards the change: some are more willing to acknowledge that changes will have to be made, but the white, or European, tradition is still seen as the one to follow and whites should keep the power to direct the change- "for the good of the future for all".[119]

The second narrative, "This Shouldn't Happen to a White", also clings to whiteness as the ideal, but, in contrast to the previous narrative, sees whites in the

---

[116] Steyn, xxxi.
[117] Some of the narratives are further divided into different strands, but for the purpose of this study, the large narratives are more useful.
[118] Steyn 59.
[119] Ibid. 67.

New South Africa as disempowered and victimized. The proper way of things has been turned upside down, and this is seen to have happened in 1994 with the official change of power, abruptly. The past might be seen as brutal and some discrimination against blacks might be acknowledged, but the things should still have gone on as they were. Because the past injustices are underplayed, the present situation seems grossly unfair.[120] Whites should not be forced to change, since they did not gain any benefits in the old system, or, if they did, it was because of personal enterprise. This is why affirmative action[121] is seen as such an insult.

"Don't Think White, It's All Right", is what Steyn calls the next narrative. The tellers of this tale acknowledge that the situation has changed and that also the whites need to accept it and adapt to the new circumstances. Nevertheless, they value their cultural heritage very high, and being white is essential to their identity.[122] Changing is not easy, though, and it is accompanied by complaints. Afrikaners who tell this narrative cling even more closely to their identity as whites belonging to Africa, whereas the English-speaking version sees the cultural link with Europe and the Great Britain as central. Some people see, however, that changing things does not mean reverse discrimination against whites, and might even be relieved that things have changed. "The ... vocabulary of colonial racism still shows up ... [a]nd the fears have not magically gone away. ... Nevertheless, the vocabulary of blame is somewhat replaced by talk about taking personal responsibility for one's future"[123] which is a

---

[120] Steyn 71.

[121] Since the change of power, the legislation has been changed to ensure that certain groups (black people, women and people with disabilities) have equal opportunities in the workplace. All groups must be equally represented in all job categories and levels. In people's minds, the affirmative action is most often connected to racial groups, and some whites see it as the reason why whites do not get jobs.

[122] Steyn 83.

[123] Ibid. 97.

clear contrast to the earlier narratives which expect *others* to do whatever is needed for future.

"Whiter Shade of White" shows us people who "disclaim any implication in whiteness".[124] Some claim to be 'South Africans' (especially Afrikaners) to have an entitlement to the land; others feel that since they did not support apartheid or that because they actively opposed it, they were not implicated in racism. Especially the English-speaking whites claim that the Afrikaners were the real racists and that they themselves did not benefit from apartheid in any way and should not therefore be seen as 'white'. Also individualism – "I am who I am, I just happen to be white"[125] - and everything having been outside one's control are used to justify not being accountable for apartheid's ills.

The final narrative, "Under African Skies (or White, but not Quite)", or at least some strands of it, give most hope for the future of South Africa. Its tellers try to "creat[e] and defin[e] new subjectivities by drawing on other discursive and cultural repertoires to supplement or replace the previous white identity"[126]. Some experience a split between intellectually understanding the need for change and even applauding it, and feeling emotionally alienated or isolated from it. Even though the change is seen as positive, they do not quite know what to do in the new order. Others feel so much guilt for what has happened that they "avoid the pain of acknowledging what it has meant to be white [by escaping] into being black".[127] The values of colonial racial binaries are turned upside down - everything black is more valuable than anything white. The last strand of this narrative, on the other hand, creates hybrids. Whiteness is seen as a mechanism of social advantage, not a biological given, and it is

---

[124] Steyn 101.
[125] Ibid. 109.
[126] Ibid. 115.
[127] Ibid. 121.

acknowledged as shaping history and structural processes.[128] "For these respondents, one must first know one's whiteness ... before it will let one go. Facing the truth about the past, distressing though it may be, is a necessary part of moving beyond whiteness."[129] This is by no means painless, but nevertheless satisfying, and includes learning about the 'other' as well as oneself.

2.3 History: Postcolonial Gothic

Our history, what we have seen and gone through, unavoidably affects our individual identity and the way we see ourselves today. The same is true with nations and their histories. As Hall argues, the individuals construct a coherent identity by narrating their past actions and attitudes to themselves; nations construct a coherent national identity similarly through narration. Both types of identity are achieved by repressing certain uncomfortable actions, feelings or experiences. The repressed memories, however, might emerge at some point. Postcolonial Gothic deals with the burden of the past on the present, and might, therefore, be useful in analyzing the way history shapes the present in South Africa. It is also an excellent tool in trying to dislocate the monolithic, unified national identity.

The Gothic had its hay day in Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Its tropes include, among others, ghosts and haunted castles, and, as said earlier, it might not be obvious why it should be connected to postcolonial fiction and criticism of the twentieth century. However, some classic features of the Gothic genre make it possible to link it with imperial and postcolonial issues. It questions

---

[128] Steyn 129-30
[129] Ibid. 133.

38

established ideologies, and according to David Punter,[130] it is based on a view of history that sets history right in our midst.

Punter approaches the connection between postcolonialism and the Gothic from the point of view of history. According to him, using the term 'Gothic' is problematic in a postcolonial context because it is tied specifically to a "particular, complex, refracted version of European history".[131] However, this problem could be overcome by supposing that the Gothic represents a specific view of history, which centres on the supposition that escape from history is impossible, that the past cannot be left behind. Punter argues that "it is here that the connection with the postcolonial comes most clearly into view. The very structure of the term 'postcolonial' itself, its apparent insistence on a time 'after', on an 'aftermath', exposes itself precisely to the threat of return, falls under the sign of repetition. ... The past, on this view of history, is right in our midst ..."[132] Often the past is emblemised in the form of the house, be it the traditional castle or manor house of the Gothic, or a more ordinary building of modern times.

Building a postcolonial nation separate from its colonial past is impossible; the new is always accompanied by half-buried histories, which is, according to Punter, evident in contemporary debates around blame and apology.[133] On a more positive note, he concludes that the ghosts can also serve as a link between the past and the present, "to assert continuity where the lessons of conventional history …

---

[130] Punter, David, "Arundhati Roy and the House of History," *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre,* eds. Smith Andrew and William Hughes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 193.
[131] Punter 192.
[132] Ibid. 193.
[133] Punter, David and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Oxford Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 55-56.

would claim that all continuity has been broken by the imperial trauma."[134] The return

of the past can also be a consolation.

Another connection between the Gothic and Postcolonial literature is,

according to Andrew Smith and William Hughes,[135] an interest in "challenging post-

enlightenment notions of rationality." Smith and Hughes point out that Enlightenment

humanism helped to construct racial hierarchies which were central to colonialism,

and created opposites such as Occident/Orient, black/white, and civilized/savage. The

Gothic conflates the previous opposites into each other, and thus erases differences

and the distance between them. They go on to argue that

> [t]he Gothic use of non-human and ab-human figures ... is
> calculated to challenge the dominant humanist discourse, and thus
> becomes ... a literary form to which postcolonial writers are
> drawn, as well as constituting a literary form which can be read
> through postcolonial ideas.[136]

Mariaconcetta Constantini[137] sees the transgression of boundaries as central to

contemporary (and therefore Postcolonial) Gothic. Questioning of legitimated colonial

ideologies weakens psychological barriers and brings forth new existential and social

questions, of which, according to Constantini, the most important are postcolonial

issues of race and identity.[138] "[P]ostcolonial fiction proves fertile ground for Gothic

plots and figures, which well exemplify the tensions and consequences of

imperialistic relations. The result is 'postcolonial Gothic' ... [narrations of] post-

Independence realities, in which 'ghosts' of colonial domination reappear in new

---

[134] Punter and Byron 58.
[135] Smith, Andrew and William Hughes,"Introduction: The Enlightenment Gothic and
Postcolonialism," *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre,* eds. Smith Andrew and William
Hughes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 1.
[136] Smith and Hughes 2.
[137] Constantini, Mariaconcetta,"Crossing Boundaries: the Revision of Gothic Paradigms in *Heat and
Dust*," *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre,* eds. Smith Andrew and William Hughes
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
[138] Constantini 155.

alarming shapes."[139] Constantini's definition is useful in analysing Andre Brink's post-apartheid fiction, where there are not only 'actual ghosts' with their story to tell, but also the personal decisions which come back to haunt the characters of his books.

Patrick Brantlinger's 'Imperial Gothic'[140] also deals with the issues of haunting. By Imperial Gothic he means Gothic fiction written in the latter half of the nineteenth century; it uses familiar Gothic tropes to convey anxieties about the decline and fall of the British Empire and also about the decline of the British character.[141] Imperial Gothic is similar to Postcolonial Gothic in its concentration on the supernatural to represent something repressed, and both use ghosts to convey anxiety about the decline of (Western) man. There are, however, also differences in tone: Postcolonial Gothic, while on one hand anxious, is on the other also hopeful. The ghosts have a story to tell, they bring forth an alternative view of history, "bring cultural and personal discrepancies to the notice of the living,"[142] and listening to them might change the listener for the better.

At this point, it might be useful to bring up Sigmund Freud's concept 'the uncanny' ('das unheimlich'). He defines it as "that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar".[143] The German pair 'heimlich'/'unheimlich' explains the concept more clearly: what should have been 'heimlich', homey, cosy and known, suddenly turns out to be 'unheimlich', unfamiliar, something concealed. Everything that should have remained a secret can

---

[139] Constantini 156.
[140] Brantlinger, Patrick, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988).
[141] Brantlinger 229.
[142] Wisker, Gina, "Showers of Stars: South East Asian Women's Postcolonial Gothic", in *Gothic Studies* (Nov 2003, Vol 5 Issue 2) 64.
[143] Freud, Sigmund, "The 'Uncanny'" in *Freud, Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo da Vinci and other works,* trans. James Strachey et al, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1990) 340.

be uncanny. Freud concludes that if it is correct that every emotional impulse which is repressed is transformed into anxiety, then the return of the repressed is experienced as uncanny. "[T]his uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression."[144] Postcolonial Gothic uses Gothic tropes precisely to create this feeling of uncanny, to make readers look at old 'truths' from a new perspective and raise up issues which were not discussed or acknowledged in the colonial times.

Postcolonial Gothic and the uncanny are useful for dealing with the atrocities of the colonial past also in the South African context. In the colonial and apartheid systems, where the majority of the population was denied simple human value, countless stories went untold or unheard. According to Dominic Head, the literature of South Africa

> has a long history of treatments of repression, terror and the uncanny. Indeed, if the uncanny is accurately defined as the effect of 'the interruption of fantasies, suppressed wishes and emotional and sexual conflicts', one might consider colonial South Africa, before as well as during the apartheid era, as an obvious place to look for instances of the postcolonial uncanny.[145]

In order to lay the past to rest, then, these 'instances of the postcolonial uncanny' need to be recognized and dealt with.

