

**Entanglements of the English and Afrikaans  
Literary Systems: Reading Epitexts on the Works of  
Marlene van Niekerk**

**Reinhardt Fourie**



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Supervisor: Prof. Andries Visagie

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## **Declaration**

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## Abstract

This study investigates the entanglements of the Afrikaans and the South African English literary systems. Sarah Nuttall's notion of "entanglement" (2009) is utilised as an analytical metaphor within a combined framework that draws on the polysystems theory of Itamar Even-Zohar (1990) and the concept of the cultural field of Pierre Bourdieu (1993). The primary sites of analysis are the series of "epitexts" (G rard Genette, 1997) surrounding the work of author, poet and playwright, Marlene van Niekerk. These epitexts take the form of popular and critical reviews of her work, interviews with and opinion pieces or essays by the author, as well as scholarly research that has been published on her work (including academic articles and essays, book chapters, and theses and dissertations). Van Niekerk made her literary debut in 1977, and her most recent work was published in 2019. As such, her literary work spans a period of remarkable political, social and cultural change, includes three literary genres, and stretches across the literary systems of both Afrikaans and English. This offers an epitextual archive that is well suited, in scope and depth, to a comparative systemic approach. Following an overview of the theory employed, the positions of Van Niekerk in the respective Afrikaans literary system and the South African English literary system are discussed. Within this frame, the author is considered as both an author writing in Afrikaans and an author translated into English, with a concomitant focus on her related position in the larger system of a "national" South African literature, in addition to the circulation of her work in the bigger, transnational Anglo-American literary system and the system of world literature. The predominant discourses within the popular and scholarly reception of Van Niekerk's work – and how these have influence her positioning in the different literary systems – are charted and interrogated, after which they are compared and discussed in order to understand the reciprocal influences, overlaps and imbrications – i.e. entanglements – that can be observed between the literary systems in question. Utilising Van Niekerk's oeuvre as analytical lens, this study observes the nature of the interconnectedness between two of South Africa's literary systems, and what this means for understanding the country's dynamic literary landscape as it developed into and exists in the present. Finally, this study offers a view as to the possibilities of comparative literary studies in South Africa.

## Opsomming

In hierdie studie word ondersoek ingestel na die “entanglement,” oftewel verstrengeling, van die Afrikaanstalige en Suid-Afrikaanse Engelstalige literêre sisteme. Sarah Nuttall se begrip “entanglement,” oftewel verstrengeling, (2009) dien as analitiese metafoor binne ’n raamwerk wat put uit die polisisteamteorie van Itamar Even-Zohar (1990) en Pierre Bourdieu (1993) se nosie van die kultuurveld. Die vernaamste fokus van die analise is die reeks “epitexts,” oftewel epitekste (Gérard Genette, 1997), rondom die werk van prosaïes, digter en dramaturg Marlene van Niekerk. Hierdie epitekste sluit in kritiese resensies en resensies uit die hoofstroompers, onderhoude met en meningstukke of essays deur die outeur, asook navorsing oor haar werk (insluitende akademiese artikels en essays, hoofstukke uit boeke, en proefskrifte en verhandelinge). Van Niekerk debuteer in 1977 met haar eerste literêre werk en haar mees onlangse teks verskyn in 2019. As sodanig strek die omvang van haar literêre werk oor ’n tydperk van merkwaardige politieke, sosiale en kulturele verandering, terwyl dit ook drie literêre genres omvat en deel uitmaak van die literêre sisteme van sowel Afrikaans as Engels. Dit bied dus ’n omvattende en diepgaande epiteksargief wat besonder geskik is vir ’n vergelykende sistemiese benadering. ’n Oorsig van tersaaklike teorie word gevolg deur ’n bespreking van Van Niekerk binne die onderskeidelike Afrikaanstalige en Engelstalige literêre sisteme. Binne hierdie opset word die outeur beskou as sowel outeur wat skryf in Afrikaans as outeur wat in Engels vertaal is, terwyl daar ook gekonsentreer word op haar verwante stand in die groter sisteem van ’n “nasionale” Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur, benewens die omloop van haar werk in die uitgebreide, transnasionale Anglo-Amerikaanse literêre sisteem en die sisteem van wêreldletterkunde. Die oorheersende diskoerse binne die bestek van die populêre en die wetenskaplike resepsie van Van Niekerk se werk – en die wyses waarop dit haar stand in die verskillende literêre sisteme beïnvloed – word gekarteer en oorweeg, waarna hulle vergelyk en bespreek word ten einde ’n beter begrip te vorm van die invloede, oorslae en oorvleuelende patrone – m.a.w. die verstrengelinge – tussen die betrokke literêre sisteme. Deur gebruik te maak van Van Niekerk se oeuvre as analitiese lens neem hierdie studie die onderlinge verbindings tussen twee van Suid-Afrika se literêre sisteme waar, en word daar tot gevolgtrekkings gekom betreffende die betekenis hiervan in verhouding tot die land se dinamiese literêre landskap soos dit ontwikkel het en tans daar uitsien. Uiteindelik bied hierdie ondersoek ’n uitsig op die moontlikhede van die vergelykende literatuurwetenskap in Suid-Afrika.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

Silos are understandable. They carve up our complex world into manageable chunks. They help us feel less overwhelmed. But in the process, they also train our brains to tune out when somebody else's issue comes up [...] And they also keep us from seeing glaring connections between our issues.

— Naomi Klein (2017)

## 1. Introduction and rationale

In 2015, a few months after I had taken up a permanent lecturing position in a new academic department, renowned author, playwright, and literary scholar André Brink passed away, aged 79. Brink, who is widely known in Afrikaans as André P. Brink, had dominated Afrikaans literature for more than half a century as not just anti-apartheid author, but also as literary critic and prolific scholar. For me, like many of my generation's students of Afrikaans literature, Brink stood a "literary giant," as the *Mail & Guardian* called him in its report on his death (Anon., 2015). While I was at the time still adapting to a new English department and navigating towards a suitable doctoral research topic, Brink's death brought into sharp relief – for me, at least – a reflection of what the South African literary system has been for a long time. A set of silos.

