As the introduction to this volume has suggested, the term identity, although subject to an overuse that possibly dilutes its usefulness as a critical term, is inevitably significant when it comes to any consideration of political hierarchies, social structures, and inequalities. This is especially so in the context of contemporary South Africa, where, more than ten years after the end of legislated apartheid, both social and political inequalities remain unresolved. By entangling myself in the historical and mythical aspects of South African identity that are highlighted in a recent novel of South African author André Brink, I aim to explore the continued usefulness of this concept as a tool for political engagement.

In his 2005 novel *Praying Mantis*, Brink returns to the world of Khoi mythology as previously explored in his *First Life of Adamastor* of 1993, this time juxtaposing it with the colonial landscape of eighteenth-century South Africa. As with the earlier novel, which presented a Khoi protagonist, the focalization of *Praying Mantis* is characterized by a marked shift in worldview from Brink’s other novels, and reads somewhat like that of a fairytale or dreamscape. The novel’s setting is the dry and barren hinterland of South Africa, where overt activity and incident seems to be lacking. Its last section, consisting of about 55 pages, is, in fact, entirely taken up with the protagonist’s residence in Dithakong, a missionary outpost in the desert without church, houses, or inhabitants. However, there is much going on beneath the surface.

As Inge Boer argues in “No-Man’s-Land? Five Short Cases on Deserts and the Politics of Place,” the consideration of desert space as empty (conquerable) space is one that is conventionally focalized from the outside and therefore overlooks what she terms the “palimpsestic traces of human histories” that populate the desert. The narrative of *Praying Mantis* is desert-like in that it is one in which not
much happens, but much is said to happen, and it presents the reader not so much with a historical account, on which its endnote claims it to be based, as with a mythology.

By examining the novel in terms of myth, a fruitful connection can be made between the concepts of history, religion, and narrative that the narrative foregrounds. Because myth is “a mode of signification” that is “open to appropriation” by its very nature as speech or discourse, as Roland Barthes puts forward in his *Mythologies*, the interpretation of history and religion as unyielding certainties is emphatically discarded. Instead, the structure of history and religion as themselves made up of stories and narratives that are inconstant and subjective is stressed, as is the value of these stories, because of their very changeability, in interpreting the South African context. In reading the novel as a myth “open to appropriation,” the conventional opposition between African mythology and Western rationality can be disabled and replaced by a more productive reading of myth as shaping (yet never exhaustively defining) identity.

Before commencing with an analysis of the novel as myth, not even so much of South Africa’s colonial past, I will argue, as of its postcolonial present, I will comment on the complicated narrative structure that has been chosen to present the reader with the story of its protagonist. After this, I will examine the concept of myth, as proposed by Barthes, in terms of discourse and as a semiological system. This will lead to a more specific consideration of myth as mythology in terms of language and metaphor, as evident in Derrida’s “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” and to the more specifically postcolonial critique of metaphor, myth, and discourse in Robert Young’s *White Mythologies*. These frameworks will then be linked to the use made of metaphor in understanding colonial history in *Praying Mantis* in order to finally consider this novel’s narrative as the story of South Africa today.

**Hatched from stories**
As asserted above, there is not much that explicitly happens in *Praying Mantis*, but much is said to happen. Brink’s narrative ostensibly concerns itself with the history of Cupido Cockroach (or Kupido Kakkerlak, as he was actually known), who, as historiography would have it, became the first Khoi person to be employed by the London Missionary Society as a missionary at the Cape of Good Hope in the early years of the nineteenth century.¹ The novel was written over a period of twenty years (as its author confesses in the endnote) and, perhaps partially because of this, retains a somewhat schizophrenic character that nevertheless corresponds pleasingly with the interpretation of myths as “productions of the human imagination” (Campbell, 27). It is divided into three parts that represent various narrators and a plethora of linguistic conventions.