---

[144] Freud 1990, 363-4.
[145] Head, Dominic, "Coetzee and the Animals: the Quest for Postcolonial Grace", *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre,* eds. Smith Andrew and William Hughes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 229.

3 White Identity in *The Rights of Desire* and *Imaginings of Sand*

3.1 *Personal Relationships and Personal Identity*

In this chapter I will analyse Ruben Olivier; who he is, and what his identity is based on. Ruben lives in a new South Africa, which is trying to find its direction after apartheid. He can, on the one hand, be viewed as an 'archetypal' South African white in the new situation, falling back on the comfortable old ways, the comfortable known culture. On the other hand, however, Ruben can be seen as one of Brink's non-stereotypical Afrikaners, his challenge to the master identity dictated from above. I will also look at Tessa Butler and Kristien Müller, but only to highlight some interesting aspects of identification and identity formation which do not come up in the analysis of Ruben.

When it comes to analysing Ruben's character, it should be remembered that he is actually the one narrating the whole novel. It is told as notes written down by Ruben for his own eyes. He inserts little comments, gives us glimpses of what he thought later, or links different events to each other. Ruben also inserts whole chapters and long descriptions of whatever events or explanations he deems suitable to enlighten the 'actual' events of the book. This is what makes *The Rights of Desire* so interesting in connection to analysing Ruben's identity and the possible changes to it. The whole novel can be seen as Ruben's attempt to create himself a coherent identity by narrating the events for later investigation by himself.

43

3.1.1 Ruben Olivier

Who is Ruben, then, and what can be learned about his character and identity in the novel? The most important definers of his identity are his work, books and the worlds created by words; his marriage; his age, and less obviously his race. Ruben's life has been centred on his profession, books and reading. He is retired from the work of librarian, or, to be precise, has been told to retire. He is, obviously, not very happy with the situation. Losing his job means more to Ruben that 'just' losing a job, he has lost a central part of himself, the place that has made him what he is,[146] his sanctuary in life. That is precisely the word Ruben uses about the library; "… these last few years after I was so treacherously dumped by the library that had been my sanctuary from the upheavals outside. My library was - all libraries are – a place of ultimate refuge, a wild and sacred place where meanings are manageable precisely because they aren't binding; and where illusion is comfortingly real."[147] And, when he lost his job, he feels he lost his place in the world of the library, he does not belong there any longer.[148] What makes is worse is the fact that he was replaced a young black man. In his insistence that "you can't solve a wrong [no jobs for blacks] with another wrong,"[149] Ruben clearly conforms to Steyn's identity "This Shouldn't Happen to a White".

All in all, Ruben seems to be more comfortable in the world of books than among the living and breathing people of South Africa. Books "never let you down, never say no, never offer a cold shoulder."[150] He remembers feeling alien in the real world since his childhood, and trying to capture the events by thinking how he would

---

[146] Brink 2001, 102.
[147] Ibid. 32. See also p. 8.
[148] Ibid. 104.
[149] Ibid. 103.
[150] Ibid. 23.

remember them later on. Only after the actual events can he see their meaning, or at least try to decipher what it was, as happens with his childhood neighbour Lenie, who is the first to show him what is under girls' skirts:

> It was as if I could see the thoughts taking shape in my own head: *Is that all? So what was all the fuss about?* Perhaps it was the sense of distance that made it seem so unremarkable. A body, even that first girl's body of my life, was no more than just a body. Only months later, when Lenie was no longer there, I started going back to the barn on my own and transformed that discovery into something momentous. That was what turned the barn into a place of miracles.[151]

"[A]s long as I can remember", says Ruben, "there have been gradations of the same sense of displacement. … Except in books. Except here in my study, or at work in my library in the city … amid the reassurance of words."[152] In Ruben's case the feeling of being an outsider has always been there, but in post-apartheid South Africa, most whites can relate to it.[153] Ruben uses books and words to escape uncomfortable situations and facts he does not want to face; he has always been able to retreat to his library, to his study and to books, write down things as he wants to and master them that way. Many whites closed their eyes to what happened during the apartheid period, Ruben is just an extreme example on how to do it. And, like Ruben, many whites continue in their old ways even after the fall of apartheid.

This escape from reality is also apparent in the way Ruben chooses to view his marriage. In the beginning of the novel Ruben describes it in the following way: "We were happy here, Riana and I. …we had a good life in this house."[154] When

---

[151] Brink 2001 30 (emphasis in the original).
[152] Ibid. 28.
[153] Indeed, most South Africans can now appreciate what Nadine Gordimer pointed out already in 1959: "The new Africa may, with luck, grant us our legal rights, full citizenship and the vote, *but I don't think it will accept us in the way we're hankering after.*" That is, as ordinary members of a multi-coloured society, with no privileges, but also no guilt. Gordimer 32 (my emphasis).
[154] Brink 2001 3-4.

Tessa Butler, Ruben's new lodger, is sceptical about his assurances of a happy marriage, Ruben even says that they were as much in love when Riana died as in the beginning of the marriage.[155] Gradually Ruben shows glimpses the reality of his marriage, even though he still wants to cling to the illusion:

> And without wishing to I remembered what I'd kept stowed out of reach for years now: those devastating silences in my marriage with Riana. When for days on end she wouldn't speak. But I angrily stifled the incipient thought. It had been a happy marriage. It *had*. For God's sake.[156]

A bit later Ruben confesses to Tessa that they had their differences in the marriage, and even that he cheated on Riana twice. One of the reasons Ruben might have created the illusion of a happy marriage is that he feels guilty for Riana's death. The guilt comes especially from the second time he was unfaithful to Riana, on the day she died.[157]

It is Tessa's pregnancy and abortion that make Ruben see the reality of his marriage; the distance brought by Riana's miscarriage, his own infidelities, her silences and "unhealthy attachment" to her parents. Sitting by Tessa sleeping in the hospital bed after the abortion, Ruben is finally able to face his marriage: "How could I tell you the truth? I'd never looked it in the face myself. Only now … can I return to it and try not to be repulsed. Not because it was so horrible, but because it was so ordinary."[158] After the miscarriage, Riana became obsessed with tidiness, and Ruben again retreated to his books and the library, to get away from her and their children.[159] The final realisation Ruben gets by Tessa's hospital bed is that "for eleven years,

---

[155] Brink 2001 36.
[156] Ibid. 128-129 (emphasis in the original).
[157] Ibid. 165-166.
[158] Ibid. 178-179. Even here Ruben cannot say it directly to himself. His notes are written like he was speaking to Tessa, not to himself as he mostly does in his notes.
[159] Ibid. 184.

since her death, I have clung to the memory of a happy marriage. It was the only way, in retrospect, to redeem those years – my life – which otherwise would have been wasted. The only way to keep faith in myself."[160] To acknowledge that the marriage had become a trap for both of them would have been unimaginable for Ruben earlier, especially after Riana died and he was left with the guilt of the failed marriage and the guilt of having been in bed with somebody else at the time of her death.

Ruben feels that he had made Riana miserable.[161] He takes all the blame of their failed marriage to himself, and even feels guilty of thinking that Riana had something to do with it.[162] It is therefore a shock when Magrieta tells him that also Riana had been unfaithful, and that the unborn baby girl would have been somebody else's child. Magrieta even says that Riana did not want the child, a fact that she has heard from Antje, the ghost of the slave girl who lived in Ruben's house. Ruben is naturally shocked and regretful. Not because of Riana's infidelity as such, but because it takes away the 'blanket of guilt', and makes him acknowledge that his own affair with Alison – the first time he cheated on Riana – was not as he has wanted to remember, either. Ruben has remembered the affair as irrational and hasty: "I still find it difficult to explain why I brought Alison home. … We knew it was wrong. But I was infatuated … We had drunk too much … she seemed to want it as much as I did"[163]. After Magrieta's revelation about Riana, Ruben is able to admit to himself that there was more to the affair with Alison than he has wanted to see:

> I thought: How different it would all have been if Magrieta hadn't
> found us that day, just as I was undressing beside the sofa, with
> Alison's musical hands clasping me. … Because we were in love.
> … We'd started discussing the hard step ahead: to tell Riana, to

---

[160] Brink 2001, 180.
[161] Ibid. 206-207.
[162] Ibid. 257.
[163] Ibid. 61-62.

get a divorce. But the way in which it happened somehow changed everything, made it small and sordid.[164]

Ruben now has to face the fact that there might have been something else for him in life if he had had enough courage to grab it.

Another central building block in Ruben's identity is his age. He is definitely getting older, and is not very happy about his age:

> To live with this emptiness for years and years, unable to think of anything except what you've lost, feeling yourself grow feebler and lonelier every day, and hating every moment of it? … It's just this slow decline … All you can do is reach back more and more hopelessly, more and more terribly, to the past, to the thing you've lost, to the one thing that has made life worthwhile, to love.[165]

He even tells Tessa that "[s]ometimes I think the past is my only future."[166] In this light it is understandable that Ruben wants to cling to the vision of a happy marriage, with as much love towards the end of it as in the beginning. And, on the other hand, it explains why he is so ready to fall in love with Tessa.

For a while Ruben thinks that he might feel younger with Tessa, but soon this proves wrong. He recognizes that instead of feeling younger, the opposite happens: "I thought, when Tessa first moved in, she would rejuvenate me. Old goats and nibblesome leaves. Not so. It ages you faster."[167] Tessa's hectic work life, her various lovers, nights out and the partying make Ruben realize that reaching to love from a young woman does not make him younger.

In a life where Ruben feels everything is taken from him little by little, where everyone, including Magrieta, is leaving him, in a life that is essentially "a long

---

[164] Brink 2001, 286-287.
[165] Ibid. 37.
[166] Ibid. 81.
[167] Ibid. 145.

drawn-out goodbye,"[168] Ruben nevertheless insists on loving Tessa. He has given up the hope of 'winning' her, they have no future together, but still Ruben says: "I need her, not for this reason or that, only for a love so irrational, so pointless, so mad, that I would make myself ridiculous even by mentioning it. Stupid old fool. Even in my dotage, grant me this: I love her."[169] This is his way of clinging to life.

Finally, a look at one of the most fundamental features in Ruben's life identity: his race. Even though that is not among the things he considers and re-evaluates in the novel, it cannot be left out of this analysis. It is interesting that Ruben's life is devoid of references to his whiteness, but, on the other hand, this seems to be the case in non-fictional white lives in South Africa, as well, as was pointed out earlier. However, some indication of Ruben's stance on the racial question can be found by analysing his dealings with Magrieta and other non-white characters in the novel.

Magrieta Daniels is Ruben's long-time housekeeper; she has been in the house even before Ruben and Riana moved there and continued to take care of Ruben after the fall of apartheid. She is central in Ruben's life, "a friend and a mother … for almost a lifetime,"[170] as Ruben introduces her to Tessa. She has been around in Ruben's ups and downs, makes her opinions known sometimes directly and sometimes with action: generous lunches when she is happy, loud and furious cleaning when she disapproves.

