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Reading sex and violence in André Brink's *Rumours of Rain* and *A Dry White Season*

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This essay examines the relationship between narrative excess and narrative restraint, arguing that the bedchamber becomes a troubling surrogate for the ideologically and aesthetically hazardous journey into the torture chambers of the apartheid state. Drawing on the work of Rosemary Jolly as well as on J.M. Coetzee's "Into the Dark Chamber" and Brink's own "Literature and Offence," which imagines the novel as a woman who teases the male reader with the promise of easy satisfaction, but then withholds her favours and provokes him to a heightened awareness of political responsibility, the paper proposes that Brink's pornographic descriptions of white women's bodies are intended to stage the larger seduction and political awakening of the male reader, and to substitute for the vanishing and covertly violated bodies of black men. In *A Dry White Season* (1979) and *Rumours of Rain* (1978) Brink makes the sexuality of the female body abundantly available to the reader (as well as to the men in the novels, and a host of voyeurs) precisely because he cannot risk turning the obscenity of torture into an object of aesthetic pleasure. This algebraic solution to the quandary of representing violence, in which one set of minutely-observed bodies substitutes for another in the name of ethical awakening, creates as many ideological and aesthetic problems as it resolves. **Key words:** André Brink, *Rumours of Rain*, *Dry White Season*, sex, violence.

In "Into the Dark Chamber" J.M. Coetzee (1992: 368) describes the process of writing about racial violence in apartheid South Africa as a struggle between "looking on in horrified fascination," and denial, "turning one's eyes away." Coetzee (1992: 365) suggests that in an inhumane society, there can be no humanity in representation; the attempt to bear witness to human suffering yields, instead, to a species of voyeurism, to the "lyrical inflation" of violence itself. Rosemary Jolly (1996: xii) diagnoses a similar danger when she writes of the tendency of literary violence to become an aesthetic object in its own right, invoking a response from the reader that is more pleasure than horror.¹ However, Jolly (1996: 18) indicates that Brink himself wishes neither to horrify nor to please his readers: he wishes, rather, to offend them. Brink's "notion of offense" centers on the belief that the transformation of "social language into literary language" contains "a critique of the values on which the meaning of pragmatic discourse depends" (Jolly, 1996:

19). And so when Brink speaks of literature as offensive, he is contrasting offense and defense in language as much as he is comparing the offensive with the socially acceptable. He formulates an aesthetic in which literary representation takes the offensive against the reader, provoking him or her to action rather than luxuriating in the stasis of either horror or pleasure.

The question, as Rosemary Jolly observes, is rooted in Brink's conception of who his reader might be. Specifically, she notes that Brink employs the masculine pronoun to refer to this "generalized 'reader'" (Jolly, 1996: 20). Although Brink composed his theory of reader response at a time when the masculine pronoun was the general pronoun, it is instructive to consider the relationship between his imaginary readership and the specific aesthetic of two novels written in the wake of his essay "Literature and Offence": *A Dry White Season* and *Rumours of Rain*. The prominent, and often disturbing, role of the erotic in both novels is anticipated by Brink's conception of the relationship between reader and text: "the 'worthy' literary text invites the reader to the total involvement of a love-relationship: not a simple one-night stand, but the immersion of the self in the other" (Brink, 1983: 122-123). The male reader is the lover of the female text, and Brink is clear about what kind of woman he imagines his novels to be:

The text is a fully emancipated person, not a mindless little creature ready to fall back and open up. Her challenge is not the token resistance of the whore, but that of the integrated personality which yields neither to gentle persuasion nor to force but makes her own responsible decision about sharing only when the challenge from the other side is worthy of such commitment (Brink, 1983: 123).

This is clearly imagined as an adult, consensual erotic/reading relationship. But while the female novel is described as a "fully emancipated person," her role is to 'invite' the male reader into "an encounter" that is based upon an "appearance of familiarity (man recognizing woman in terms of previous experience and of convention)" (Brink, 1983: 123). Once seduced by the promise of appearances, Brink posits that the reader will become frustrated in his desire for the conventional and familiar by the text's resistance against "immediate consummation". The reader is now 'offended,' energized, by the "challenge of the unfamiliar, the new, the strange": by this tease-text which proffers familiar, easy satisfactions but ultimately yields only when the courtier's "challenge" – his willingness to recognize his "total human responsibili-

ties" – matches her own level of political commitment (Brink, 1983: 122).

If there was any possibility that Brink used the masculine pronoun to refer to both male and female readers, I think it is erased by the sexual roles which he assigns his texts and his readers. Brink himself explains the erotic language in which he casts his political notion of 'offense' by claiming that "the sexual itself represents an area of 'offensiveness,'" and that, moreover, the sexual remains "one of the rare 'unknowns' of (...) experience" (Brink, 1983: 125). Both Brink and Coetzee suggest that in apartheid South Africa the relationship between the place of the erotic in literature, and the idea of literature as erotic, acquires a charged significance. Brink claims that censorship turns the writer into a "physiologist" who must "explore as meticulously as possible the anatomy of an organism and probe the most hidden secrets of its processes and its needs," while Coetzee (1990: 235) writes that the censored author must compete with the state "not by force but by courtship". While Brink's explicit reference is to the "body" of state apparatus and ideology, his physical metaphor recalls his conception of the female text yielding to the penetrative power of the male reader. Echoing the eroticism of Brink's "Literature and Offence," Coetzee argues that the condition of censorship places desire in the foreground of the relationship between writer and reader: the writer frustrates the authority of the state by his power to "woo a public for himself – a public whose desire it soon becomes to follow where he will take it" (Coetzee, 1990: 69-70).