Brink's death had passed with not so much as a whisper amongst the majority of my colleagues in our English department. Except for one, who sent me a rather odd e-mail in which he expressed his condolences (almost as if I were considered family of the deceased). Both the fact of my colleagues barely noticing that Brink had died and the peculiar notion that I should somehow be personally affected by his death – as expressed in the very sincere condolences e-mail I had received – resulted in my own reconsideration of the relationship between Afrikaans and English literary studies in South Africa, which I had up until that point assumed to be on many levels quite close and integrated.

As a student of Afrikaans literature, I had thought, perhaps rather naïvely, that Brink had attained a stature as not just an Afrikaans author, critic and literary scholar, but beyond that

also as an author writing in English and as respected critic and scholar of South African literature written in English. While both Afrikaans and English newspapers and literary websites such as LitNet subsequently ran several pieces on Brink, his life and his work, I found it interesting (and a bit jarring) that my colleagues barely noticed the passing of a South African author who had twice been shortlisted for the Booker Prize,<sup>1</sup> who was often mentioned along with English-language authors such as J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer and Zakes Mda as a pre-eminent South African novelist, and who had for a time been a professor of literature in the Department of English at the University of Cape Town. And this does not even begin to fully account for his impact on Afrikaans literature as an author, anthologist, and as incredibly prolific translator.

It was at this point that I began interrogating more seriously the connections and disconnections between the respective Afrikaans and South African English literary systems. And it was Brink who, with his prose written simultaneously in both Afrikaans and English from early on in his career, drove my thoughts toward both points of contact and boundaries between these literary systems. Of course, Brink is not alone as an originally Afrikaans author whose work has become world-famous in English translation (and other languages). The authors Breyten Breytenbach, Antjie Krog, Marlene van Niekerk, Ingrid Winterbach, Etienne van Heerden, Dalene Matthee, and Deon Meyer are similarly renowned for their work in English within South Africa and beyond the borders of their birth country. Like Brink, the reception of these authors in the two respective literary systems provides stimulating material for reflections on the state of South African literary studies from a broader perspective. In other words, the oeuvres of these authors can be utilised as lenses to see the relationships between these two literary systems differently. Deciding on a suitable doctoral research topic, I felt pressed by an urge to find a route around what seemed to be the fossilised but unmoving walls that are in some ways still separating the literary cultures of different languages in South Africa.

I had gathered some knowledge about how Van Niekerk was situated within the respective Afrikaans and South African English literary systems, as I had written on her novel *Agaat* (2004) in my first Masters thesis (Fourie, 2011). And, as I found out when working on an article with a colleague a few years ago (Fourie & Adendorff, 2015), the publication of research on

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<sup>1</sup> This was for *An Instant in the Wind* (1976) and *Rumours of Rain* (1978). Brink's final novel, *Philida* (2012), had also been on the longlist for this prize.

her work had only exponentially increased since my earlier thesis, which considered aspects of only one of the texts in her oeuvre. Further on, I return to my rationale for selecting Van Niekerk as the author through whose work I approach my comparative project, but first I want to briefly refer to the case of Antjie Krog and her entry into South African English literature, as I think it offers a nuanced summary of the interesting position in which she finds herself, as an originally Afrikaans author, within the broader South African literary landscape – much like Brink, Breytenbach and Van Niekerk.

Krog has become a well-regarded author within the English literary system. Initially, she was known mostly as a respected Afrikaans poet, until the publication of *Country of My Skull* (1998) – a text inspired by her time as reporter for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) during the public hearings that formed part of the activities of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC had been set up as a project of restorative justice in the newly democratic South Africa in an attempt to enable the country to publicly come to terms with its (especially recent) violent colonial past. This propelled Krog to explore the complicities of her own people, the Afrikaners, and the horrors they had inflicted on the oppressed majority of the country under apartheid. As an attempt to re-evaluate Afrikanerdom and Afrikaans, Krog produced *Country of My Skull* in English, which became her point of entry into the English literary system.

Referring to Krog’s literary output since the publication of *Country of My Skull*, Franci Vosloo explores the author’s role as “bilingual or multilingual writer in a complex sociocultural and sociolinguistic environment” who “operates at a dialogic and heteroglossic level [...], producing texts that are double-voiced or multi-voiced [...]. She] introduces differing meanings and openness to different perspectives, often defamiliarizing herself, her own and others’ language, and the reader” (Vosloo, 2014:359-360).<sup>2</sup> In a careful consideration of the reception of Krog’s work within both the Afrikaans and English literary fields, Vosloo notes that criticism from within English literary circles, wherein the thematic concerns and techniques of her older, Afrikaans works were often largely unknown,

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<sup>2</sup> A note on translation in this dissertation: For the sake of readability, longer quotes from non-English sources (particularly block quotations) appear as my own English translations, with the section quoted from the original language appearing in an accompanying footnote that is preceded by the abbreviation “orig.”. Here and there, long quotes in English that do not have such a footnote can be considered to be taken from the English abstract of the article in question. Shorter quotes from non-English sources that appear in my English translation in the main body of the text will be followed by the phrase in the original language indicated in brackets and quotation marks next to the translation.

seem to fall on her position in the literary field, but specifically on the presence of a traditionally Afrikaans author within the English literary field where the gatekeepers in all likelihood act even more harshly against Krog as what might be occurring within the Afrikaans literary field. [...] It would appear as if her growing status as Afrikaans-English author holds a threat for the existing order of English literature in South Africa particularly. [...] The concern is not so much about Krog writing in English, but that an *Afrikaans* poet is daring to publish in English.<sup>3</sup>

— Vosloo (2014:380, 381; original emphasis)