Ruben never calls Magrieta black, but still it is obvious from the way she is described and in the way she speaks. She has been a servant since before Ruben knew

---

[168] Brink 2001, 273.
[169] Ibid. 263.
[170] Ibid. 72.

her, has lived in the District Six and the Cape Flats and calls Ruben 'Meneer'.[171] Her first two sentences in the novel, "Whole place is in a blerry mess again," and "You a man, Meneer," make it very clear that she is not white. The only times her colour is mentioned in the novel are when Ruben quotes somebody else's words; Magrieta's or her daughter's, for example.

Ruben feels that they are close and know everything there is to know about each other's lives. He clings to the old belief that whites are able to define the 'other' unilaterally, a characteristic evident also in Steyn's first narrative, "Still Colonial after All These Years".[172] Despite this, it at some point comes apparent even to him that he does not know Magrieta that well. Magrieta has been through three marriages and deaths of all her husbands, the 'clean-ups' of District Six and resettlement elsewhere, has seen her son join gangsters and trash Magrieta's house. Ruben has been aware of all these, but has not really been involved in any except trying to help after the eviction from District Six. And even then, it was Riana who did "the frustrating rounds from one office to the next … while [Ruben] wrote letters and drew up petitions and made representations,"[173] retreated into his study, as usual. Ruben's comment on how "[i]n the background of [his] life Magrieta continued to come and go"[174] is perhaps the best way to describe their relationship. Her life, for Ruben at least, matters only when it impinges on his.

Then there is a killing of a woman outside Magrieta's house, which results in the killers threatening Magrieta and forcing her to move in with Ruben for a while to save her life. Ruben tries to comfort Magrieta, and when they are sitting at a table, there is a moment when Ruben sees the total separation of their worlds:

---

[171] 'Mister' or 'Sir' in Afrikaans.
[172] Steyn, for example pp. 59-61.
[173] Brink 2001, 87.
[174] Ibid. 154.

50

> Worse than anything else, I think, was the sense of the distance that separated us. There was only a kitchen table between us, but we might have been creatures from different worlds who just happened by the purest of coincidence to be sharing the same space. She, the large mother from the townships … harbouring somewhere inside her global body the violence and the rage, the raping and the killing and burning of her everyday world, its poverty, its meekness and patience and suffering … I, secluded among books and music and cats, disturbed at most by images of unrequited lust, my concern a leaking tap, a squeaking gate, a girl not yet returned from her night abroad. How could I ever reach out from my world to touch hers? No way, no way at all. … She was as unreal to me as any ghost.[175]

Ruben realizes that there is a wide gap between his and Magrieta's life, a gap that he cannot even imagine bridging. This uncanny moment is a step towards acknowledging that his life has been privileged – his only worries are a leaking tap and Tessa, whereas Magrieta faces murder and suffering. After the realization, Ruben feels that his world has been invaded by Magrieta's. He reacts in his usual way; even though he feels it is not enough, he is content to let Magrieta move in, call her a taxi to collect some of her belongings from her house, and, at Magrieta's urging, retreat to his study. He has glimpsed the reality of Magrieta's life, but as so many South African whites, returns to his safe world rather than faces it.

Ruben also tries to find the easy way out of a serious argument between Tessa and Magrieta. Even though Magrieta confronts him directly, Ruben just says, "I'm sure you can sort out this whole thing among yourselves,"[176] and again escapes to his study. It is of no use however, his life changes as the result of the argument. Magrieta gives her notice, moves away and leaves Ruben. "My life seems to have drifted loose of its moorings, such as they were," says Ruben after Magrieta has left, and continues: "Losing a companion after thirty-eight years. … To me it's like a death in the family.

---

[175] Brink 2001, 142.
[176] Ibid. 277.

She'll still be looking in from time to time, I know; and I may visit her occasionally to share a cup of tea. But I know it will be different."[177]

All in all, it seems that Ruben's actions with Magrieta do not differ much from his actions with his family members and other close people. He cares about them, but is usually not willing to engage actively in any of their lives. It is much easier to leave everything be, since they cannot be controlled or managed the way words and their meanings can. Ruben's position towards Magrieta is reminiscent of colonial attitudes; his actions are somewhat paternalistic, but definitely friendly.

The almost only characters in the novel who are directly described as 'black' by Ruben are Siphiwo Mdamane, the man who replaces Ruben after he is forced to retire, and Zolani, one of Tessa's lovers. Ruben's reaction to both seems to be independent of their colour. In Siphiwo's case, Ruben says later that "under different circumstances, we might have become friends,"[178] and his resentment is more geared towards the system of correcting one wrong with another.[179] Zolani is not welcome because he is Tessa's lover, but the fact that he is black does not seem to make any difference in Ruben's reaction. The other – white – lovers are as unwelcome.

All in all, what characterises Ruben's identity are books – both his profession as a librarian and his fascination with words and the worlds they create are central – his marriage, his age, and also his race. In the beginning of the novel he is essentially a withdrawing man, clinging to the memory of his marriage and the life he has had. His greatest love is books. As the novel progresses, however, the real world intrudes and he has to face it, at least to some extent. The changes take place after Tessa's arrival; she acts like a catalyst and makes Ruben's self-realizations possible. She

---

[177] Brink 2001, 273.
[178] Ibid. 240.
[179] Ibid. 103.

makes Ruben rethink his marriage, and by bringing the outside world to his comfortable safe heaven, finally makes him participate in it more.

Emerging to the real world is not easy, and at some point, even though Ruben realizes that his own world is shrinking in the pressure of the outside reality, he cannot change. Like many South Africans, he recognises, at least fleetingly, that he has been privileged, and that things should change, but finds the real world terrifying. The only way for Ruben to live is to control the world by writing the events down so that they are manageable, or ignore them and retreat to somebody else's words. Even though he realizes that it is not the best way to live, he still goes on: "[H]ow could I not go on? … And even as I was thinking it, I already knew the thought would make no difference. I would still go on. When the next cold front moved in I'd reach for the threadbare blanket."[180] He constantly has the urge to withdraw to his own world, either the study, the library, or towards the end of the novel, under the floor of his study, which he even dreams turning into his "private bunker, safeguarded against all the threats of the outside world."[181]

The most forceful intrusion of the violence of South Africa in Ruben's life comes in the form of five young men, who rob him and Tessa and try to rape Tessa while making him watch. They are saved by passers-by who hear Tessa's screams. As soon as they get home, Ruben starts to feel unreal: "Already what had happened seemed unbelievable, remote, impossible."[182] Once again the events do not really touch him. The revelation comes at night: Tessa screamed for help, and somebody came. What has Ruben been doing all his life and why?

---

[180] Brink 2001, 144.
[181] Ibid. 259.
[182] Ibid. 298.

53

> How many other voices have there been shouting for help throughout my life, shouting for me to help? … All those cries for help from a clamouring world. While I chose not to listen. I couldn't bear to get involved. … I just want to stay out of it altogether. The world is too much with us. I cannot bear it. If Tessa had been raped, I would have been to blame. Even had there not been a knife against my throat I would not have had the courage to intervene. I write letters, I make notes. I don't like shouting.[183]

The reality of life in South Africa has seemed too violent, too desperate, demanding too much if the state of it would be recognised. It has been easier to ignore the shouting voices and not get involved, a way many whites reacted during apartheid.

Even though Ruben realises what he is doing, he cannot seem to live in the 'actual' world and take physical action. The events of the world still feel somehow unreal to him. This is proven again when Tessa finally asks Ruben to make love to her after the attempted rape. Ruben still feels the same sense of disappointment and displacement as when he saw Lenie's body for the first time: "Is this what I have so passionately lusted for, needed, dreamed of, fantasised about, for months and months? This act of taking, this possession, this fucking? Is this what I have envied the others for, cursed them for, damned them to everlasting hell for?"[184] In other words, dreaming about Tessa has been better than the actual having of her, and Ruben's love for her has been safe and has maybe suited him just *because* Tessa has kept him at a bodily distance.

Despite the fact that the new love for Tessa allows Ruben to let go of the idealized picture of his marriage to Riana, he does not give up his habit of living in his own world. His reaction to Tessa's eventual willingness to have sex with him is the habitual 'is this it?' which has characterized the important events in his life, and he is,

---

[183] Brink 2001, 299-300.
[184] Ibid. 303.

in the end, if not quite content, then at least resigned to let Tessa go. As he has observed earlier, "when she is not here I can imagine her more perfectly than when she is with me."[185] Ruben is left with Tessa's navel ring, a ring that was lost and made Ruben despair, because he believed that "once [he had] found it there would be light in the gloom that had settled … on Tessa's life."[186] Now it is with Ruben, and he can believe Tessa is all right. He can continue living in his world with his love more perfect than if Tessa was present.

Thus, the 'core' of what Ruben is remains the same, which can be seen in the last chapter of the book. Tessa moves out of Ruben's house and his life. It is not altogether clear whether Ruben will retreat to his safe world of books and words or start acting in the real world. It is worth quoting the two last paragraphs of the novel here:

> I am alone now, in this tumultuous desert where Tessa left me after disrupting the flatness of my world. But I am also not alone. Antje of Bengal is here. She will help me – and, no doubt, also make it more difficult – to face what has to be faced, what all my life I've tried to turn away from. There is a world outside – how did Rilke phrase it? – which requires me and strangely concerns me. Antje will see to it that I should not avoid it.
> I have no doubt about her continued presence any more. When I came in from the stoep where I'd stood that morning to see the old Beetle drive off for the last time in its cloud of smoke, I came into my study to take my seat behind the desk. And found on it, neatly on top of the pile of books I'd rescued from Tessa's flames, the little navel ring that had been lost, its genuine glass ruby glittering like a small drop of blood. My desire is intact.[187]

Ruben at least says that there is a world outside, but in the same sentence resorts to quoting Rainer Maria Rilke, resorting to somebody else's words again. This is the

---

[185] Brink 2001, 240.
[186] Ibid. 238.
[187] Brink 2001, 306. Ruben has before referred to his life as a desert, in connection with Magrieta's life invading his own, and his reaction of preferring to retreat from all of it: "If my life was a desert, at least it was my choice to withdrew into it … [E]ven in the desert temptation would not let Anthony [an ascetic saint] be. Monsters, lunatics, murderers, amphibians, naked women, greed, lust." (p. 173)

established pattern in his life; every time he feels something is real, actually happening, he starts to think of ways to remember it later, or links it with something somebody else has written.[188] However, it sounds like he will participate in the world more instead of trying to ignore it as he has for most of his life. Antje, the ghost that Ruben has finally recognised as something more than words he can put on paper, will see to it. He has recognised the past, and now it will not let him ignore what is going on in the real world.

On the other hand, the last thing Ruben does in the novel is to go to his study, and find Tessa's navel ring. As pointed out earlier, with the ring found, Ruben can believe Tessa will be fine, and he can again retreat to living with a ghost of a relationship. With Tessa gone, Ruben can make her into what he wants – "imagine her more perfectly". His desire is indeed intact, because there is nothing to challenge his ideal. It seems that, rather like South Africa and the whites living in the country, Ruben can go two ways. He, and the South African whites, can close his eyes and his mind, and continue living the comfortable old way – ignore the majority of the population and their problems and cling to his interpretation of things and the identity close to the old master narrative of whiteness. Or, he can be actively involved in the changes around him, recognize what has gone before, and try to change his attitudes and actions to better suit the new situation. Ruben's direction is just not sure yet.