Here is a version of Brink's seductress-text who arouses and then manipulates the male reader's desire. However, while Coetzee's version of this erotic structure emphasizes the role of the writer-as-courtier, his analysis of the dynamics of desire are less rigidly gendered than Brink's, perhaps because he is writing in 1990 rather than 1976. Coetzee speaks not of "text," but of "authorship," the agency behind text; he conceives of a general reading "public," a plurality of "readers," rather than Brink's singular, masculine reader (Coetzee, 1990: 69-70). He shares, however, Brink's conviction that literature survives in a 'state of siege' by awakening the magnetism of longing, and he suggests that textual representations of "desire and the arousal of desire" alert the censor's attention because they stand in for the larger seduction of the reader by the writer (Coetzee, 1990: 70). However, the danger for the writer, Coetzee (1990: 70) suggests, is an unwitting complicity with the very structures of censorship s/he endeavors to resist, a seduction by "desire at last independent of any object of desire": the "narcissism of majesty," or

absolute authority equivalent to that of the state itself. Indeed, Coetzee (1990: 72) argues that when Brink writes against the censor, and against social taboos, his "language becomes as excessive as the censor's". Having produced a theory of the novel in resistance to the apartheid state, Coetzee posits that, paradoxically, Brink "cannot do without the state and its denunciatory organ, the censorship" (1990: 72).

Rosemary Jolly (1996: 18) points out that Brink's frequent depictions of sexual intimacy "treat topics that were proscribed under the terms of South Africa's extensive censorship legislation" as a form of political resistance, and yet Coetzee's observation that Brink is absorbed into the language and economy of the censor questions his ability to escape its values. Moreover, Jolly's (1996: 46) fascinating analysis of eroticism and violence in Brink's novels centers largely on the role of the "perverse 'love' triangle" in which "rape and flogging become substitutes for one another" in relationships among black slaves and white slaveowners. *A Dry White Season* and *Rumours of Rain* are novels from which these censored, 'offensive,' inter-racial love triangles are absent, or at best subliminal, and yet, Jolly's (1996: 41) observation that "the expression of intimacy is conceived of as violent, not affectionate" remains true. Brian Macaskill (1990: 171) describes the "Brink oeuvre" in general as one which "phallaciously exploits at every turn such mytho-sexual constructs as the rugged, individualistic Afrikaner male or the potent Black Man, whose codification in the order of masculinity, an index of political identity, is chartered around his success in satisfying female sexuality". However, in *Rumours* and *Dry White Season*, satisfying female sexuality becomes less important than dominating it through physical or psychological violence, and Brink's fascinated, almost pornographic, descriptions of the female body belie his claim that the novel is a willing partner in the erotic relationship between reader/text. If, as Coetzee suggests, narrative representations of desire stage the larger seduction of the reader by the text, then Brink's consistently violent depictions of the erotic question the efficacy of his model of the relationship between sexuality and legitimate political 'offense' against the racial violence of apartheid South Africa.

In the case of *A Dry White Season*, for example, it seems to me that eroticism and sexual violence become figures of another violence which Brink will not represent, except by occluded narration. We know that this novel was written, at least in part, in response to the 1977 murder of political detainees by the Special Branch of the South African police, including Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko (Jolly, 1996: 22). It is

an overtly 'political' novel, in that its subject is the corruption and brutality of the Afrikaans government and judicial system. It is a novel that is concerned with offense at every level: with transgressions against the law, against society, black and white, against the mind, and against the body. At the center of the novel is the type of violence to which Coetzee refers in "Into the Dark Chamber": that which is secretly inflicted by the white torturer upon the black victim, and whose existence is censored from public view. I would add to Coetzee's observation that violence is treated in fiction either with a fascination that borders on aesthetic endorsement, or by an absolute failure of representation, the possibility that violence may also be sublimated and projected, transformed, onto the body of another subject. In other words, the depiction that the author avoids – perhaps to escape the very aesthetic and ideological trap which Coetzee identifies – may be displaced and disguised within the narrative. I am thinking specifically of Brink's treatment of Susan du Toit, Ben's wife, and of Melanie Bruwer, the reporter who becomes Ben's lover.

Before looking closely at the depiction of the relationship between Ben and his wife, and later, between Ben and Melanie, it is instructive, I think, to consider the narrative which frames and shapes the novel. Jolly (1996: 25) points out that Brink's layered narrative structure provides the reader with several surrogates: first Ben, and his political awakening, and then the "writer-narrator," who is shocked out of his "dry season" of writer's block and takes on the personal risk of reconstructing Ben's history. The point of this framed narrative, Jolly suggests, is to provide the reader with multiple models of the effects of 'offense' in order that the reader himself may be 'offended' into awareness and action. What are we to make, then, of the fact that the writer-narrator, as Jolly calls him, is a romance writer who fashions "tender loving tales of rape and murder"? (Brink, 1984: 9.) Evidence of the narrator's profession is in ample supply, I think, throughout the Foreword. He evaluates Melanie's passport photo, and decides that, although striking, she is "not beautiful in the sense of the heroines ambling through [his] books" (15). It is not surprising that he mistakes the photograph of Ben and Melanie for pornography because he describes the "magnetic field" between himself and Susan du Toit, and reconstructs the memory of their dinner together, with all the erotic detail of a soft pornographer (21).

We read of the "merest suggestion of moisture" on Susan's lips, the "intense blue of her eyes," her "tanned shoulder" and slipped dress

strap, the "sensuality" of her lipstick smudged on a "white damask napkin," and of her "gently provocative" breasts (21, 25). We learn, moreover, that as an adolescent Susan "believed in castigating [her] body like some mediaeval nun," flagellating herself and wearing rough underclothes in the attempt to "rid [herself] of evil desires" (26). The Foreword ends with "a scene from any of [the narrator's] best sellers": with a bed, the "scent of a woman," exposed breasts, and a narrowly averted consummation of desire (32). Not averted, perhaps, but transferred, because the narrator tells us that precisely nine months after he reaches for Susan's hand she gives birth to a son. We know then, that Susan consummates this scene with her husband Ben, although the encounter takes place outside the boundary of the narrative. I think we are in a position to agree with our romance writer when, at the end of the Foreword, he admits that his narration is as much an attempt to "write [himself] out of [his] own sterile patch" as it is to bear witness to Ben's life and political struggle (33). As a surrogate for the reader, the writer-narrator is more prominently a model of the erotic masculine gaze than of a nascent political consciousness at this point in the novel. Susan, as both the object of the writer-narrator's desire and of his narrative construction, embodies Brink's conception of the seducer-text, alluring the surrogate reader with the anticipation of sexual fulfillment.