Perhaps because of, on the one hand, Krog's very direct involvement in South African public political narrativising during the TRC, and, on the other hand, her role as principally both the author *and* translator of her work (on the TRC, and later, related topics)<sup>4</sup> in both English and Afrikaans, she stands in a very visible literary and cultural position in the South African imaginary. This position is, according to Vosloo (2014:382) a hybrid space, or contact zone – an “in-between [...] *third space*”;

an uncomfortable, exposed space that is symptomatic of the tension between two more definitive spaces from the perspective of the English reader: the one familiar (English), the other strange (Afrikaans), the one local and the other global, intimidating, equalising, universal.<sup>5</sup>

— Vosloo (2014:382)

I do not want to delve too deeply into the case of Krog as bilingual author, but I think the point I wish to make is evident: Afrikaans authors who come to achieve some presence in both the Afrikaans literary system and its South African English counterpart enter into a fascinating literary space, resulting in their work being received in often distinct ways in the two respective

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<sup>3</sup> Orig.: “blyk dus eerder op die vlak van haar posisie in die literêre veld te lê, maar spesifiek die teenwoordigheid van ’n tradisioneel Afrikaanse skrywer binne die Engelse literêre veld waar die hekwagters waarskynlik feller optree teenoor Krog as wat binne die Afrikaanse literêre veld gebeur. [...] Dit wil] voorkom asof haar groeiende status as Afrikaans-Engelse skrywer ’n bedreiging inhou vir die bestaande orde van die Engelse letterkunde in Suid-Afrika spesifiek. [...] Dit gaan] dus nie soseer daaroor dat dit Krog is wat in Engels skryf nie, maar dat dit ’n Afrikáánse digter is wat dit waag om in Engels te publiseer.”

<sup>4</sup> This includes specifically Krog's three texts *Country of My Skull* (1998), *A Change of Tongue* (2003) and *Begging to be Black* (2009), though her Afrikaans and English poetry of the past two decades reflect musings on similar issues.

<sup>5</sup> Orig.: “’n ongemaklike, ontblote ruimte wat simptome is van die spanning wat heers tussen twee meer definitiewe ruimtes uit die oogpunt van die Engelse leser: die een bekend (Engels), die ander vreemd (Afrikaans), die een plaaslik en die ander globaal, intimiderend, gelykmakend, universeel.”

systems.<sup>6</sup> However, Vosloo references particular sets of tension here that will certainly not always result in only clear *difference* or *distinction*. By this I mean that the opposing tensions between the familiar and the foreign and the local versus the global that are inherent in an author's work, as it manifests in different languages, can offer thought-provoking perspectives on the reception of the literary works themselves and of their authors. These tensions can certainly also present one with the opportunity to gain further insight into the operations of, firstly, each of the respective literary systems (Afrikaans and South African English), secondly, the relationship between these systems (and thus what this might reveal about the broader "national" South African literary system), and, thirdly, the relationships these systems have with broader, transnational systems, such as the widely inclusive Anglo-American<sup>7</sup> literature (in English) and even beyond that, supposedly the most inclusive and wide-ranging system of all, world literature. Yet it is not just in the distinctions that one can discern more. Indeed, it is the far more complex and tangled space between these various systems – where tensions are intertwined – that I seek to explore in this study.

### 1.1. The selection of Marlene van Niekerk

Marlene van Niekerk's literary renown is reflected in the various South African literary prizes she has received or has been shortlisted for, in addition to international recognition, such as her nomination for the 2015 Man Booker International Prize.<sup>8</sup> Van Niekerk's oeuvre spans the two decades before the end of apartheid until the present, and she has received critical applause for her texts both in the original Afrikaans, and, significantly, also for the English translations of some of these works. Additionally, as public intellectual, she has contributed to debates surrounding the role of literature in societies in the process of drastic transformation, education, as well as the ongoing questions surrounding the language of tuition at South African universities and concomitant processes of institutional decolonisation (see Van Niekerk, 1990, 2013b and 2016).

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<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, the similarities between the positions of Krog and Van Niekerk go beyond biographical similarities of race, gender and language profiles, and unto the concerns explored in their works, as Mary West (2009a:173) notes: "Both writers [...] are equally preoccupied with a current crisis of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa." Eva Hunter also notices this similarity, for her specifically between Krog's *A Change of Tongue* (2003) and *Agaat* (2004), when she writes that in these two texts "Afrikaner 'whiteness' in post-apartheid South Africa is predicated as, if uncertain, at least open" (2008:18).

<sup>7</sup> I have elected to use "Anglo-American" rather than "Anglophone," as the latter implies a kind of equality between the different English-speaking parts of the world, while the former more accurately reflects the global inequalities in which the United Kingdom and the United States of America are still culturally dominant.

<sup>8</sup> See Terblance (2015) for a relatively complete list of literary prizes awarded to Van Niekerk.

To date, Van Niekerk has produced five collections of poetry, two volumes of short stories, one drama, and three novels. She made her literary debut in 1977 with the Afrikaans volume of poetry *Sprokkelster*, followed by a second volume, *Groenstaar*, in 1983. Almost a decade later, in 1992, she ventured into the realm of short fiction with the short story volume *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*. Though the reception of these works was mostly positive, they have not been translated into English and have had a limited reception internationally.

In 1994, Van Niekerk's controversial novel, *Triomf*, won the M-Net Prize, CNA Prize and Noma Prize for Publications in Africa. The novel is about a poor white family in Triomf, the Johannesburg suburb built upon the ruins of Sophiatown, and is set on the eve of South Africa's first democratic elections. Leon de Kock's English translation of the novel (1999) broadened the readership of the novel immensely.<sup>9</sup> After the success of *Triomf*, Van Niekerk published a short story "Klein vingeroefening rondom die nosie van hibriditeit" in 2001. This short story was translated by Michiel Heyns and was published in English as "Labour" in 2007. The novel *Agaat* also appeared in 2004, and would go on to receive international acclaim after the publication of English translation in 2006, also by Heyns. Subsequent to *Agaat*, there followed in 2006 the novel *Memorandum: 'n verhaal met skilderye* (appearing in both Afrikaans and in English translations, accompanied by paintings by Adriaan van Zyl).<sup>10</sup>