3.1.2 Tessa Butler

Tessa Butler comes to Ruben's life when he starts seeking a lodger. She is young and very attractive in Ruben's eyes, and despite the fact that he had decided to take in an older couple, he ends up letting the rooms to Tessa. His descriptions of her

---

[188] See for example p. 223-224, where Ruben is on the beach with Tessa. He thinks, "For once I'm not looking at something through a glass darkly or through the filter of past or future, of wishful thinking or guilt. I am here, with you. *And I remember a line …*" (Brink 2001, 224. My emphasis).

are very conscious of her body and of the way she moves; Ruben's notes depict her as vulnerable, innocently beautiful and alluring, but still very corporeal. This is repeated throughout the novel, and Ruben's attitude towards Tessa varies between that of a concerned father and a jealous lover.

Even though Ruben is very conscious of Tessa's body and describes her movements and features, there are no definite clues to her colour until very late in the novel. This might be read in two ways: either Brink is subscribing to the old habit of needing to mention a person's colour only when he or she is the deviation of the white norm,[189] or, on the other hand, trying to rid himself of the old habit of defining people according to their skin colour. By leaving out Tessa's race, Brink makes it possible to interpret Tessa and Olivier's relationship as even more 'shocking' than just that of an old man and a young woman – it might also be seen as a relationship between an old *white* man and a young *black* woman. Definitely more scandalous in South Africa, where apartheid laws forbade marriages any sexual contact between races, and where the old attitudes even in this area could be assumed to have kept strong even after the fall of apartheid.

There are some indications in the novel to both ways, to Tessa being black or white. Mostly her blackness could be read in the way all the main characters, Tessa, Ruben and Magrieta, equate Tessa with Antje, and easily jump from talking about Antje to Tessa, and vice versa. Tessa herself does this after learning about Antje from Ruben:

> 'Men like having women at their mercy.'
> 'Not all men.'

---

[189] This is what Richard Dyer refers to as non-racing of the whites, which is done unconsciously: "An old-style white comedian will often start a joke: 'There's this bloke walking down the street and he meets this black geezer', never thinking to race the bloke as swell as the geezer." (Dyer 2) As pointed out in chapter 2.2, this inability to see whiteness as something special is a central feature in securing the white privilege.

> 'Willem Mostert did.'
> 'I wasn't just thinking of him.'
> I saw the distortion of her face in the wine glass. 'No man will ever muck around with me again,' she said.[190]

The comparisons get clearer the further the novel progresses; at one point, Ruben mistakes Tessa for a ghost,[191] and Tessa herself says that "[Antje] could have been my sister. She could have been me."[192] However, all the comparisons between Tessa and Antje could be read as implying that despite the fact that Antje was black and a slave, and lived three hundred years ago, the white Tessa living in post-apartheid South Africa is not very different from her.

There are also some references indicating that Tessa is white. When she tells Magrieta that she could have been Tessa's mother, Magrieta replies: "Not really, hey."[193] Also, even though Tessa tells many versions of her childhood, they all seem to describe a white childhood. In one version she says her father used to teach at university,[194] in another he's a lawyer and a would-be painter,[195] both more likely in white families than black in the seventies in South Africa. These are as vague clues as those hinting Tessa is black. There is, however, one point in the novel where Ruben describes Tessa as white in plain words. This is after she has had an abortion and Ruben is sitting beside her hospital bed waiting for her to wake up:

> Every time I look up from my notes to gaze at you, that sleeping lovely face with its disconcerting innocence, I feel the threat of here and now. …[Y]our sleeping face is more naked, and infinitely more vulnerable, than the image of your body. I write 'vulnerable'. But it is not the right word. As you lie here in the white bed – Snow White sleeping off the poison – you harbour no secrets. You *are* your own secret … True mysteries are hidden in

---

[190] Brink 2001, 51.
[191] Ibid. 127.
[192] Ibid. 290.
[193] Ibid. 94.
[194] Ibid. 78.
[195] Ibid. 290.

> the light … Your body, white and clothed in white, bathed in the gentle white light filtered through the curtains. The image of chastity, haunting me, stalking me as surely as any ghost.[196]

However, this does not necessarily mean that Tessa is white, it might also be read as Ruben writing the story in the wants to. He wants to see Tessa as innocent, vulnerable, and therefore the strong emphasis on whiteness of her clothes, surroundings and her body. Whiteness as a colour, as Dyer argues, is linked with innocence, vulnerability, goodness, ethereality – and this is the way Ruben wants to view Tessa. Furthermore, since the skin colour is not the only marker of whiteness, especially in South Africa, this description of Tessa should not be read to emphatically. She could be regarded as coloured or black even though Ruben describes her body as white. All in all, the question of Tessa's colour is left unsolved in the novel. This is, most likely, done purposefully.

Even discounting the mystery of her race, we do not actually get many facts about Tessa in the novel. She tells Ruben various versions of her childhood: first she says that her father was murdered when she was three,[197] in another version he was accidentally murdered and her mother began working in a hotel, started drinking and her children were taken away by the welfare people.[198] In still another version Tessa's father left them for a young student and moved out of the country, and her mother worked in an estate agency.[199] There are still other versions, varying from these to smaller or greater degree.

When Tessa and Ruben go to a pub, she invents new pasts for them both. Ruben is obviously amazed. By the time they move to another group in the pub, he has lost the momentary feeling of not being present, and just allows Tessa to go on:

---

[196] Brink 2001, 177-178 (emphasis in the original).
[197] Ibid. 26.
[198] Ibid. 34.
[199] Ibid. 78.

"They'd probably invented themselves anyway, just as Tessa had reinvented us. This time she turned into a fashion photographer, I was introduced as a bookbinder specializing in erotica. My mind was in a daze".[200] Tessa's attitude to this reinventing of herself comes clear in the following:

> 'People are fascinating,' she said with closed eyes.
> 'I think you *make* them so,' I said. 'You make yourself fascinating.'
> 'What do you mean?'
> 'Those stories you told them about yourself. Are they true?'
> 'I can no longer remember.' A little laugh. 'Does it matter?'[201]

She does not care what version of herself she presents to people, and does not, as Ruben observes, seem to care much about what happens to her, either. She "[glides] along the surface of life … remaining singularly uninvolved."[202] This is also what the reader is left with: an impression of somebody floating past, nothing tangible to concentrate on, always changing.

Tessa leaves Ruben's house after an attack on them by the five youngsters they encounter on a walk. The attackers are very carefully left uncoloured, even though Ruben describes them quite clearly: "There were five of them, although I didn't think of counting then. Young men, ranging I'd say from the mid-teens to the late twenties. That is what I told the police afterwards. One had a limp, another a scar on his left cheek. One wore a knitted cap drawn down low over his eyes, the rest were bare-headed."[203] Throughout the passage, they are described in a way that leaves their colour as undecided as Tessa's. This, disregarding the violence of the scene, might be read as what Brink hopes for South Africa's future: people acting and reacting to *people*, their races unimportant.

---

[200] Brink 2001, 111.
[201] Ibid. 112 (emphasis in the original)
[202] Ibid. 191.
[203] Ibid. 293.

Also Tessa could be read as an allegory of South Africa and South African whites after the fall of apartheid. She is flitting from place to place and work to work without really knowing what she wants to do. She tells countless stories of herself and her identity seems to change from situation to situation. It seems that either she does not know what and who she is at all, or has decided to be whatever she wants in any single situation regardless of the consequences. She is, in her way, trying to find the way forward in the more uncertain South Africa, which is trying to rid itself of the old ways of looking at things, but which has not yet found the best way to deal with the uncertainty.

3.1.3 Kristien Müller

Kristien, the protagonist in *Imaginings of Sand*, is an outsider like Ruben. The central fact characterizing Kristien is her exile. She has left because she could not fit into the identity expected of her as white, Afrikaner and woman. In contrast to Ruben, however, by the end of the novel she feels more a part of South Africa, and also participates in the real life and works to make it better. In this chapter I will mostly look at her identity through her 'outsideness' and her whiteness.

Kristien left South Africa because she felt at odds with the Afrikaner way of life; her father's "smug dedication to the great causes of Afrikaner politics,"[204] the narrow role accorded to women, and the forced separation of the 'races'. One moment of realisation came when she and her friends were discussing human condition at a student party. Suddenly, a black man run through the yard, and on his heels came police, guns in hand. To Kristien, this is a revelation:

> [T]o me it was another shift, as if the whole submerged other half
> – four-fifths – of life in South Africa had suddenly, forcibly,

---

[204] Brink 1996, 140.

> broken into the comfortable little enclave in which I'd been brought up. … [H]aving been brought, for one shocking instant, face to face with that secret dark segment of life in this country on which everything else is predicated, I couldn't just blithely return to the bliss of my habitual ignorance.[205]

This is similar to how the fact of their whiteness dawned upon many of the narrators of Steyn's last narrative, "Under African Skies", and especially the ones Steyn labels as 'hybridizers'. Unlike Ruben after his moment of revelation about the violence of Magrieta's life, Kristien acts to change it by turning to anti-apartheid activity. The final straw that makes Kristien leave the country is a threat of an immorality trial. She is asked to give information on fellow students at the university anti-apartheid group, and after her denial, is threatened with a trial because of her friendship with Jason, a coloured teacher and an organiser for the university anti-apartheid activity. The threat is mostly to Jason, since he is non-white and more likely to actually suffer the consequences of the trial. So, Kristien leaves the country, never to return. "I knew then, yes, that I should go. I would leave the margin and move into another territory. Its name was history."[206]

Many South Africans of all races left the country during apartheid. According to Gordimer, whites left because they could not "bear the guilt and ugliness of the white man's easy lot here; a few have left because they are afraid of the black man; and most, I should say, have left because of the combination of the two."[207] Kristien does not seem to fit into Gordimer's categories: by going into exile, she thinks she could participate in the changing of South Africa, and perhaps get her name in history, unlike the generations of Afrikaner women who were pushed into obscurity while their men were remembered. However, part of Kristien's reason could be a desire "to

---

[205] Brink 1996, 141.
[206] Ibid. 149.
[207] Gordimer 34.

find a society … where [her] white skin will have no bearing on [her] place in the community,"[208] a reason Gordimer also recognises.

However, Kristien has not felt much at home in England, either. Her lover, Michael "may represent the closest I've come to 'belonging' over the last eleven years, but even he feels like a surrogate; I remain at one remove,"[209] says Kristien. She has participated in the anti-apartheid movement and ANC's work in London mostly to spite her father: "with every action I was striking my little blow against everything my father represented."[210] The problem with fighting against her father and the Afrikaner system in this way is that when her father dies, Kristien cannot see the sense of it any longer. Another problem in her rebellion is that she feels that she is again pushed to the sidelines, "doing manageable womanly things … History had passed me by".[211] Going abroad had been a failure.