During the course of her dinner with the narrator, Susan asks, "Why must one be condemned to a body?" (26). She is speaking in the context both of the inconvenience of sexual desire, and the fear of aging. However, the novel is, more generally, a story of the management of bodies, in both the arenas of the erotic and the violent. After his arrest by the Special Branch, the body of Jonathan Ngubene becomes virtually invisible, and the story of his torture, murder, and burial must be pieced together through a mixture of terrified witness accounts, rumour, and speculation. The fate of Jonathan's body becomes a kind of mystery: the police claim that he was shot in the riots, never reaching detention; a nurse recalls his admission to the hospital for head injuries; a cleaner claims to have cleaned blood from the floor of his cell; and a fellow detainee, Wellington Phetla, provides an account of the torture that both he and Jonathan endured. Phetla's account is as close as we get to the interior of Jonathan's cell, but his description is given as an affidavit, not as a narrative. At the center of this representation of violence is not Jonathan Ngubene, as subject, but rather the difficulty of establishing what has happened to his body, of determining where it is and how it came to be there. Ultimately, even for Gordon, Jonathan's father,

the process of collecting evidence seems to “become an end in itself” (50).

Ultimately, Gordon too becomes an untraceable body, and with him all that remains of his son, the affidavits, disappears. Again, the narrative avoids direct representation of the scenes in which Gordon’s ear is deafened, his arm broken, his face bruised, and his teeth knocked out. We receive this evidence of torture through the report of a “stranger,” through traces of blood on the trousers Gordon sends home, and by the presence of teeth lodged in his back pocket (67). The medical report fragments Gordon’s body into parts, and describes the effects of the violence done to each of them, but the nature of the violence itself remains disputed: the Special Branch maintains in court that Gordon “had always been treated with courtesy and correctness,” and that any damage to his body was self-imposed (107). The only moment in which Gordon’s body is reconstituted is when his wife Emily washes “his whole body,” or rather his corpse, and when Ben looks upon him in the funeral parlour. It is fitting, then, that both Emily and Ben hear of Gordon’s murder over the radio, a medium which estranges the voice from the speaking subject in much the way that Gordon is reduced to a set of violated body parts. Even the fact of his murder is contested, disguised in language as “suicide” (76).

As though to compensate for the invisibility and fragmentation of the black male body, Brink renders the white female body astonishingly available. The narrative restraint which cloaks the circumstance of imprisonment and torture in mystery is nowhere evident in representations of women’s bodies specifically, and of white male erotic desire in general. This re-focusing of the narrative eye is, I think, encapsulated in a scene between Ben and his wife, following the detention of Gordon Ngubene. As Ben wonders about Gordon’s whereabouts and condition, he is approached by Susan who is, yet again, fresh from the bath, her body suggesting “the luxury of nakedness and warm water” (56). Susan dismisses Ben’s concern that Gordon may be suffering sexual torture as “obscene,” and she seems to offer the certainty of her own body, the “promise of her breasts and belly,” as means of putting an end to her husband’s speculation (57). At this early point in the novel, Ben refuses the compensation of his wife’s body, but when the futility of his investigation becomes evident he seizes her with violence. Susan is now a “weary old woman” with sagging breasts and wrinkled skin, but despite “agony” and “revulsion” Ben is “roused to desire” (264, 265). Susan is described as “exposed, exhibited, made available,” and the

sexual act itself is an "agonising struggle," an act of vengeance for "years of inhibitions" (265). The encounter is a kind of rape, through which Ben expresses his rage not only at his wife's repression of "the body and its real demands," but at the political apathy which seems to be its corollary (265).

Ben cannot reconstruct the precise circumstances of Jonathan and Gordon's murders, and he cannot prove that the Special Branch is responsible for their deaths, but he can reach for his wife's body in anger. The narrative encourages him in this impulse to transfer his attention to the white woman's body, not only because her body is available, but because its exposure is necessary for her political enlightenment. Melanie Bruwer's "unflinching womanness," her "frank and unevasive womanness," stem both from her political awareness and from her knowledge of her own physicality (115, 135). She describes her personal awakening in terms that may remind us of Susan du Toit. Like Susan, she is depicted coming from the bath, but unlike Susan she stands in front of her mirror naked, surveying her whole body. Like Susan, she has felt the entrapment of marriage, but unlike Susan she connects personal apathy with the corruption and hypocrisy of the larger social structure in which she lives. What is disturbing, however, is that the political revelation which begins with Melanie's naked body, seems to lead necessarily to her gang rape in Mozambique. When Ben asks whether this trauma caused Melanie to feel that she would "never be the same again," she replies that she "didn't want to be the same" (133). In fact, she claims that the experience may have even "made things easier for [her]" by freeing her from "[her] hangups" (133). Rape taught her "the things that came naturally to [Ben]"; although these "things" are not enumerated, we are led to believe that they are related to the process of political resistance (133).

Melanie's claim that the experience of gang rape was germane to her personal and political liberation seems to me to be extraordinary. Only a purveyor of "tender loving tales of rape and murder" could contend that the worst thing about sexual violence is the discovery, after the event, that there is no hot water in which to bathe. While the narrative merely sketches the contours of Melanie's violent encounters in Mozambique and Zaire, it is, as usual, highly attuned to the existence of the erotic "magnetic field." Ben's desire for Melanie becomes a figure of the narrator's earlier desire for Susan, and it is constructed with a similar attention to physical detail. Melanie's large eyes, her long, loose hair, the movement of her dress "swinging round her legs," the "scent

of her perfume" have an "intensely sensual" effect upon Ben (134). Her "unevasive womanness" seems to be implicitly contrasted with Susan's postured femininity, which is created through careful makeup, coiffure, and sexual reserve, but it seems crucial that sexual violation has played a central role in the revelation of Melanie's "womanness." Perhaps we are meant to understand that Susan's 'rape' by her husband came too late to forcibly liberate her from her adolescent chastity belt, from the denial of the body that is so closely connected in the novel to political denial.

