

Cilliers Van den Berg

University of the Free State

Bloemfontein, South Africa

On minor/small literatures and difficult pasts: literary mnemonics between the local and the global

Whether it is mapped on the coordinates of imagined communities or not, literary discourse plays an important role in the ways in which different collectives engage with their respective difficult pasts. It portrays and performs memory, but can also evoke various responses: from empathy and solidarity to protest and moral outrage. One can imagine that a normative approach to “world literature” would focus on the positive aspects of memories shared on a global scale, but likewise that the coming to terms with local histories in smaller literatures somehow need to manage its position *vis-à-vis* global representations. An important question therefore is to what extent the status of a literature as minor or small correlates to the ways in which collective or cultural memory unfolds – especially if the latter is considered against global notions of *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*. If collective or cultural remembering materializes in the tension between the local and the global, what effect does the status of the literature, in which these memories are expressed, have?

The trajectory of Afrikaans literature is thought-provoking, in that its engagement with the South African Apartheid past could be read against the background of both collective memory (positioned between the local and the global) *and* a small literature with a minor status. This paper will explore some of these issues, with specific reference to Afrikaans narrative fiction of the 1990s: both the literature of the time and its critical reception to a large extent have conformed to a normative politics of regret. The hypothesis is that the latter can directly be related to the socio-political position of Afrikaans, which represented a combination of minor and major elements. The exploration of these elements furthermore can illuminate some of the dynamics of the South African memory culture.