When Kristien returns to South Africa she is on one hand not willing to let the past catch up with her,[212] but on the other hand realizes that there is much unfinished business that she has to face if she goes back.[213] By returning to South Africa she feels she is "reassum[ing] an identity suspended when [she] left … recovering the self that remained behind,"[214] even though she feels that the whole country is mad, and that she is totally out of place among the history she would rather deny than participate in.[215] She still does not feel she belongs there, she is not able to understand either her sister and brother-in-law and their fear of the change power, nor can she even in retrospect understand her parents. And even her Grandmother, Ouma

---

[208] Gordimer 34.
[209] Brink 1996, 42.
[210] Ibid. 151.
[211] Ibid. 156.
[212] Ibid. 11.
[213] Ibid. 15.
[214] Ibid. 31.
[215] Ibid. 126.

Kristina, does not seem to be what Kristien expected. Similarly to Ruben in *The Rights of Desire*, Kristien is disillusioned: "Is this what I've come back for?"[216]

Bit by bit, however, she learns about her ancestors through Ouma's stories, but also about her sister Anna, and through their discussions also confronts what she left behind when she went to exile. The central theme throughout the novel is the role given to women in Afrikaner culture; it is what Kristien rebels against, what Anna tries to fulfil without success, and what is important in Ouma's stories. Kristien's ancestors, the numerous women of the stories, have all been unconventional, outside the mould of Afrikaner women, and when Kristien learns about this, she starts to feel that South Africa might, after all, be where she belongs. In a family of strong women she is the only one who has the possibility of truly having her say in history, and shaping her own life. She has left the country in order to do just that, but now she is discovering that it is possible to do it in South Africa. She makes a stand by staying and voting for all the voiceless women who came before her. Like Steyn's 'hybridisers' she finds a source of affirmation for her beliefs in these stories "previously subjugated by the dominant narrative".[217] She has finally found the thing to believe in, the people of South Africa, both present and those that have come before her.[218]

Kristien is quite different from Ruben in that she consciously thinks about her whiteness, what it has given her, and what it means in the new South Africa. She would like to be on equal footing with Ouma's servants and other blacks she meets, but the problem is that they are often more reserved.[219] Despite the willingness to stop acting according to the old stereotypes, she sometimes catches herself doing just that:

---

[216] Brink 1996, 46.
[217] Steyn 144.
[218] Ibid. 308.
[219] See for example pp. 43-44 and 71-72.

she offers to find out what possibilities there might be for Jonnie, the servants' son, and thinks: "Suddenly it sounds such a 'white' thing to say that it makes me feel sick."[220] She also fears of falling to the old trap of assuming that since the coloured servants are around, they are available to help her at any time.[221]

On the other hand this self-doubt might come *just because* she is willing to see everyone as equal and is afraid of not making it clear enough, and also because she is trying to rid herself of the superior white attitude and cannot help feeling annoyed when she catches herself acting according to it anyway. As Gordimer points out, "[e]ven those of us who don't want to be boss … have become used to being bossy. We've been used to assuming leadership or at least tutorship … we may – indeed, I know we shall – be tempted to offer guidance when we haven't been consulted."[222] Also, according to Steyn, the way to leaving the whiteness behind is by recognising its effects on oneself – effects like feelings of superiority and collective cultural ignorance of the 'other'.[223] Like Steyn's 'hybridisers', this seems to be what Kristien tries to do.

Kristien seems, despite her own doubts, to have come a long way to rid herself of the white conditioning; her only true love affair is with a black man – although this might be thought as a part of her rebellion in London – she takes the possibility of black blood in her ancestors in her stride, and is willing to recognize Trui, one of the coloured servants, as her kin. Her dealings with non-whites are mostly in terms of people, not colours. All in all, to Kristien gender seems to be more significant than colour. The picture this gives of the future in South Africa is more hopeful than that given in *The Rights of Desire*. It is also more hopeful than what

---

[220] Brink 1996, 72.
[221] Ibid. 66.
[222] Gordimer 35.
[223] Steyn 133.

Gordimer could imagine in 1959: "For if we're going to fit in at all in the new Africa, it's going to be sideways, where-we-can, wherever-they'll-shift-up-for-us. This will not be comfortable; indeed, it will be the hardest of all for those of us … who want to belong in the new Africa as we never could in the old".[224] As a result, many whites will leave. Kristien, instead, believes it is possible to stay and build something together: "I no longer have the wild faith of youth in my ability to change the world; but I also know that it *can* be changed, and that I want to be involved in it. … To work with others, to bring about a world – slowly, gradually, but surely, I swear – in which it will no longer be inevitable to be only a victim. … There are points of no return that mark the beginning, not the end, of hope."[225]

3.2 The Haunting Past of the Afrikaners

3.2.1 The houses and their ghosts

In Postcolonial Gothic the past is seen as something that cannot be left behind, as something that unavoidably affects the present. The colonial period repressed many voices and left stories untold, and these are now, in postcolonial times, manifesting themselves in ghosts and haunting. This is true also in André Brink's *Imaginings of Sand* and *The Rights of Desire*, where both Ruben and Kristien face haunted houses and ghosts related to their history as Afrikaners.

Ruben's house is haunted, and it has clear connections to the Gothic mansions of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. Ruben himself describes it as "more Victorian than anything else ... with only a stretch of boundary wall left of what was once, reputedly, an estate of impressive dimensions."[226] And his son tells that "[t]he house is falling apart. It's getting darker and gloomier every year. No one

---

[224] Gordimer 32.
[225] Brink 1996, 348 (emphasis in the original).
[226] Brink 2001, 3.

has touched the garden in ages. It's a wilderness."[227] The reader gets a good picture of a building heading towards ruin, but with a past as grander and more orderly place.

The house in *Imaginings of Sand* has also seen better days. It is an amalgam of different styles, "started off as High Victorian folly [and] turned out as Boer Baroque,"[228] filled with mysteriously appearing and disappearing rooms, and a warren of cellars mirroring the house above like a memory of it. It is "[a] place where anything or everything was possible, might happen, did happen. At night it was visited by ghosts and ancestral spirits … but even in the daytime … it appeared … desperate and exuberant proof of the extremes the human mind, let loose, is capable of."[229] When Kristien returns, the house is half burned, and even under it shows signs of decay; there is no electricity, the cellar staircase is crumbling and some windows are broken. In a true gothic form, both houses have ghosts.

Postcolonial Gothic, as classic Gothic fiction, views history as something inescapable, something that will return to haunt you, and this haunting is often emblematised in the house.[230] This is also the case in both *The Rights of Desire* and *Imaginings of Sand*. I would suggest that Brink uses the house to symbolise South Africa, and since the houses belong to Afrikaners, the ghosts might be read as the alternate versions of history clamouring to get heard and acknowledged. The official history of South Africa was, after all, written by Afrikaners and it left out much of what took place in the country. And, from the point of view of the Afrikaners, their house, South Africa, might indeed be heading towards ruin.

In *Imaginings of Sand*, the country is waiting for the first democratic elections of 1994. The whites are very tense, preparing for full-out war. Casper,

---

[227] Brink 2001, 4-5.
[228] Brink 1996, 7.
[229] Ibid. 9-10.
[230] Punter, 193.

Kristien's brother-in-law, says that they are prepared to die for their way of life and to keep the land they love and call their own,[231] and Anna, his wife and Kristien's sister, voices the common fear: "Once the blacks take over – I mean, anything can happen."[232] The overall mentality is: "It's them or us."[233]

As already said, Kristien has left the country, never to return. As things turn out, she does come back, but feels very out-of-touch with the other Afrikaners, especially her sister and brother-in-law. "All I feel is – outside; beyond,"[234] she says. She intends to stay only until her grandmother dies, and then return to London. The grandmother, Ouma Kristina, has other ideas, however. She tells Kristien the history of or, depending on the point of view, stories about the family's women. Kristien has heard them before and confesses to "never [seeing] any special significance in her jumble of stories."[235] Ouma's idea is to give Kristien another side of the Afrikaner history, one that has been suppressed. She compares it to "let[ting] loose her idiots", the people who have been locked in the cellar as too shameful to be seen. Except that in their family, as she tells Kristien, "an idiot needn't necessarily be retarded or a waterhead. It's anyone who deviates from the norm. Anyone who dares to be different."[236] So, Ouma Kristina tells Kristien about Kamma, who turned herself into a tree, of Samuel, a woman who pretended to be a man, of Wilhelmina, as strong as most men and known as the Fat Woman, of Lottie, who did not speak, of Ouma herself, and others. All of whom were forced to silence, leaving their stories outside the official history. At the same time, she tells the history of the house she lives in.

---

[231] Brink 1996, 51.
[232] Ibid. 48.
[233] Ibid. 36.
[234] Ibid. 42.
[235] Ibid. 86.
[236] Ibid. 87.

The stories are magical, surreal, and change from telling to telling. Kristien is disappointed: "'I thought you were going to tell me the truth.' 'No. I asked you to come so I could tell you stories,'"[237] is Ouma's answer. Ouma's intent is clarified by what Brink himself has written elsewhere, non-fictionally, about story and history: "[S]tory does not presume to bring to light 'the' truth, but at most a version of it. And its value resides in allowing the reader to compare a variety of available versions in order either to choose among them or to construct a composite image from all of them".[238] In *Imaginings of Sand*, Brink recounts, his meaning was not to find the 'sense' behind Ouma's stories, but what sense the telling of the stories at that point in their lives, could make.[239]

Bit by bit Kristien starts to realise the point behind Ouma's stories and the telling of them. They are told to give Kristina a sense of history, but also to show her that there are alternate views to see the history. She realises that it does not matter whether they are true or not, as long as she has "written it all down, [she has] appropriated it, claimed it as [her] own,"[240] as her link to South Africa. The stories are meant to help her understand what she and South Africa are,[241] they are told to make her realise that if you pretend to forget the past you cannot imagine the future.[242] The past needs to be dealt with; otherwise it will not leave you free to choose the future. "How sad – no, how dangerous – to have suppressed all this for so long,"[243] is Kristien's realisation. She has, obviously learned something.

---

[237] Brink 1996, 114.
[238] Brink 1998, 39.
[239] Ibid. 40.
[240] Brink 1996, 125.
[241] Ibid. 174.
[242] Ibid. 264.
[243] Ibid. 97.