Although the scene of Melanie and Ben's consummation is narrated in the first person, allegedly excerpted from Ben's own diary, it bears the imprint of our romance writer's sensibility. It is, on one level, a displaced fulfillment of his desire for Susan, and the narrative structure encourages this comparison. As the romance writer reached for Susan, Ben appeals to Melanie to spend the night with him; both women leave in refusal, but Melanie returns. Ben repeatedly asserts the difficulty of committing the erotic experience to words, as though description itself were "paltry," "offensive": "But what else can I do?" he asks: "Silence would be denial" (272). The essence of the encounter is "nothing [Ben] can enumerate or adequately name," but he manages to recount the physical and emotional particulars in remarkable detail (272). The emphasis on the unnameability of the erotic experience, the transgression of written description, is surely comparable to the inchoate properties of violence and torture. The narrative chooses to evoke the violence done to Jonathan and Gordon by gesture, rather than literal reconstruction, never venturing to depict the visceral responses of the subject. However, Ben describes Melanie's body during and after their lovemaking with a eye for detail and a specificity that borders upon a pornographic, invasive fascination. As she sleeps, he surveys her body, which sounds damaged rather than loved: the "bruised" breasts, the "exposed and mangled furrow," the lips "swollen with invisible blood" (273). Like Susan's before her rape, her body is "exposed and available" (274).

The voyeurism implicit in the description of this scene is heightened by the realization that there is a literal voyeur outside the bedroom window, an officer from the Special Branch with a camera in hand. Moreover, Ben's journals become the property of the writer-narrator, who himself becomes a voyeur through the medium of written language. Once the image of Ben and Melanie is captured on film, it enters the realm of the pornographic, and ironically, it is this photo-

graph which becomes the center of scandal. Ben's wife leaves him, he is forced to resign from his job, and his daughter Linda rejects him. The erotic scene, the exposure of the body, enrages and shames the Afrikaans community in a way that Gordon and Jonathan's murders do not. The outrage which should have been aroused by the fate of these black men, and by the condition of the black community generally, is instead displaced, and focused upon the supposed immorality of an extra-marital affair, upon the sordidness of the female body that has been violated by the hidden camera.

Brink's critique of the moral myopia of the Afrikaans community is, however, undermined by the terms of the critique itself. The structure of the narrative is such that the reader, whether male or female, must accept the connection between erotic consummation as a type of violent exposure, and the condition of political 'offense' or mobilization. If Ben and the romance writer are surrogates for the reader, then according to the narrative structure of displaced consummation, the reader not only participates in Ben's erotic/violent encounter with Melanie, but is staged as a voyeur, first by the language in which the scene is described, and then by the presence of the photographer outside her window. The inter-racial "perverse 'love' triangle" of Brink's other novels appears here as layers of surrogacy, implicating the (male) reader in Ben du Toit and the romance writer's economy of shared women.

Shortly before his murder, and directly following his disastrous trip to Soweto, Ben du Toit recognizes that an unbridgable gulf separates him from the very community he is trying to help. "*I am white,*" he realizes, understanding for the first time the ideological implications of his skin colour (304). In the eyes of those who must live in Soweto, Ben's attempts to identify with Gordon Ngubene, and with Stanley Makhaya, are nothing short of "obscene" (304). It seems to me that Ben makes a discovery that has long been anticipated by the narrative of this novel, and that Brink manages the problem of identification by substituting one obscenity for another. I mean by this that Brink avoids the dangerous position of identifying with the victim by emphasizing the vulnerability of the black subject, by turning his identity and his experience into a series of vanishing documents and conflicting reports. While this strategy may allow Brink to explore the dehumanizing ideology of apartheid rule, it does not allow him to dramatize physical suffering, to explore the visceral implications of imprisonment and torture. And so I have suggested that his narrative sublimates and displaces a fascination with the properties of the violated body, turning its

attention to the white female body – to focus upon the black female body would clearly be impermissible – and to the effects of eroticism and sexual violence. Brink has found a solution to the quandary of representation identified by Coetzee, but it is a solution which creates as many ideological problems as it resolves.

The connections between *A Dry White Season* and *Rumours of Rain* are first suggested by their titles, both of which predict a metaphoric comparison between political and moral corruption and landscape parched by drought. Both novels are at one level about the very process of writing: while the structure of *Rumours* is not as layered with writers and reader surrogates as that of *Dry White Season*, its narrative is driven by Martin Mynhardt's belief that he must "write [himself] out of" the "cornered feeling" that he attributes to weariness, apathy, and middle-aged inertia (Brink, 1978: 12). And yet Martin never undergoes the moral awakening that Ben du Toit and the romance writer experience: his unmitigated Afrikaner nationalism gives offense aplenty, but Martin himself is never offended into self-reflection, even in the final scene of the novel when the drought is broken by a flood of rain and the school-children of Soweto begin their historic march. As Sue Kossew (1996: 112) argues, the novel "enacts the bad faith of the narrator despite his apparent self-examination," and calls for the reader to "read the text against its narrator". Indeed, Martin's persistence in calling attention to his role as narrator – and to the contingency of that role – repeatedly underscores the relationship between the construction of his account and the maintenance of his own complacent self interest.

If Martin is a foil rather than a surrogate, that is not to say that *Rumours* fails to provide models for the 'offended' reader. Bernard Franken, like Ben du Toit, is the figure of the dissident Afrikaner, and Louis, Martin's son, rejects his father's political position and becomes "the new Bernard" (350). And yet, Kossew writes that Martin's position at the center of the narrative "makes for a somewhat static reading-process" because the reader can do no more than "to pronounce [him] 'guilty'" (118). Similarly, Brian Macaskill (1990: 175) argues that "Brink's novel flounders precisely to the extent that it joins Mynhardt in mythological recuperation and textual contradiction": while attempting to subvert Martin's racist vision of Afrikanerdom, Brink succeeds only in constructing a counter-hegemony according to which "all Afrikaners [are] (...) rugged, individualistic men striving to live up to some ideal of 'dissidence'" (Macaskill, 1990: 178). Macaskill's criticism echoes Coetzee's claim that Brink has unwittingly developed a language that

is equal if opposite to that of the censor, replacing one absolute model of authority with another.