Ending an almost 20 year stint of prose-writing, Van Niekerk published the collection of short stories *Die sneuslaper* in 2009, which appeared in English translation in 2019 as *The Snow Sleeper* (translated by Marius Swart).<sup>11</sup> Between 2010 and 2011, a play, titled *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.* (2010), was performed at the Aardklop National Arts Festival in Potchefstroom and in Stellenbosch. Though the play exists in published form, as it was provided to audience members at these festivals, it has to date neither been published by any mainstream publisher, nor has it been translated into English. After three decades, the author returned to poetry with the publication of *Kaar* (2013), and with the two simultaneously released volumes *Gesant van die mispels: Gedigte by die skilderye van Adriaen Coorte ca. 1659-1707* and *In die stille agterkamer: Gedigte by skilderye van Jan Mankes 1889-1920*, both

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<sup>9</sup> De Kock in fact produced two English translations – one for local publication, and one for publication in other territories. I elaborate on this in Chapter 3.

<sup>10</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will at times refer to this novel simply as *Memorandum*.

<sup>11</sup> Prior to this, the translation of only a single story from the full volume of short stories appeared as *The Swan Whisperer: An Inaugural Lecture*, accompanied by a series of sketches by William Kentridge (Van Niekerk, 2015).

published in 2017.<sup>12</sup> To date, no complete English translation of any of these volumes has been published, though a handful of poems have appeared in a few anthologies, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Whereas a number of the abovementioned Afrikaans texts are now considered central to the Afrikaans literary canon, it is mostly van Niekerk's later prose texts – including the novels *Triomf*, *Agaat* and *Memorandum*, as well as the single short story “Labour” and the recently published translation of the short story collection *The Snow Sleeper* – that make up her entry into the South African English literary canon. In its approach, my study seeks to go beyond considering only the fairly limited (and limiting) notion of the literary canon, and so I utilise the idea of the literary system. (Both the notions of the canon and the system are clarified in Chapter 2.) I have already mentioned that Van Niekerk as an author is situated in both the Afrikaans and the South African English literary systems. Additionally, specifically as a result of her position within the latter system, her work can be considered to be part of systems more transnational in nature; that is, the Anglo-American literary system and the system of world literature. My study will therefore focus on the systemic relationships that may be revealed through closer analysis of these systems using the oeuvre of Van Niekerk as a lens.

Here it seems necessary to clarify the analytical focus of my study. I must stress that I do not seek to focus on Van Niekerk's work itself as the primary site of analysis, and therefore, I shall not be occupied with the examination of the Van Niekerk texts themselves – except insofar as they might be relevant for my discussion of matters related to analysing elements of the systems. I thus set out to explore the extensive system of existing Van Niekerk *epitexts* (i.e. texts outside, around and surrounding the Van Niekerk literary texts). I am interested in how these nodes form in a network of practices of reception that can be read to offer a more acute focus on the complex entanglement(s) of two of South Africa's literary systems, before, during and after the country's transition to democracy. This entails, therefore, an almost encyclopaedic overview and discussion of the reception of Van Niekerk's work – both in popular and scholarly spheres. This broad and detailed consideration allows me to deduce not just how Van Niekerk is differently located in the separate South African English and Afrikaans literary cultures, but also how these cultures are mutually imbricated with one another, often in quite

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<sup>12</sup> The latter two volumes of poetry will for the sake of conciseness mostly be referred to simply as *Gesant van die mispels* and *In die stille agterkamer*.

unexpected ways. As the author's work is concerned with issues that extend beyond the experience of a single South African cultural formation – including race, gender, land, language, history, etc. – the renderings of these concerns in different sites of cultural production and reception might intersect, overlap, agree, conflict and differ, and it is onto this that I cast a critical and analytical gaze.

## 1.2. Existing research

The case of Van Niekerk is both similar and dissimilar to that of Krog, which I have discussed above. Van Niekerk functions, unlike Krog, mostly as an author only – and not as both the author and *principal* translator of her own work – at least insofar as her prose is concerned.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore Van Niekerk's translators – and not Van Niekerk herself – who mainly fill what Vosloo (2014) calls the liminal space wherein the domesticating or foreignising of her text into an English translation is attempted. I am interested in this liminal space – as this is exactly the transactional site between different nodes within the two literary systems that I engage in this study. It is also within this liminal space and the forces of reception through which it is shaped that we can likely achieve possible further insight into the trade-offs, negotiations and machinations of South African literary systems in the post-apartheid era. In this regard, Vosloo has for instance considered the reception of Krog, and though she (Vosloo) does not focus in her article on the literary system, her observations do offer some perception of how the liminal space reveals something of linguistic power relations in the literary landscape. Vosloo shows that efforts have been made to deny Krog access to the English system (notably by Stephen Watson and Stephen Gray; see Vosloo, 2014:379-382), despite certain others within the same system considering her as “firmly part of the English literary establishment” (Thurman, 2007:4). Such instances, where there is an attempt to exclude authors from a system, or at least to keep them on the periphery of that system, are indeed interesting. They could become even

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<sup>13</sup> The case of *Die sneeuslaper* (2009) is slightly different to those of *Triomf*, *Agaat*, *Memorandum*, *The Snow Sleeper* and “Labour,” as its origins lie in a simultaneous and reciprocal process between writing in Afrikaans and being translated into Dutch – with the latter process influencing the rewriting of the former. Still, even in the case of *Die sneeuslaper*, Van Niekerk was not the principal translator. For a more detailed discussion of the simultaneous writing and translation of *Die sneeuslaper* in Afrikaans/Dutch, see De Vries and De Jong-Goossens (2010:8) and Viljoen (2016 and 2017a). Van Niekerk's two most recent volumes of poetry, *Gesant van die mispels* (2017) and *In die stille agterkamer* (2017) are published with Afrikaans and Dutch versions of each poem in the same volume. The translation of the poems into Dutch was a collaborative effort between Van Niekerk and Henda Strydom, to whom the texts are also dedicated.

more so when viewed within an even broader framework, where an author's entry into a system might be resisted in certain instances, but welcomed in others.