At the same time with Ouma's stories, the elections approach. To everyone's surprise, the violence stops, and the election day itself is peaceful. In the polling queue,

> [t]he mood is festive, even if the first news imparted to us, almost gleefully, is that the polling station has run out of voting papers. …there is no sign of anger or protest. … We all talk, and laugh, and speculate together. In our midst are businessmen in suits, laborers in overalls, youngsters in jeans, the destitute in rags, the social climbers in outfits from Cape Town and Johannesburg … All colors, all ages, all shapes and sizes.[244]

The voting is momentous to Kristien as well, for she has never voted. Before leaving South Africa, she did not vote as a protest to the apartheid politics, and in England she felt outside and saw no need to vote because the issues did not touch her. Now she has claimed the past as her own, and finally feels that she has a history of her own instead of the official one forced on her because she is an Afrikaner. History used to belong to her father, or the blacks of the country, but not her.[245] Kristien realizes that her history "may be paltry; or it may be outrageous; most of it may be even be invented. *But it is mine*. And all of it, the whole accumulated wave of it, will be involved in the small cross I am to trace."[246] Finally she is willing to vote because she feels she is able to vote *for* something instead of just against.[247]

In *The Rights of Desire*, the mood is less hopeful. The elections - "that famous moment when we were supposed to become a democracy and our lives changed utterly for at least three months"[248] as Ruben says - have come and gone, but the country does not seem to move towards better times. The papers are full of

---

[244] Brink 1996, 307-309.
[245] Ibid. 323.
[246] Ibid. 309 (emphasis in the original).
[247] Ibid. 312.
[248] Brink 2001, 8-9.

70

"murder, mayhem, corruption and scandals,"[249] and they even reach Ruben's
neighbourhood. His friend, Johnny MacFarlane, is murdered in his own house by a
young man hired to help him, Magrieta's life seems to be full of violence, Ruben's
one son has moved to Australia and the other is about to leave for Canada, and at the
end of the novel Tessa and Ruben get robbed and Tessa is almost raped. It is indeed
very different from the exuberance of the election day described in the *Imaginings of
Sand*.

Ruben's house has an 'actual' ghost, Antje of Bengal, a slave girl in the Cape
of the early eighteenth century, and a victim of her master and lover. But the house is
also haunted by Ruben's past - his childhood, marriage and the choices he has made in
life. "Memories stealing past to haunt me, like old ghosts. I've tried for so long to lay
them to rest but they have a way of coming back,"[250] says Ruben himself.

There are several versions of Antje's story in the book, and they differ
slightly according to the teller. The first version comes from Ruben.[251] He tells Tessa
that Antje came to the Cape from Batavia, nowadays known as Jakarta. We can
deduce from her name (Antje *of Bengal*) that her origins were in India. Ruben tells
Tessa that Antje was brought to the cape by the Dutch in 1696 when she was six years
old, separated from her mother, and sold to a baker. After the baker's death, Antje was
auctioned to Willem and Susara Mostert of Papenboom ("the first owners of this
[Ruben's] house"[252]). Willem had, according to Ruben's research, been obsessed by
Antje already before he bought her, and after that they started a sexual relationship.
Some time later Willem and Antje murdered Susara to get rid of her. Willem was not
blamed for the death, however, but Antje. She was tortured, executed and

---

[249] Brink 2001, 64.
[250] Ibid. 82.
[251] Ibid. 40-49.
[252] Ibid. 40.

dismembered. Willem collected her remains, took them to his house and committed suicide. Antje's body was never found.

Ruben's account is based on hard facts: he quotes research done on slavery at the Cape and on this particular case, the court records, and a confession made by Willem to the Reverend Le Boucq of the Dutch Reformed Church and "submitted during the subsequent inquest [into Willem's death], with such amendations and corruptions and hiatuses as the man of God deemed fit to bring to it."[253] His facts come from men only, and Antje has no say in the story. She is not once an active participant, but always the target of actions. She is sold, assigned something, led by the hand, taken here and there, lured, locked up and so on. Ruben also points out that "we have no way of knowing ... whether the passion was mutual or whether Antje merely submitted to the master's exercise of ... his 'rights'."[254] Tessa's reaction to Ruben's story is revealing:

> 'I guess all those historians were men?'
> 'Why?'
> 'It is supposed to be Antje's story, but she hardly features in it.'
> 'That may be enough reason for her still to stick around,' I said lightly.
> She took it more seriously than I'd meant it. 'You may be right.'[255]

Ruben has never even seen Antje, but his housekeeper, Magrieta, has, and also "seem[s] to have regular conversations"[256] with her, as Ruben tells Tessa. Magrieta's version of Antje's story comes straight from the girl herself, and in it Antje is presented as an active agent instead of just a target. We also get a sense of her as a person, instead of the mere possession she was in Ruben's version of the story. Magrieta tells that Antje was afraid when she was bought by Willem, and at first

---

[253] Brink 2001, 48.
[254] Ibid. 41.
[255] Ibid. 51.
[256] Ibid. 50.

bullied by the other slaves. Later she is accepted in the household, and even taught how to please men by one of the older slave women. She is not passive in relation to Willem, either: "When it came to the baas, it wasn't for Antje to say yes or no – en anyway, as she tole me, it was always yes with her. The two of them was like a sickness in the blood. So it made no difference that she had no right to say yes or no."[257] From Magrieta we also learn that Antje did indeed kill Susara on Willem's behalf, but that after it had been done, he did not want her any longer. One of the other slaves, Cupido went to tell the authorities about the murder, and Antje was convicted.

Tessa and Magrieta bond with each other and Antje as women, but also on some other level, from which Ruben feels excluded. He starts to resent the fact that his knowledge of Antje comes "vicariously, through books, through the notes I've made over the years based on journeys of exploration through the libraries, the Archives."[258] He is relying on science to explain Antje, whereas Tessa and Magrieta *believe* in her. Before, Ruben's interest has been academic, to learn as many facts about her life as possible, but now he starts to wonder why Antje is haunting his house. He suggests to Tessa that Antje perhaps wants to get her voice heard, but does not seem to believe it himself. Tessa and Magrieta seem to be more open to the possible explanations of Antje's presence. After hearing Magrieta's story about Antje, Tessa says:

> 'No wonder she's still around.'
> 'To take revenge?' I [Ruben] asked. 'To look for justice?'
> 'She doesn't sound like the kind of person that's bent on revenge. And there's not much justice in the world anyway.'
> 'Then why should she still be haunting this house?'

---

[257] Brink 2001, 96.
[258] Ibid. 133.

Magrieta shrugged. 'Just to tell her story, perhaps. Isn't that enough reason?'[259]

Later Tessa finds out from Antje, it was actually she who made Cupido go to the authorities, after she had almost forced herself on him. Tessa also indicates that it might have been the only way she felt she could have some kind of justice. This makes it less likely that Antje would stay in the house because she wants justice, however. Ruben is baffled why she would stay, but Tessa offers one explanation: "Maybe she isn't here for herself but for us. … Perhaps … we need our ghosts as much as they need us."[260] This is a clear link to the idea in Postcolonial Gothic of using ghosts to remind us of the forgotten past.

Whatever the reason for Antje to stay in Ruben's house, she is still there at the end of the novel. However, there are changes in Ruben's attitude towards her. Whereas before his interest used to be academic, now he starts to believe in Antje and even sees her. This might be interpreted as him acknowledging her. And, in a similar way to Kristien finding her history through the family ghosts, Ruben might be seen as finding another way to interpret history from the one his used to. Ruben also finds Antje's skeleton under his study floor, moves the skull, until now on top of the body, to its right place, and after consulting with Magrieta, buries the remains under stones.[261] According to Magrieta, Antje will be in peace, with her head returned to its proper place. She is thus left under Ruben's study, a reminder of what the past has been.

Besides Antje, there are other ghosts in Ruben's house; his past decisions and the people come to haunt him and demand to be recognized. Just like Antje, they

---

[259] Brink 2001, 98.
[260] Ibid. 250.
[261] Ibid. 279- 284.

make Ruben reconsider the past and why it has happened as it has. After he has given the memories the attention they deserve and made himself recognize them as they have been, he is no longer haunted by them. A good example is Ruben's marriage. As is clear from the analysis above, he first insists that it was a happy marriage, but his memories do not leave him in peace with this illusion. Only after he recognizes that the marriage had its problems and that he was not the only one to blame, is he able to make his peace with the past. It is made easier by Magrieta's revelation about Riana's infidelity; this releases Ruben from the guilt he has suffered because he thought he was the only one to fail the marriage.

What is important in both of the novels is that the houses are haunted by stories or ghosts whose stories have not been acknowledged or heard, and sometimes they have even been forcibly suppressed. Ruben's knowledge of Antje in the beginning of *The Rights of Desire* comes through white historians, and she has no say in it herself, and Kristien's female ancestors have all been somehow voiceless, forced to do what their men have wanted. During the novels we get various versions of Antje's story, and of Kristien's ancestors. The important point that both Ruben and Kristien learn to acknowledge is that there does not need to be one master story, but instead all versions can be accepted. Maybe this is the reason that the ghosts have stayed around – to remind them that there are many ways to see the past, and all should be heard. Indeed, this seems to be the view that Brink himself has about history and the role of stories in relation to it. He says that in his fiction, there has been a change "toward an intimation that something may in fact have happened [in the past], but that we can never be sure of it or gain access to it, and that the best we

can do is to fabricate metaphors – that is, tell stories – in which, not history, but imaginings of history are invented."[262]

What Ruben and Kristien do with this realization differs, however. Kristien feels that she "can no longer be detached, apart. [She] is not simply the result of those who have gone before: if [she] needs them … they also need [her]."[263] She decides to stay in South Africa, and try to change the way the country is. "To work with others, to bring about a world … in which it will no longer be inevitable to be only a victim."[264] And Ouma's house, as an echo of South Africa, is inherited by her coloured servants Trui and Jeremiah, who begin to "convert it into a more permanent abode, gradually taking possession, insinuating themselves into its space,"[265] repairing the house and making it liveable again. Ruben, instead, stays in his house. He hints at more involvement with the outside world, but on the other hand falls back to saying: "I have memories, I can survive."[266] Magrieta moves out, and Ruben is left in the house, together with Antje and his memories. On the other hand, recognizing Antje and her role in history, Ruben might be seen as abandoning the stereotypical Afrikaner way of thinking, learning to accommodate other ways of seeing the past. The ghost under his study will influence his actions, and he is aware of it. The direction of his life is not clear, however.

This difference in reactions is perhaps due to time the difference between the novels. *Imaginings of Sand* was published in 1996, two years after the elections it describes, and *The Rights of Desire* in 2001. By that time it must have been obvious that the changes would not be either easy or fast, and that South Africa would still

---

[262] Brink 1998, 42.
[263] Brink 1996, 336.
[264] Ibid. 348.
[265] Ibid. 338.
[266] Brink 2001, 306.

have a long way to go to reach equality between people. The attitudes have proven hard to change, and mostly the whites would just like to forget about the apartheid period and what was done during it to the majority of the population, which apparent for example in their resistance to talking about race.

3.2.2 The master identity of Afrikaners

As has been explained above, the overriding identity in South Africa has come through race. Especially Afrikaners have clung to their idea of themselves as a pure people who are as entitled to the land as the black South Africans. Since Afrikaners have seen themselves as constantly under a threat from either the natives or the British colonists, they have employed the collective identity to unify the people. This has created a master identity for Afrikaners, one that represents the people as hardy, ready to battle, religious (they are the chosen people, after all). The Afrikaner family is ruled by the father and women have been pushed to a supporting role. The paternalistic attitude extends to non-whites as well; Afrikaners are thought to be a superior race, and therefore better equipped to rule and guide the non-whites.