For Coetzee, Brink's resistance against the political order of the censor collapses at the moment when he capitulates to this desire for authority. Macaskill diagnoses Brink's wish to replace one mythology of the Afrikaner, that embodied by Martin Mynhardt, with another mythology, that embodied by the individualism and "elemental" charisma of Bernard Franken, which is surely a version of what Coetzee (1990: 72) names "the phenomenon of reciprocal definition by warring twins". Brink's desires – to offer an alternative definition of the Afrikaner, to challenge the authority of the state, to woo the reader, and to create the conditions which will give rise to the reader's 'offense' – are figured in *Rumours of Rain*, as they are in *Dry White Season*, by a sustained fascination with white male erotic desire, and with the object of its gaze, the white female body. There are no missing bodies at the narrative and imaginative center of *Rumours*, and so the argument that the sexual exposure of the female body is a sublimation of an unrecorded, unimaginable violence cannot obtain, except in the most general terms. The novel's seductions, rapes, and vividly detailed sexual encounters may on one hand be what Kossew (1996: 112) calls "alienation devices," which encourage the reader to 'take offense' at Martin's extra-marital affairs and the wider politics of domination which accompany them. But I would suggest that the erotic 'eye' of the narrative actually seduces the reader into complicity with Martin's policy of "personal apartheid," which allows him not only to physically separate his wife from his lovers, but to avoid admitting the ideological connection between the violence of his sexual relationships and the violence of the state itself.

Indeed, Martin opens his narration by asserting "I am surrounded by violence, yet untouched by it myself," and he describes himself as "a catalyst for violence which breaks out all around [him] yet leaves [him] unscarred" (28). Martin is a spectator to violence – headless motorcyclists, suicides, victims of riots, swimming accidents, and domestic disputes – but he cannot be called a sympathetic witness to the racial oppression of the apartheid state. In a move that is analogous to the structure of *Dry White Season*, Brink substitutes a risky, ideologically fraught attention to the condition of the racial 'Other' with an invasive representation of the body of the sexual 'other'. As Madeleine Sorpure (1991: 661) observes, "the issue of a love story is essentially found in the relation between self and other – a highly overdetermined relation in both a South African and a postcolonial context". Sorpure is writing

about Brink's 1988 novel *States of Emergency*, which explicitly questions the interactions between the conventions of the love story and the apartheid state, but the overdetermination of the relationship between self and other is very much at issue in *Rumours of Rain*, particularly in light of Brink's 'romantic' positioning of masculine reader and feminine text.

The complication of the relation between self and other to which Sorpure alludes is the condition of apartheid (or of colonialism more widely), in whose terms the black African is the consummate Other. Brink, in his depictions of 'romantic' and sexual relationships between white men and women, mirrors the unknowability and danger of the black African in the body of the white woman. If the reader is to be seduced by the representations of desire in the text – those moments which Coetzee suggests stand in for the larger desire of the censored writer to court and convert an audience – then is he not aligning himself with the novel's private apartheid between white men and women which echoes the official apartheid between black and white? Can the terms of the seduction offer a critique of the system they imitate? The line between Martin's personal apartheid, which is essentially erotic, and of racial apartheid, becomes hopelessly blurred.

However, *Rumours of Rain* differs crucially from *Dry White Season* in that its setting is partly rural, and its aesthetic of landscape is an important term in its articulation of male desire and conquest. *Rumours* is partly a farm novel in the Afrikaans rural tradition, and Brink's representation of farm land is indicative of the shift which Coetzee (1988: 167) identifies from the "botanical" to the "geological" gaze. Coetzee (1988: 167) posits that the botanical view is historically produced by the "imperial gaze," the vision of the prospector who imports a European aesthetic standard of the "picturesque," and judges the vista of the South African landscape according to its rule. In addition to subjugating landscape to a colonial model of beauty, the botanical gaze is acquisitive; it is the eye of the surveyor. The geological view, by contrast, regards land rather than landscape, divining the interior, particular meaning of rock and earth. Coetzee (1988: 167) credits Olive Schreiner, the nineteenth century South African writer, with formulating the distinction between the "prospect-view" that is linked with "conquest and domination," both in literal and aesthetic terms, and the "humbler homegrown art of closely rendered particulars, grounded on love of and intimacy with the soil."² While Brink's descriptions of the parched farm in *Rumours* are "geological" in the sense that he writes of the "subliminal existence" of the land, "stripped (...) so you could see the

very bones of the earth," he paradoxically links this exposure with the vulnerability of the female body (136, 161). Far from resisting the "prospect view," Brink's language incorporates and feminizes the farm, linking it with a larger system of acquisition, exploitation, and displacement. The subliminal life of the land, for Martin, the mining magnate, speaks of precious metals to be extracted using black labour, and of the great profit to be made by selling the family farm to facilitate the apartheid policy of separate development in black homelands.

The geological gaze becomes allied with an erotic, territorial vision of land that is based on masculine penetration and exposure rather than Schreiner's "love of and intimacy with the soil." From childhood, Martin longs for the "moist earth and virgin forest" of his family's farm with "an almost physical, almost sexual, fervour," and his recurrent memory of nearly drowning in quicksand underscores the connection between earth and the female body (335). In early adolescence Martin is rescued from a patch of "soft clay" by "a Black piccanin" nicknamed "*Pieletjie*, which means *Prick*, because at the age of twelve or thirteen he already had a penis which, even in its flaccid state, dangled down halfway to his knees" (57). Martin is surely haunted by this memory because it stands not only for the danger of the land, which anticipates, perhaps, the "possessive" passion of women with their "sticky traces," but also for an early sexual humiliation by a black boy (122). As an adult, Martin is able to explicitly articulate the connection between sexual and territorial control in his conviction that before his marriage to his wife, Elise, "one landscape inside her had been kept intact," untamed (240). Long after his marriage he reflects upon the aging of his wife's body as though she herself had been ravaged by drought: her skin, "exposed to sun and air," has become "wrinkled and dry," and she is marked by "the hideous disfigurement of stretch marks after a birth, the discoloured weal of a Caesarean," which scars her in the same way that the earth is marked by the prolonged absence of rain (229).