With an overview of the scholarship and critical reception of Van Niekerk in research produced in English, I wish to begin making visible how the author's position in South African English literature might be surmised, but also how this stands in relation to the Afrikaans literary system. In the case of the latter, I undertake a similar in-depth overview of the reception of Van Niekerk's work, and how the exchange between the literary systems, viewed through the work of a single author as a lens, might ripple out into the greater South African literary system.

Although some scholars and critics have previously identified other authors that seem to straddle the Afrikaans and South African English literary systems – such as Herman Charles Bosman, who Hennie Aucamp (1972:65) referred to as a “hyphen” between these systems – to my knowledge, no other study of this nature or scope has yet been undertaken. Indeed, while Van Niekerk is a well-considered and well-studied author, fairly little has been done in terms of comparative systemic readings of her work, as I shall discuss in this dissertation. While books such as Michael Chapman's *South African Literatures* (1996, 2003), Chris Heywood's *A History of South African Literature* (2004), and *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (2012), edited by David Attwell and Derek Attridge, have attempted to offer literary histories that integrate all the literary systems of South Africa, none has had as point of departure the express intention to consider in greater detail the connections between these different systems – not least by utilising the work of a single author as a lens.

The reasons for this gap could be myriad, but four possible reasons stand out. Firstly, there is a relatively limited tradition of studies in comparative literature in South Africa. Secondly, we have witnessed the rise of English in political, cultural and societal terms (to the arguable detriment of all other languages of the country), which could directly and indirectly discourage comparative studies. Thirdly, there could be a reticence to undertake what could easily become, if not delineated carefully, a study of substantial magnitude. And finally, the structures of academic language and literature departments in universities still reflect, in various ways, the separate social and cultural circuits envisioned by apartheid for different racial groups. If this

is not reflected in terms of their constitution within institutions, then it is visible, at least, in their research and teaching operations, as well as in their degree offerings.<sup>14</sup>

Cognisant of these challenges, it is my aim that my approach should be manageable in scope so as to allow for meaningful, specific observations that can be sensibly extrapolated (within reasonable limits) to the broader South African literary system. For this reason, I do not undertake a comprehensive literary-historical overview of both Afrikaans and South African English literature, which would be too unfocused for what I seek to achieve. Similarly, I also acknowledge the potentially interesting investigation of Van Niekerk as an author in the Dutch literary system, but the inclusion of Van Niekerk as an author in Dutch in this particular project would not allow for the more detailed analyses that I wish to conduct. I therefore limit my approach to the work of a single author within the context of two South African literary systems, even as I tease out the transnational implications of her oeuvre when it is relevant. The oeuvre of Marlene van Niekerk thus serves as a lens through which to view the respective Afrikaans and South African English literary systems, as the author is well represented in both of these. Moreover, it is the vitally important interaction between these systems that I wish to emphasise.

It needs to be acknowledged that there are some existing studies that resonate with my project. Firstly, there is the work by Vosloo (2014) that is discussed above. In Andrew van der Vlies's 2017 monograph, *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing*, he reads a number of recent South African literary works in an attempt to think "about affect and temporality together" in order to come to a better understanding of "present-day South African writing, and of postcolonial and contemporary world literature more broadly" (2017:viii-ix). He makes "a case for the key place of South African writing in global conversations" through his analysis of novels, in particular, which, he argues, "might provide spaces in which imaginative openings out of the present uncertain aftermath of the end of apartheid are made visible" (Van der Vlies, 2017:ix). Though Van der Vlies uses a wide conception of the South African literary system, his emphasis on affect makes his study quite different from my own. He focuses on "disappointment [as] a significant structure of feeling in contemporary South Africa," and he

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<sup>14</sup> In terms of the latter point, South Africa is not unique. Other multilingual countries, such as, for instance, Belgium, India and Canada, are likely to see similar language Balkanisation. What is indisputable is that the contributing factors to such a state of affairs in each country will be influenced by unique historical contexts. In the case of South Africa, therefore, apartheid was a strong contributing force.

traces this through the work of a number of authors, including J.M. Coetzee, Zoë Wicomb, Marlene van Niekerk, and others (2017:viii). Regarding Van Niekerk's novel *Agaat*, Van der Vlies also considers the problems of translating a text from a "provincial literature" into "world literature in English" (2017:90).<sup>15</sup> However, again, Van der Vlies's discussion of *Agaat* and its English translation are brought into the larger conversation of *Present Imperfect*, and his considerations of Van Niekerk as an author in English are limited primarily to *Agaat*. Thus, his book does not contain an expansive consideration of the *systemic* relationships between the Afrikaans and South African English literary systems. With a similarly limited focus, Derek Attridge discusses the adoption of Van Niekerk's first two novels into English via translation. His concern is specifically the different versions of the texts created for the "English-speaking South African readership and versions addressed to a global readership" (2014:395). Comparably, with a focus on the relationship between Afrikaans and Dutch, Louise Viljoen (2017a) considers Van Niekerk's *Die sneeuslaper* (translated as *De sneeuwslaper*) as both a transnational and translational text. Again, like the other two scholars mentioned above, Viljoen's focus is on a very limited part of Van Niekerk's oeuvre (a single text) – along with texts by a number of other authors – and her approach is not primarily systemic in nature. I engage with these arguments (Attridge, 2014; Van der Vlies, 2017, 2012; Viljoen, 2017a) in considerable detail throughout the following chapters of this dissertation. I shall therefore not delve into them further here, except to acknowledge that they all imply in varying ways re-considerations of South African literature within a globalised system, even as they do not adopt either the systemic view or the scope that I do in this study.