There are good examples of this kind of Afrikaners in *Imaginings of Sand*. Kristien's sister and brother-in-law, Anna and Casper, are terrified of the change of power, which they see as a definite end to their way of life: "A week from now will be the end of the world as we know it. Do you have any idea of what's going to become of us? … We're fighting for our *lives*".[267] They are farmers, afraid of loosing the land they love, and seeing nowhere else they could go if they do.[268] Their family is ruled by Casper; Anna refers all major decisions to him, and he rules the family with a hard hand. Casper expresses a stereotypical Afrikaner attitude to women; for example,

---

[267] Brink 1996, 80 (emphasis in the original).
[268] Ibid. 51.

when Kristien tries to persuade him that there is an alternative to armed struggle, he tells her: "You're trying to argue like a man."[269] He also describes their topic as 'man-talk', as something that should not concern women. In *The Rights of Desire*, the feeling of being under siege has definitely passed, and perhaps therefore the novel does not directly concern itself with race relations and what being Afrikaner in the new South Africa might be.

In both novels Brink shows alternatives to the master identity; neither Ruben nor Kristien are comfortable with the roles they are given from outside, and the past that they both go through reveals other ways to be an Afrikaner. The essential factor in both their lives has been a sense of displacement, of being out of tune with the world. Ruben is not the typical masculine and paternalistic Afrikaner head of the family, but instead an introvert, and more willing to let his wife lead the family. Kristien cannot imagine being content defined only by husband and children. Instead she would like to have her say in history, and is willing to argue for her point of view with any man. What they are clashes with what is expected of them.

The master identity is also questioned by Ouma Kristina's stories, which seem to make fun of the Afrikaner beliefs: the stories have elements from the myths central to Afrikaners, but Ouma makes them sound ridiculous. This making fun or pointing at the possibly ridiculous parts of the past is not unique to Brink; according to Wisker, the women's Postcolonial Gothic she has studied uses "the supernatural and fantasy … alongside realistic factual accounts to critique contradictions, and highlight little ironies" of either the colonists or the colonized societies.[270] In *Imaginings of Sand*, one of the foremothers, for example, builds a ship to sail to Israel

---

[269] Brink 1996, 52.
[270] Wisker 64.

to join the Israeli, "from whom the Boers had descended,"[271] another is called Samuel, despite being female, because her father is so afraid of breaking a covenant made with God – a covenant, which stated that in exchange for a victory from a San tribe, the head of the family would always have to be Samuel Grobler. To guarantee this, all eighteen children, boys or girls, were named Samuel.[272] Both the covenant with God and being the chosen people are central myths in Afrikaner tradition.

The remainder of the chapter will look at where Ruben or Kristien can be placed in the spectrum of Steyn's identities. In *Imaginings of Sand*, it is the time of the change of power, but it is still reasonable to expect Kristien to have a more 'progressive' white identity, since she has participated in the anti-apartheid activities and has had to think about her whiteness. Ruben, instead, might be expected to have a less progressive identity, since he is older that Kristien, male, and is, all in all, not very willing to participate in the real world. Both of them have characteristics from several of Steyn's identities.

Ruben seems to be at odds with real life in general, not necessarily with living in the changed circumstances for whites in South Africa. He has been made to retire in order to make room for a young veteran of the black freedom struggle:

> I was offered a package, with a very firm indication that I'd better take it or else. And Siphiwo Mdamane was given my job. I had less than three years to go to retirement. Couldn't they just have allowed me to see it out? … Dead wood had to make way for the previously disadvantaged …[273]

Being 'the victim' of the affirmative action is not easy, even though Ruben does recognize something has to be done in the country. Getting "booted out just because I'm white and male" is not acceptable, says Ruben, and even after Tessa reminds him

---

[271] Brink 1996, 99.
[272] Ibid. 204.
[273] Brink 2001, 9.

that for a long time you could be fired for being black, Ruben sticks to his point: "I know it was high time things changed, … but you can't solve a wrong with another wrong."[274] He is still thinking that even though something has to change is post-apartheid South Africa, it does not need to be himself. This echoes Steyn's second narrative "This Shouldn't Happen to a White".

Ruben's attitude towards Magrieta is closer to the first narrative, "Still Colonial after All These Years". Even though their relationship might be friendly and Ruben thinks of Magrieta as a part of his family, the way he acts is still paternalistic. For example, when Magrieta loses her flat, Ruben is the one to immediately start looking for a new one, and he somehow feels responsible for Magrieta's well-being. Kristien also catches herself thinking like this; she, for example, suggests that she could try to find out future possibilities for Trui's son, and does not take into account what either the son or Trui want. Trui admonishes her: "You want to take my life in your hands … Do I have no say in it?"[275] Kristien is, however, aware of this, instead of doing it unconsciously as Ruben is, and this might indicate an attitude more in tune with Steyn's last narrative, "Under African Skies".[276] She recognises that her attitudes have been shaped by the apartheid reality, and tries to act to change them.

Kristien is also more open to non-white cultures. She has learned Xhosa, habits like the "African double handshake", and is open to learning from the non-whites she meets. In contrast, Ruben is steeped in European culture, despite being an Afrikaner himself. He listens to classical composers and the worlds where he spends much of his time are created by Europeans: his companions include Don Quixote, Macbeth, Dostoyevsky, James Joyce, and the Little Prince, to name but a few. It is not

---

[274] Brink 2001, 103.
[275] Brink 1996, 244.
[276] See Steyn 133-134.

so much that he thinks the European culture is better, but more that he cannot see the alternatives applying to him. He listens to Magrieta's stories, but thinks that "[m]ere facts were never an impediment to Magrieta's powers of imagination and her stories … were entertaining enough to hook even the most sceptical listener."[277] Entertaining, but not to be taken as seriously as the European culture's products. This also fits with the "Still Colonial after All These Years" -narrative.

Ruben and Kristien's attitudes towards what should be done to right the wrongs in South Africa are similar, but their reactions again differ. Ruben thinks that "perhaps the only way of attempting to repair it [the broken existence in South Africa] is by remaining part of it. Again, I don't know."[278] His idea, however, does not result in action; he stays in the house with his memories. Kristien is in the beginning of the novel strongly against the Afrikaner way of life, almost preferring the blacks over whites; her relationships with blacks are closer than with whites (with the exception of Ouma), she has been involved in the liberation struggle, she is appreciative of black African culture, but cannot find much good in her own – either culture or people she meets when she returns to South Africa. This sounds like one strand of Steyn's narrative "Under African Skies", which sees whiteness as something to be guilty over; involvement in the liberation of blacks has been a personal atonement for what has been done in South Africa, and also a way to find self-esteem.[279]

However, Kristien also shows elements of a second strand of the "Under African Skies" narrative, which Steyn calls hybridisation. She recognizes that being white has been central in her life, but most importantly, the future needs to be built

---

[277] Brink 2001, 214.
[278] Ibid. 263.
[279] Steyn, 121- 126.

together, but the past should not be forgotten, either.[280] What seems more significant in this strand of the narrative, however, is the willingness to listen to the 'other' and see them as human beings, not as representatives of a certain race. This is what Kristien does in the novel. She has been willing to treat blacks as good and not inferior, and on the other hand has learned to be suspicious of whites/Afrikaners, but now she realizes that neither colour is an immediate guarantee of either 'goodness' or 'badness':

> 'I'm confused … About myself. About the country. About you.'
> [says Kristien to Nomaza, a member of ANC]
> 'Me?'
> 'Not you personally. I trust you. … But the whole new government. Not all of them will be like you and Thando and Sandile and Mongane.'
> 'Of course not,' she says. 'You've seen enough of the struggle to realize it takes all kinds. You of all people should know.'[281]

Kristien also gets to know Abel Joubert, an Afrikaner farmer, who has for years been helping blacks in his farm. He has a clear view of the way forward: "What we need is to start seeing more than just black and white." When Anna reminds him that they are in South Africa, implying that it is not possible, he continues: "All the more reason for breaking the stereotypes."[282] This seeing more that just black and white is the way Kristien is going; she is finding a new way to see, not only her own whiteness, but also her 'Afrikanerness' and the way the apartheid ideology has reduced all South Africans to their colour only.

---

[280] Steyn, 132-133.
[281] Brink 1996, 266.
[282] Ibid. 158.

4 Conclusions

In this thesis I have analysed white identity in André Brink's novels *Imaginings of Sand* and *The Rights of Desire*. I intended to find out whether Brink's white protagonists conform to the Western master narrative of whiteness and to the dominant Afrikaner identity which was promoted under the apartheid regime, and whether there has been any change in the way whiteness is seen in South Africa since the fall of apartheid. I also explored how the past affects the way Afrikaners see themselves.

The introductory chapter briefly goes through the history of South Africa from the white, and especially Afrikaner, point of view. Also the role literature has played in opposing apartheid, and Brink's contribution to this, are investigated in the introduction. Brink has been seen as a dissident writer, offering different ways to be an Afrikaner and challenging the dominant identity forced on whites under apartheid rule. Therefore it might also be expected that his post-apartheid novels would deal with what white South Africans, and especially Afrikaners, have to go through when they have to find alternative identifications to the former master identity. The theoretical framework of the thesis consists of postcolonial issues of identity, nationality and race. In addition, I have used Postcolonial Gothic in the analysis of the haunting and ghosts in both novels.

I looked at how identity and its formation have been theorized mainly through Stuart Hall's ideas. What Hall suggests is that in post-modern society identities should be seen as fragmented, different situations calling for different, sometimes contradictory identifications, and that people feel they have a coherent

83

identity only because they construct one through narratives of their lives. The narration of the self is apparent in both Brink's novels. Ruben Olivier and Kristien Müller are the narrators of their stories, and add observations and comments to the 'actual' events, comments that analyse their own actions and link events to each other in a way that was not obvious to them as they took place. Also, according to this view of identity, the unconscious affects the way we see ourselves. Painful or embarrassing events can be suppressed from active knowledge, but they might still influence the way we react in certain situations or the way we see ourselves. This is what Ruben has done with the memory of his marriage: he has, more or less consciously, refused to see that the life with Riana was not happy, because facing that would have meant acknowledging that his life had not gone as it should have.

However, also sociological definition of identity was useful in trying to find out who the protagonists on the novels are. According to this view, people's identities are formed in interaction with the outside world, the expectations of others and the way these change or define the way people identify themselves. Both Ruben and Kristien change during the novels, and also change the way they see themselves. Ruben's revelations about himself are caused or eased by Tessa. Ruben's love for her, and her actions during the novel make Ruben see that his marriage was not as happy as he has insisted it was, and notice more clearly the way he has of withdrawing from the world when it gets too painful or requires too much effort. He notices that he has not listened to other people's voices calling for help. Kristien, on the other hand, does not find so much hidden in herself, but in the past, and that changes the way she reacts to South Africa and her place in it. Ouma Kristina's stories give her a possibility to see herself as an Afrikaner, and give her a sense of history and a way to relate to the past that has previously seemed so alien to her. She has felt that she cannot meet with

people's expectations of her as Afrikaner and a woman in South Africa, but now that she has found other ways to be an Afrikaner than the dominant one of the national myths, she can feel part of the country.