The identification between the land and the female body is, moreover, complicated by Brink's repeated connection between the earth and an unknown, elemental power. Brink straddles what Coetzee (1988: 7) identifies as two "dream-topograph[ies]" in South African rural writing: on one hand, the farmland is "humanized," or rather feminized, according to a myth in which "the earth becomes wife to the husband-man," and on the other, the land cannot be brought under control by cultivation, but remains "vast, empty, and unchanged long after man has passed from its face". According to the imagination of this second

topography, the land is associated with an intractable history, or a pre-history of colonial intervention, and its voice is that of "some giant or monster from the past, wordless but breathing vengeance": its language is the "poetry of monsters under the earth" who presage "the return of the repressed," and apocalypse for the white oppressor (10). Alongside Martin's recurrent memory of being sucked down into the land is a tandem fear of forces within the earth, whose sudden awakening will spell his destruction. He dreads the day when "the earth itself [begins] to clear us away" according to the logic of some unknown timeline: "The worst of all was that it might have been predestined in the very core of the earth since millions of years before one's own birth" (248).

Martin's anxiety focuses on the memory of a mine disaster, "a rock-fall caused by the pressure of earth on a geological fault," which he describes as "an event prepared a million years ago" (248). The legitimacy of Martin's view of a hazardous planet, tripwired for destruction, is of course compromised by the "personal apartheid" which allows him to separate a collapsed mine shaft from the human activity which produces mines and fills them with black labourers. As he later distinguishes two categories of cruelty, "elemental" and "moral," he fails to connect his view of 'Nature' with human behaviour, preferring the cosmic abstraction of ancient geological faults and shooting stars (285). Similarly, when the farm foreman Mandisi murders his wife, Thokozile, Martin considers that "an entire primitive, invisible world had reached up, through that simple, barbaric act, to momentarily reveal itself": this dark force belongs to "the very guts of the farm itself, as secret and as dangerous as the subterranean water courses beneath the house" (284). But of course Mandisi's murder of his wife is intimately connected with the economy of the farm, and with Martin's assertion of his own authority over him as the white landowner. Martin's mother admits that Mandisi's violence toward his wife must be tolerated because "without him the farm would have been down the drain long ago" (202). When Martin reprimands his violence and threatens him with expulsion from the farm if it continues, he is as concerned with the fact that Mandisi stands "a head taller" than he does and has the "muscles of a gladiator" as he is with the plight of his wife (269).

Mandisi's murder of his wife is, in this sense, a retaliation against Martin himself, a pattern reminiscent of Rosemary Jolly's (1996: 46) analysis of Brink's triangular relationships in which two people, usually of different races, communicate with one another through shared access to the body of a third. Martin's failure to see the relationship

between Thokozile's death and his struggle with her husband for control of land, his preference for a consideration of dark, primitive forces, is assisted by his "detached, 'aesthetic'" contemplation of the dead woman's body (284). If Thokozile is the intermediate term between Martin and Mandisi, her body is also the term which connects the masculine erotic with the land. Although Martin insists that he regards Thokozile's dead body with a "detached" eye, his appreciation of "the symmetry of her limbs, the full firm breasts and smooth belly, the satisfying curve of hips and long legs" is clearly erotically charged (284). Indeed, he admits that he is shaken by the discovery that "a Black woman could be as beautiful as that" (284).

The 'subliminal life' of Martin's gaze is revealed not only by the language in which Thokozile is described, but by the connection between her body and the land itself. Not only is she the sign of the "primitive, invisible world" which has surfaced and left its mark, but the knife wounds which have ended her life are "like small wet mouths," inviting comparison with the fissured earth itself (284). The terrain of Thokozile's body, its shape and contour, suggests another model of the dreamed topography of the South African landscape: that the body, in this case the black woman's body, parallels the beauty and danger, the subterranean forces, of the earth. When Martin wanders into the forest surrounding the farm he comes upon a swampy area, recalling the quicksand of his adolescence, and he compares sinking into the mud with being swallowed by a living creature: "Perhaps, if one stepped into this mud, it would get hold of one and start swallowing one like a big wet mouth, gulping one down into a slithery throat, down, down, through layers of loam and clay, to the rich fertile courses feeding the earth" (354). The "big wet mouth" of the mud fault echoes the wounds "like small wet mouths" in Thokozile's flesh, and the feared descent into the earth is figured as a descent into the interior of the body.

If the black woman's body is a kind of portal to an underworld of "rich" but destructive, hostile powers – to Coetzee's "poetry of monsters under the earth" – Brink also draws a wider affinity between black Africans and the forms and forces of nature. When Thokozile's mother arrives on the farm after her daughter's murder, she is described as "a statuesque woman, more than six feet tall, brown as rock, straight as an aloe, with the sort of aristocratic dignity one finds among the poorest of peasants" (362). When she mourns for her daughter her cry is unlike that of "man or beast": "It was no human voice. It was as if the dark-red earth had itself become a voice, thrusting up through her feet

and body, through bursting entrails and tearing lungs and breaking heart, howling against the bleeding night sky" (363). The grief of the bereaved mother is collapsed with the grief of parched earth in the way that the wounds on her daughter's body reproduce the form of moist mud. The mother ventriloquizes the land, and her personal loss is heard as a harmonic within the larger voice of the suffering earth, which surfaces much like the dark, hidden forces which acted upon her daughter's body. But of course this naturalization of grief, this collapse between the human and the organic, has a political register as well because it confuses the sphere of human relations with the uncontrollable conditions of climate and season, for which human beings cannot be held accountable. To compare Thokozile's mother with an aloe plant, and her sorrow with that of the "dark-red earth," disguises the human particularity of her condition in much the same way that Martin prefers to consider a mine disaster the result of geological predestination rather than the consequence, at least in part, of a specifically exploitative human relationship with the land and its inhabitants.