### 1.3. Theoretical underpinnings and research questions

The theoretical underpinnings of my approach are formed by a synthesis of the concepts *entanglement* (Sarah Nuttall, 2009), the *system* and *polysystem* (Itamar Even-Zohar, 1990), the *epitext* (Gérard Genette, 1997), and the *cultural field* (Pierre Bourdieu, 1993). I utilise the notions of the latter three theorists – and studies by scholars that have since honed some of these concepts – to refine and build upon Nuttall's idea of entanglement (itself taken from Édouard Glissant). As such, entanglement can be considered the central structuring idea of this study, which is developed, in the first instance, theoretically, and in the second, analytically,

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<sup>15</sup> This is something Van der Vlies also explores in relation to *Agaat* in an article (Van der Vlies, 2012) that appeared prior to the publication of the mentioned monograph (2017).

by way of my investigation into the reception of the oeuvre of Van Niekerk. This can be formulated in the following main research questions and sub-questions:

- How can we conceive of the interrelatedness (entanglement) of the Afrikaans and South African English literary systems when viewed through the reception of the Afrikaans and English oeuvres of Marlene van Niekerk?
- How is Van Niekerk considered within the South African English literary system?
  - What is the importance of Van Niekerk's works as English translations, and how does this relate to larger transnational systems such as that of Anglo-American literature and world literature?
  - In both the popular and scholarly reception of Van Niekerk's work within this system, how is she situated as South African author in English?
- How is Van Niekerk considered within the Afrikaans literary system?
  - What is the importance of Van Niekerk's larger Afrikaans oeuvre, especially in terms of how this has shaped her reception within the Afrikaans literary system?
  - In both the popular and scholarly reception of Van Niekerk's work within this system, how is she situated as an Afrikaans author who also commands an international presence?
- Subsequently, what is the nature of the entanglement between the two relevant literary systems, as viewed through the reception of Van Niekerk's oeuvre?
- Consequently, what might these insights suggest about the current dynamic state of the broader South African literary system?

#### **1.4. Aims and objectives**

By 2019, Marlene van Niekerk's oeuvre spans a period of 42 years, from her poetry debut in 1977 to her latest volumes of poetry in 2017 and the release of *The Snow Sleeper* in 2019. Her work during this period covers a period of remarkable political, social and cultural change, in addition to three literary genres, and the literary systems of both Afrikaans and English. As

such, this offers an extent and level of detail that is well suited to a comparative systemic approach.

Louise Viljoen has stated that the interaction between the literatures and literary systems in South Africa are not as extensive as one would expect (2014:8). She also confirms what has certainly been my experience of literature departments within the university landscape; that is, that those departments focusing on literature in a single language have been institutionalised, at the expense of comparative studies that straddle the literatures of different languages (ibid.). This project is, then, a response to this.

The intention of this study is not to present a case by case horizontal comparison of particular markers in the respective Afrikaans and English literary systems, as such an approach would suggest a kind of parity and parallelism in the two systems that does not exist. I do not want to merely prove that there is some interaction between different literatures and literary systems. Rather, what I want to illustrate, and in some ways come to terms with as a scholar working within the field of comparative literature, are the fascinating intimacies of two literary systems and how this might contribute to future scholarship in comparative literature within the South African academe.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical and Literature Overview

### 2. Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss, firstly, the central metaphorical concept that structures my methodological approach – that of entanglement. This discussion, which charts the development of the concept and the specific ways in which I have adapted it for my study, is followed by a discussion of the polysystem and the cultural field. These serve as representations of the interactive network of entanglements engaged in my analysis. Finally, I consider world literature and translation as important elements of the systems that are analysed, and contextualise how these structuring approaches support my use of entanglement and the system.

#### 2.1. The notion of entanglement

The notion of entanglement is a metaphorical concept that is central to this research project. In this section, I seek to unpack it to explain how I am applying this metaphor in my attempt to understand the dynamic and complex relationship that has come to exist between the Afrikaans literary system on the one hand, and the South African English literary system on the other. I also try to situate it differently from other contexts within which it has previously been used, in order to argue why it can be used appropriately within a comparative study of entwined systems.

##### 2.1.1. Origins

I draw the term entanglement in its basic sense from the work of Martinican writer, poet and literary philosopher, Édouard Glissant, who initially developed it as an analytical lens in postcolonial – and for him specifically Caribbean – societies. Glissant uses the term within the context of racial entanglement (Nuttall, 2009:9), and places his emphasis on processes of diaspora and metamorphosis:

There is a difference between the transplanting (by exile or dispersion) of a people who continue to survive elsewhere and the transfer (by the slave trade) of a population to another place where they change into something different, into a new set of possibilities. It is in this *metamorphosis* that we must try to detect one of the best kept secrets of creolization.

— Glissant (1989:14; my emphasis)

While my project within literary studies will not directly engage with race as a point of intersection, Glissant here marks a central characteristic of the notion of entanglement, which I transpose into my systemic reading: its malleability and dynamicity. He contends that, through change, “we can see that the mingling of experiences is at work, there for us to know and producing the process of being,” and so entanglement responds to the problems that “fixing the object of scrutiny in static time” may result in, as it avoids “removing the tangled nature of lived experience” (ibid.). The decision to employ entanglement as the main analytical lens is therefore founded on the dynamic possibilities it brings to the analysis of the literary system as an aspect of broader cultural sites.

Glissant uses the French phrase *point d'intrication*, which roughly translates into English as *entanglement*, and into Afrikaans as *verstrengeling*, to encapsulate “the hybridization and creolization of human societies, as a result of the historical brutalities of colonialism and other forms of domination” (Oruc, 2013:2).<sup>16</sup> Firat Oruc argues that Glissant utilises entanglement to stress “the fragmented diversity of the multiplied poetics of the world” (ibid.). It is through this that one can identify “the nonassimilatory relation of cultural difference from specific historical dispositions that are *individually distinct but also variously connected*” (ibid.; my emphasis). This speaks in many ways to the sometimes surprising links between diverse cultures, languages and literatures, for example. Zimitri Erasmus (2000:187) notes, in writing about the complexities of historical South African racial categories and how power relations in terms of race and gender continue to be informed in knowledge production in South Africa after the transition to democracy, that “entanglements are made and remade through crossings of various histories which produce and reproduce multiple cultural formations” (2000:186). In addition to the dynamic possibilities of entanglement, as evidenced by Glissant and Oruc,

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<sup>16</sup> The notion shows certain overlaps with Gayatri Spivak’s thoughts around the so-called *subaltern* (a term developed by Spivak, 1988, based on the work of Antonio Gramsci) and Homi K. Bhabha’s ideas on what he has called *hybridity* (1994).