Identities are often expressed through belonging to a certain group or groups, and defined in contrast to those outside the group. In South Africa group identification was largely forced on people from above; race categorized people to the extent that being black, white or coloured defined what you were supposed to be from birth. Among whites, the strong Afrikaner national identity was utilized to keep people in line against the threat of either the British colonists in the earlier period, or the non-whites during the apartheid rule.

Even though national identities are usually thought to be in our genes and inevitable, they are in fact built very consciously. For a united national identity to emerge, other possible identifications and differences within the national population have to be suppressed, sometimes forcefully. National culture, the actual events in the history of a nation but also the way they are represented, is central in creating allegiance to the nation. In South Africa, the nation under apartheid rule was largely synonymous with the Afrikaner nationality and their culture.

Another master narrative defining life in South Africa has been whiteness. In Western discourse, whiteness has been very powerful. This is largely because, even though race always contributes to the way we make judgments about people, whiteness has been largely invisible. It has not been seen as a race, and whites have seen themselves as representatives of people in general, of the human race, not the white race. There is still much resistance to talking about whiteness, but in order to dismantle the power structures built around it, research into how whiteness operates is needed. Much of the central imagery and associations of whiteness come from

85

Christianity and its tendency to divide everything to dual pairs; this leads, for example, to everything white being good, everything black bad. Racial theories, social Darwinism and science in general also contributed to the position of whiteness.

One of the facts feeding the power of whiteness is its instability: it is not a fixed racial category, but largely a social one. Being wealthy gave better possibilities of being accepted as white, and in South Africa the judgment of your neighbours was central in whether you were accepted as white or not. Because whiteness was, at least in theory, attainable, it was worth fighting to get the privileged position. This in turn fed the power of whiteness. In South Africa whiteness was so powerful also because the white population was a minority in the country, and felt constantly threatened by the non-white majority. Governments also consciously used the fears of the 'black peril' to maintain their power.

Postcolonial theory had caused the idea of a united national identity and the structures that uphold the power of whiteness to come under discussion. It is now recognized that nations have always had internal divisions and that a national narrative could come about only when these were suppressed. Even though national culture and identity are constructed in a way to make them look unified, this has never been the case. In postcolonial times national cultures are increasingly more heterogeneous, and the unified national identity is losing its meaning. This is clear in South Africa even among Afrikaners, who are starting to look for other identifications and other ways of being Afrikaner. In *Imaginings of Sand* Kristien has left South Africa largely because she could not fit into the mould of an Afrikaner woman. She felt that the history of the country did not include her, and that she could not identify with what was expected of her. However, Ouma Kristina's stories give her a different perspective to what being an Afrikaner might mean, and the coming change of power

gives her a possibility to actively change the description of Afrikaners by working with the non-whites.

The fall of apartheid and the change of power in South Africa have forced whites to look at their whiteness, too, and according to Melissa Steyn, there are now different versions of the narrative of whiteness circulating in the country. This in spite of the fact that most white South Africans would rather forget the racial categories altogether. Steyn's five narratives describe the different ways whites now see their position in the country and their whiteness. In *Imaginings of Sand*, Kristien herself is relieved because the power is about to change hands, and this also means different ways of being white and Afrikaner. Her sister and brother-in-law, however, are terrified. They cannot see other ways of being white in South Africa, and their way of life is about to be destroyed. Kristien, instead, tries to get rid of the old attitudes, and consciously thinks of her whiteness and what it means. She has momentary lapses of acting on behalf of the coloured servants without asking their opinion, and thinking that she knows best, but she is at least conscious of these. Towards the end of the novel she is starting to see both whites and non-whites as persons, not as inherently good or bad just because they are of certain race.

In *The Rights of Desire*, Ruben is less conscious of his whiteness, maybe because he is largely living in his own world. His actions and attitudes toward Magrieta are occasionally paternalistic, and very much unconsciously so. However, his conscious reactions to Magrieta and other black characters in the novel do not seem to be dependent on their colour. In fact, Ruben does not seem to think much in terms of races or colours. Both Ruben and Kristien are composites of several Steyn's narratives. Kristien's whiteness seems to be more 'progressive', less dependent on the master narrative of whiteness. Ruben is less conscious of race, and lives at least

partially in the past, and he is therefore closer to the older whiteness, but he also has some characteristics from the more progressive of Steyn's narratives.

All in all, both *Imaginings of Sand* and *The Rights of Desire* offer alternatives to the old white Afrikaner identity in South Africa. Both Ruben and Kristien are essentially at odds with what would be expected of them as Afrikaners: Ruben is not the hardy and ready-to-battle head of the family, but has been contented to let his wife rule the family and retreated to his books. He is essentially an introvert. Kristien cannot imagine being content with only a husband and children, she wants more from life, and wants to leave her mark in history. She does not see the need of giving up her opinions just because they clash with a man's.

The novels also offer different interpretations to the history of South Africa. Brink shows history as something that should not be forgotten, because we can learn from it and the different versions of it. Postcolonial Gothic, which is what this aspect of the novels can be included in, views past as something that will return to haunt us. The uncanny moments that arise from the old 'truths' being shown in a new light make it possible for the protagonists in both novels to change their attitudes and the way they see themselves. The haunting figures of Antje and Kristien's ancestors have their stories to tell, and listening to them brings changes in both Kristien and Ruben's lives. Ouma Kristina's stories reveal strong Afrikaner women, whose stories have, however, been left unheard. Now Kristien hears them, and learns from them. Not necessarily hard facts, but that there are different versions of the past, and that it is important to be open to them all. Ruben's ghost, Antje, seems to be around for the living and not because she has left something unfinished, as Tessa says to Ruben. He recognizes in the novel that there are different versions of her story, none of them more true than the other, and what is important is that she is recognized in any case.

88

To conclude, Brinks novels offer different versions of what it might be to be white and Afrikaner in the new South Africa. The old colonial attitudes towards non-whites are still present, but there is hope of them changing. The message in *Imaginings of Sand* and *The Rights of Desire* seems to be that the past needs to be listened to and dealt with before South Africa can move forward. *Imaginings of Sand* is more hopeful about this happening; Kristien decides to participate in the building of the new South Africa. In *The Rights of Desire*, Ruben's direction at the end of the novel is not certain: he can either retreat to his memories or start participating in life, urged by the past. This difference is most likely due to the time passed between the novels. After the elections in 1994, it came apparent that the changes would not come easily or fast, and even now it is uncertain what will be the direction South African white identity develops.

References

Primary sources

Brink, André. *The Rights of Desire.* London: Vintage, 2001.

Brink, André. *Imaginings of Sand.* London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996.

Secondary sources

Alcoff, Linda Martín. "Introduction: Identities: Modern and Postmodern," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality.* Eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta. Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003.

Alexander, Neville. *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy in South Africa.* Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso, 1991.

Aronowitz, Stanley. "Reflections on Identity," *The Identity in Question.* Ed. Rajchman, John. New York and London: Routledge, 1995.

Balibar, Etienne. "Culture and Identity (Working Notes)," *The Identity in Question.* Ed. Rajchman, John. New York and London: Routledge, 1995.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture.* London: Routledge, 1994.

Brantlinger, Patrick. *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Brink, André. "Stories or history: reimagining the past in post-apartheid narrative," *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa.* Eds. Nuttall, Sarah and Carli Coetzee. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Chapman, Michael. *Southern African Literatures.* London: Longman, 1996.

Constantini, Mariaconcetta. "Crossing Boundaries: the Revision of Gothic Paradigms in Heat and Dust," *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre.* Eds. Smith Andrew and William Hughes. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Davenport, T.R.H, and Christopher Saunders. *South Africa: A Modern History.* Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.

Davis, Geoffrey V. *Voices of Justice and Reason: Apartheid and Beyond in South African Literature*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003.

Dyer, Richard. *White*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks.* United Kingdom: Pluto Press, 1986.

Featherstone, Mike. "Localism, Globalism and Cultural Identity," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*. Eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta. Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003.

Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny'," *Freud, Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo da Vinci and other works*. Trans. James Strachey et al. Ed. Albert Dickson. London: Penguin, 1990.

--- "Consciousness and What is Unconscious," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*. Eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta. Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003.

Gordimer, Nadine. "Where Do Whites Fit In?" *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*. Ed. Stephen Clingman. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.

Hall, Stuart. "The Question of Cultural Identity," *Modernity and its Futures*. Eds. Stuart Hall and Tony McGrew. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.

Harris, Cheryl I."Whiteness as Property," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*. Eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta. Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003.

Harrison, David. *The White Tribe of Africa: South Africa in Perspective*. Halfway House: Southern Book Publishers, 1993.

Head, Dominic. "Coetzee and the Animals: the Quest for Postcolonial Grace," *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre*. Eds. Smith Andrew and William Hughes. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Kossew, Sue. *Pen and Power: A Post- Colonial Reading of J.M. Coetzee and André Brink*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996.

Laclau, Ernesto. "Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*. Eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta. Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003.

Marx, Anthony W. *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of South Africa, the United States, and Brasil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Mead, George Herbert, "The Self," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*. Eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta. Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003.

Meintjes, Godfrey. "A Chain of African Voices: The Prose Oeuvre of André P. Brink," *New Writing from South Africa: Authors Who Have Become Prominent Since 1980*. Ed. Ngara, Emmanuel. London: James Currey, 1996.

Poole, Ross. "National Identity and Citizenship," *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*. Eds. Alcoff, Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta. Malden (Mass.): Blackwell, 2003.

Posel, Deborah. "Race as Common Sense: Racial Classification in Twentieth-Century South Africa". *African Studies Review*, Sept 2001, Vol 44 No 2, pp87-113.

Povey, John F. "English-Language Fiction from South Africa," *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures*. Ed. Oyekan Owomoyela. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993.

Punter, David. "Arundhati Roy and the House of History," *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre*. Eds. Smith Andrew and William Hughes. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Punter, David and Glennis Byron. *The Gothic.* Oxford Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Ross, Robert. *A Concise History of South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Smith, Andrew and William Hughes. "Introduction: The Enlightenment Gothic and Postcolonialism," *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre*. Eds. Smith Andrew and William Hughes. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Steyn, Melissa E. *"Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be": White Identity in a Changing South Africa*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001.

Terreblanche, Sampie. A *History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2003.

Wisker, Gina. "Showers of Stars: South East Asian Women's Postcolonial Gothic," *Gothic Studies*. Nov 2003, Vol 5 Issue 2, pp 64-80.

Wolfreys, Julian Ed. *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.