Even Martin's son, Louis, who is a reader-surrogate in that he consistently questions his father's political position and ultimately supports his dissident god-father, Bernard, naturalizes the circumstances of black Africans. He sees the blacks in war-torn Angola "like sticks planted in their fields," and he tells his father, "if we pass that way again a hundred years from now, we'll still find them there just like that. Living with the seasons, like plants and stuff" (361). Oblivious to rain or sun, the blacks are "just there," like some impervious force of nature, and despite being "robbed and beaten and plundered and murdered and raped and bombed and fucked around," they "remained," like "stones" (361). In the essay "After Soweto," Brink (1983: 135) writes that the early Afrikaners and the black tribes both "had an essentially peasant connection to the soil (...) an almost mystical communion with the land," and his descriptions of blacks in South Africa and Angola reflect this conviction.³ However, communion with land is different from congruence, which blurs the lines of the comparison between blacks and landscape to the point at which the two become nearly identical, and the metaphor of an animate, suffering earth is articulated at the expense of the humanity of the individual. There is surely a crucial difference between Schreiner's belief that the South African literary aesthetic must base itself on the particular language of stones and soil, and Brink's manoeuvre, which is to turn the black African into stone and soil.

I am suggesting that the ethics of metaphor are violated in *Rumours of Rain*, and yet I have strayed far from my argument that the violence of Brink's erotic representation undermines the efficacy of a critique of larger structures of violence. But the novel's relationship with land is, as I have attempted to demonstrate, a species of white masculine eroticism, which represents earth and bodies from the point of view of a penetrative, exoticizing gaze. The role of the rural woman, specifically the black woman farm labourer, as the term which mediates Martin's desire for and understanding of the earth, is similar to that of the white urban women who mediate his relationship with Bernard Franken and satisfy his impulse toward conquest and domination. These women, Elise, Beatrice, and Reinette, are naturalized as 'women' in a manner analogous to the connection that is made between black labourers and the land. Like Ben du Toit in *Dry White Season*, Martin has an eagle eye for the feminine essence. He describes Reinette, Bernard's wife, as possessing an "undeniable 'presence'": "she was unmistakably, and disconcertingly, a woman" (165). His lover, Beatrice, is marked by her "womanliness, a maturity which bore both the scars of pain and disillusionment and the vulnerability of suffering" (384). Similarly, Martin repeatedly returns in his narrative to the memory of his first meeting with his wife Elise, when she undressed "with that inimitably graceful gesture which comes naturally to women," and dove into the dam to swim (83).

The women in Martin's life are united by their radical difference from him, by their shared quality of an essential "womanliness" which is the identifying mark of their kind: they belong, unmistakably, to the category *woman*. Not only are Martin's lovers 'naturally' women, but his relationships with them are characterized by the same imperatives which govern his view of land. He understands them, on one hand, as commodities whose acquisition confirms his victory over his friend and erotic rival, Bernard, and on the other as bodies whose mystery must be excavated, exposed. If there are dark, threatening forces as well as mineral treasures beneath the earth, beyond the "wet mouth" of clay, there are dangers within the "wet mouths" of women that can only be defused through sexual penetration and narrative exposure. Both acts – the sexual and the narrative – blur the boundary between consensual eroticism and rape.

The central erotic structure of the novel is quite similar to that of *Dry White Season* in that it hinges on a rivalry between two men. Martin pursues Elise in part because of her obvious interest in Bernard: "It was

obvious she had eyes only for him" (81). He hastens their wedding because he knows that she would marry Bernard "the moment he asked her" (240). When Bernard is arrested for terrorist activities, Elise and Martin "comfort [one] another by making love," although both are preoccupied by the imagination of what tortures Bernard may be undergoing (150). The link between sex and both acquisition and violence becomes more explicit when Martin seduces Bernard's ex-wife, Reinette, who comes to him for information about Bernard. Reinette is "beautiful – tall, blonde, athletic, tanned," and she is just a few years older than Elise was when Martin first met her (165). Her appearance, her age, and her manner all remind Martin of his own wife, "not the Elise of the present, but the defiant and positive young woman of many years ago" (167). Reinette becomes a repeat of Elise, and her lovemaking with Martin becomes a repeat in history, underwritten by violence and the "electric current" produced by Bernard's absence (170). Martin and Reinette's consummation is "agonised," as though they are attempting to "strangle and tear apart and kill each other" (170). In the end, however, it is Reinette who is destroyed by the violence of the encounter. She is pictured with "her torn and crumpled dress pulled up to her breasts, her bruised thighs wide open, exposing the grimace of her sex," and she lies so still that Martin fears she may be dead (170). When Martin returns home to find Elise asleep, "untouched and immaculate," he must remind himself: "No one has raped my wife. Not even I" (171).

But of course the violence of the encounter is a kind of rape, not only of the body, but of the integrity of identity. Reinette's body is treated with violence, but her identity is also violated because she becomes the figure of another woman whom Martin wishes to 'tame' in retrospect, and whose love for Bernard he would like to annul. The narrative assists this double violation by its exposure of Reinette's "bruised thighs" and the "grimace of her sex," the place where all women look alike: the general sign of *woman* (170). Similarly, when Martin escapes to Ponta de Ouro with his lover Beatrice, he describes her "standing over [him] with legs astride," and the narrative again trains its invasive gaze on "the tips of her dark-nippled breasts, her small tangle of pubic hair forming a comic goatee below the pink protruding inner lips of her slightly distended sex" (387). The relationship between the desire to document the female body and the desire to control and possess it is underscored by the description of Beatrice and Martin's lovemaking:

she willingly submitted to my entry and my thrusts, but without coming herself. At my disposal – yet with something held back deep inside her, an invincible, unassailable independence, a secret centre of pain into which she would never allow me to enter. Time and time again the same process was repeated, sometimes almost violently, assaults on that privacy within her: assaults all the more furious because I knew in advance I wouldn't succeed (389).

The “secret” impenetrable center recalls the “primitive, invisible world” which Martin imagines beneath the earth, and whose “barbaric,” unpredictable forces he fears. Sex becomes a violent attempt to penetrate and gain mastery over an “unassailable independence,” an individuality that is interior, withheld from the male eye and both its essentializing vision of *woman* and its documentary, gynecological gaze.