Erasmus shows how the concept allows new ways of considering temporal engagement. In this way, the notion can enable analyses that avoid the neat and simplistic temporal bifurcation of South African history into apartheid and post-apartheid.

### 2.1.2. Beyond race and colony

Resonating with Glissant's emphasis on metamorphosis, Erasmus writes about how entanglement can result in the creation of a multitude of newness and voices: "the refraction of gendered and classed identities through racialized and creolized african [sic] identities brings to the fore multi-vocality" (2000:202). Erasmus asserts that "the analytical power of entanglement" lies in its disruptive possibilities:

The concept and the social condition of entanglement have significant consequences for hegemonic binarisms and notions of "pure" and singular identities. Among these is the transgressive effect of engagements in entanglement through its disruption of the hegemonic black/white binary frame and singular notions of blackness and whiteness, of woman, of man.

— Erasmus (2000:203)

The very concept of entanglement therefore steers the researcher to multiplicities of meaning: The French *intrication* comes from the Latin verb *intricare* ("to entangle"), which itself comes from the noun *tricae* ("perplexities"). As Sarah Nuttall (2009:1) has it, as "a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with," entanglement "speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited." Though the process involved is thus not always intentional (although it might in some cases be), and, as suggested by the entrapment implied in *entanglement*, is often resisted by various concomitant but oppositional forces (again, it might in some cases not be), the result can be something metaphorically akin to being interwoven to the extent that, through repetitive cultural intersection, patterns and disruptions in seemingly disparate elements – individually distinct but also variously connected – might become more visible. It is the relationship between these elements that leads Nuttall to her broader definition of entanglement, which enables us to still gaze through Glissant's proposed lens, but to broaden the focus to various other cultural flows, and to use it as structuring concept (2009:1).

Nuttall views entanglement as “a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle [...] It is a means by which to draw into our analyses those sites in which what was once thought of as separate – identities, spaces, histories – come together or find points of intersection in unexpected ways” (2009:1). Most importantly, this notion offers a “rubric”, or analytical lens, “in terms of which we can begin to meet the challenge of ‘after apartheid’” (Nuttall, 2009:11). She proposes a number of ways in which entanglement has entered into critical work in various fields in the humanities, and her broad definition of what the concept entails can be applied to differing extent and effect as analytical rubric, which through their mutually imbricated natures cannot always be neatly separated from one another. She names her main focuses as: historical entanglement; the time of entanglement; literary entanglement, which includes Leon de Kock’s idea of the seam (2001) and Mark Sanders’ idea of complicity (2002), which I discuss below; the entanglement of people and things; biological entanglement (DNA); and finally, racial entanglement (2009:2-11).

### **2.1.3. Entanglement, the seam, and complicities**

In an attempt to understand the complexity of South African literatures, or the “field of South African literary studies,” Leon de Kock utilises the notion of the *seam* (2001). De Kock recognises the implicit problematic nature of the metaphors often used for the literary field, as they “require some reason other than the mere convenience of geography for their existence: they need minimal convergence in the domains of origin, language, culture, history, and nationalism (contested or not) to become, in some sense, cohesive and interreferential” (2001:246). In the case of South Africa, he remarks, these domains are so heterogeneous that any convergence is an area of unresolved difference. (My discussion will turn to the notion of (a) South African literature(s) further on.) In reading the tensions in the identified heterogeneity, De Kock takes the notion of the seam from Noël Mostert’s *Frontiers* (1992), and adapts it to signify “the site of a joining together that also bears the mark of a suture” (2001:276). He views the seam as the result of a contradictory process, wherein the suturing of “the incommensurate is an attempt to close the gap that defines it as incommensurate,” while at the same time the process is inevitably marked by its own contradiction – wherein lies the seam as a “site of both convergence and difference.” The tension of the seam leads to a cyclical “compulsive” return to the “zone of the seam” in an attempt to iron out the seam as a reminder of the marks of difference, or to at least imagine it differently (De Kock, 2001:276-277).

Drawing again on Mostert (1992), De Kock considers both the psychological and territorial frontier that has been the meeting points of difference in South African history; “a place [...] of simultaneous convergence and divergence and where a representational seam is the paradox qualifying any attempt to imagine organicism or unity” (2001:277).

Nuttall (2009:5) seems to both praise and criticise De Kock’s use of the seam when she comments that, strikingly, its greatest subtlety lies in its application to the past. While it is therefore a useful analytical lens, it shows “minimal engagement” with the “now” – a shortcoming she later notes can be overcome, one reads into her argument, indeed because entanglement is able to “begin to meet the challenge of ‘after apartheid’,” or in broad terms, the now (Nuttall, 2009:11). This also has some implications for reading the current historical moment against moments of the past. De Kock has acknowledged this shortcoming, stating that he is no longer certain that South Africa’s “current condition” can still be functionally understood through the metaphor of the seam (De Kock, 2005:71). Nevertheless, Ronit Frenkel, in a rather scathing critique of De Kock’s concept, observes that the logic of the seam “is based on segregated thought” (2010:42). Similar to the critique levelled by Nuttall, Frenkel sees the principal shortcoming of the seam in the way it engages the present moment, “where De Kock designates unity as impossible due to an inability to suppress difference, as identities are never singular and therefore carry the mark of the seam” (ibid.). Frenkel argues that all identities are composed of dissimilar parts: “Identities, by their very nature, consist of seemingly incommensurate parts that are synthesised internally to form a coherent whole [...] [Apartheid] was marked by Manichean [sic] polarities that enforced the idea of strict divisions between us and them, [...], black and white, [...] when lived reality was becoming increasingly hybridised” (Frenkel, 2010:41-42). The seam represents the view of bifurcated identity formations that are forced together but never heal, but this is, according to Frenkel, a mode of segregated thought, where difference “is reified as normative” rather than explored “in terms of relational positionings.” According to her, this only further entrenches existing dualistic readings that already mark a lot of scholarship on South Africa, ultimately hiding the “blendings, interconnections, hybridities and ambiguities that characterise South African cultural formations” (ibid.). What Frenkel gestures towards here is a different analytical lens, which in terms of its cognisance of fluidity and nuance resonates strongly with the concept of entanglement.