Ultimately, however, Martin's erotic desire for Beatrice is transformed into explicit violence. When she challenges his “personal apartheid,” and insists that he choose between her and Elise, Martin rapes her. Afterwards, Beatrice lies “motionless on the carpet, her knees still drawn up and wide open. Like, once before, Bernard's wife Reinette” (397). It is worth noting that Beatrice too carries an “electric current,” because Martin's Aunt Rienie had intended to introduce her to Bernard. Martin acknowledges that he is only “standing in for him [Bernard], his surrogate,” and he realizes that a large portion of his desire for Beatrice has been produced by her admiration for his rival (413). Beatrice, despite her attempts to maintain a secret, inviolate center, at the moment of rape is collapsed with Reinette and Elise, those women who have become the medium through which Martin competes with Bernard.

And so what, finally, is the nature of desire in this novel? Brink points to the importance of depictions of the erotic as both a challenge to the censor and as a means of ‘offending’ the reader: “The moment somebody transgresses on this domain [sex] the community's defence mechanisms are alerted: what is primitive in the experience challenges sophistication; the hint of the unknown is potentially offensive” (125). If representations of the sexual imbalance, awaken the reader, Brink has also argued that reading itself is erotic, a seduction of the male reader by the feminine text. Similarly, Coetzee suggests that under censorship the writer must court an audience, and that s/he does so by narrating desire: representations of sexual desire become models for the desire of the writer for a readership and for an alternative to the oppressive

order of the censoring state. However, Coetzee (1990: 72) warns that in his writings about censorship Brink fails to “escape contagion by the censor’s paranoia”; his arguments against censorship become as polemical and hegemonic as the policies of the state itself.

What are the implications of Brink’s desire to subvert the racist political order of the censor by positioning the text of his fiction as feminine? Brink imagines that the feminized, sexualized text lures the male reader by the “appearance of familiarity,” of “convention,” but then resists an easy consummation, demanding first that the reader achieve a state of political ‘offense.’ But when this reader/text paradigm is staged in the moments of erotic desire in *A Dry White Season* and *Rumours of Rain*, the resistant or dissident woman is either literally raped or figuratively violated by voyeuristic narrative exposure. *A Dry White Season*, moreover, suggests in the characters both of Melanie Bruwer and Susan du Toit, that rape is necessary for a woman to escape from entrapment by the ‘conventional,’ and from the racist politics which accompany acceptance of the status quo under apartheid. *Rumours of Rain* is more selfconscious in its critique of Martin Mynhardt’s “relentless masculinism” because the novel posits that Martin himself is the writer of the narrative, and so his sexual violence is on one level meant, as Kossew suggests, to encourage the alert reader to distrust the values for which Martin stands (Macaskill, 1990: 178). And yet the line between Brink and Martin is not always clear, in part because of the prominence of the erotic in Brink’s own theory of the reader/text relation.

More widely, both Brink’s theory of reading and his depictions of women raise a larger question about the efficacy of deploying stereotypes (the appearance of the “conventional” and “familiar”) as a means of inspiring a critique of racist politics, which are themselves based upon the acceptance of stereotypes. As Homi Bhabha (1996: 88) writes, “the exercise of colonial control through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference – racial and sexual”. The articulation of these forms of difference, he then argues, are closely connected with the production of the stereotype, “an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (that the negation through the other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations” (98). Bhabha contends that colonial discourse constructs the colonial subject as both racially and sexually ‘different,’ while denying “an ‘original’ identity or a ‘singularity’ to objects of difference, sexual or racial” (89). Brink’s depictions of black Africans as co-extensive with nature, without indi-

vidual humanity, and his fascination with *woman* suggest that both are “objects of difference.” Moreover, Bhabha suggests that the twin spheres of ‘difference,’ the erotic and the racial, are interdependent, because “the body is always simultaneously inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination, and power” (89).

The violence of eroticism in *Rumours* and *Dry White Season* suggests that white women’s bodies are implicated in the economies of both male desire and domination, and the larger connection between the woman as sexually ‘different’ and black Africans as racially ‘different’ suggests that the two are co-dependent. The narrative eye moves repeatedly to the biological signs of the woman – the genitals, the breasts – those characteristics which all women share and which define the sex. Similarly, the narrative connects all its women, not only through the repetition of rape and exposure, but by the invocation of a mysterious ‘essence,’ some unmistakable quality which separates women from men absolutely. This stereotyped, fixed image of *woman* is supplemented in *Rumours of Rain* by a vision of land which maps the female body, including that of the black woman, into the geology of the earth: all women are naturalized, and both black women and men are imagined as contiguous with the life of the land. The rural black African is depicted as not quite human, certainly not ‘singular’ or “original,” but part vegetable or mineral, with his or her actions and speech shaped in part by the dark forces of a threatening, unknowable underworld. Brink argues that “the full relationship” between male reader and female text evolves because of the “otherness” of the text, the unfamiliarity behind the lure of convention, and that the challenge of this “otherness” leads to political ‘offense’ and to consummation between reader and narrative. However, this model of the female text as “other” predicts not only the violence of the reading relationship, in which the (male) reader is implicated in rape and voyeuristic exposure, but the violence done to female bodies and identities throughout *Rumours of Rain* and *A Dry White Season*: Brink depicts the female body, in Bhabha’s (1996: 101) term, as a stereotyped “fetish,” whose construction insidiously supports rather than subverts the vision of apartheid.

Notes

1. I am thinking specifically of Jolly’s (1996: xii) discussion of the aesthetic traditions of the “sublime” and of “gothic horror”.
2. Coetzee refers specifically to Schreiner’s novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883).
3. Macaskill (1990: 174) also cites this passage from “After Soweto” in a footnote of his article “Interrupting the Hegemonic.” He uses the citation to argue that Brink “himself endorses Mynhardt’s

view" that black Africans and Afrikaners share a similar relationship, citing the similarity between Brink's writings and Martin Mynhardt's claim: "as an Afrikaner I know my Black man. To a large extent we have the same history, the same rural background."

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