An approach that defies the binary oppositional points of departure that are fundamental to the seam, is what Mark Sanders refers to as *complicities* (2002). Sanders develops this idea as an attempt to understand the various and varied responses to a diverse socio-political, -economical and -cultural system such as apartheid, which he argues cannot simply be bifurcated into *opposition to* on the one hand, and *support for* on the other. Sanders argues that proponents of apartheid, “a system of enforced social separation,” were never able to fully realise the separateness that was both the “originary law and ultimate end” of their system (Sanders, 2002:1). In opposition to apartheid, opponents “affirmed an essential human joinedness,” pointing out both the system’s evil and untruth (*ibid.*). However, unavoidably, opponents of the system – in their very opposition – became implicated in the reasoning and practices of the system. Complicity avoids the dualism of notions such as the seam, in that, according to Frenkel (2010:42), it “seek[s] to read cultural formations in relational rather than Manichean [sic] terms.” Sanders posits the concept in a way that allows one to establish overlaps with the notion of entanglement:

In the absence of an acknowledgment of complicity in a wider sense of *foldedness* with the other, whether welcomed or not, there would have been no opposition to apartheid. The history of the intellectual and apartheid – *whether of support, accommodation, or resistance* – can, in these terms, be deciphered, not by fixing on apartness alone, but by *tracking interventions*, marked by degrees of *affirmation and disavowal*, in a *continuum of foldedness* or responsibility-in-complicity.

— Sanders (2002:11; my emphasis)

This idea of “foldedness”, constituted as it is within discourses of complex overlaps and continuities, resonates with the rubric of literary entanglement with which I seek to broaden the analytical possibilities of the metaphor central to this project. The interwoven characteristics of Nuttall’s broader conceptualisation of entanglement seems to align generally with the ideas surrounding what Itamar Even-Zohar refers to as the “complex of activities” that are literary systems, firstly, and secondly, with the “dynamic and heterogeneous” nature of the polysystemic approach, which “emphasizes the *multiplicity of intersections* and hence the greater complexity of structuredness” (Even-Zohar, 1990a:12; my emphasis). Thus, my project seeks to rise to the challenge Even-Zohar (1990c:53) poses to comparatists: Explore and question in more exacting detail instances of so-called literary interference – the relation or relationship between literatures, with one becoming a source of influence on the other. “[W]hat

is interference for, why does it emerge, what are its main features, how does it work, when and under what conditions may it emerge, function for some longer time, and decline?” In pursuing these questions, I hope to expand beyond the initial parameters of interference, and so I return to the concept of entanglement throughout the subsequent sections of this chapter, but also do so in the following chapters.

In the next section, I pay attention to the notion of the polysystem, as well as what Pierre Bourdieu has called the cultural field. I discuss how these concepts can be blended with entanglement as structuring tools of analysis.

## **2.2. The system and the field**

### **2.2.1. The polysystem**

The notion of the system, according to Even-Zohar, is a way of understanding “sign-governed patterns of human communication” such as literature (1990b:9). He notes that rather than attempting to understand these patterns as “conglomerates of disparate elements,” they can be considered from a broader perspective – in other words, as interrelated systems that are not analysed based on their substance, but rather approached on the basis of their relations (ibid.). To speak of a “literary system” then, is to refer to a whole – comprising the activities, role players, and relations that form part of a particular discourse – that is greater than the sum of its parts (Viljoen, 1992). For the purposes of this study, a “literary system” is defined as

[t]he network of relations that is hypothesized to obtain between a number of activities called “literary,” and consequently these activities themselves observed via that network. Or: The complex of activities, or any section thereof, for which systemic relations can be hypothesized to support the option of considering them “literary.”

— Even-Zohar (1990b:28)

The notion of the literary system is related to, but not the same as, the literary canon. Abrams states that the idea of the literary canon “has come to designate [...] those authors who, by a cumulative consensus of critics, scholars, and teachers, have come to be widely recognized as ‘major,’ and to have written works often hailed as literary *classics*” (Abrams, 2005:29; original

emphasis). More critically considered, canons are “essentially strategic constructs by which societies maintain their own interests, since the canon allows control over the texts a culture takes seriously and over the methods of interpretation that establish the meaning of ‘serious’” (Altieri, 1990:21). While many of the elements that form part of the literary system contribute to (or are implicated in) the formation of a canon, the canon as a collection of literary texts is neither as complex, nor as encompassing as the notion of the system. The system includes various forces and artefacts that surround the collection of literary texts that would be considered part of a particular canon. It is important to note that a canon is usually distinguished as “national literature[s]” (Abrams, 2005:29) or as attached to a particular language; a characteristic shared with more narrowly defined literary systems. Even-Zohar refers to Viktor Shklovsky’s discussion of the concept of canonicity, noting that

in literature certain properties become canonized, while other remain non-canonized. In such a view, by “canonized” one means those literary norms and works (i.e., both models and texts) which are accepted as legitimate by the dominant circles within a culture and whose conspicuous products are preserved by the community to become part of its historical heritage.

— Even-Zohar (1990a:15)

Conversely, “non-canonized means those norms and texts which are rejected by these circles as illegitimate and whose products are often forgotten in the long run by the community,” unless these norms or texts are reconsidered and re-entered into the canon (ibid.). Ultimately, canonised status cannot be viewed as a marker of quality, as human societies and cultures are stratified, and changing ideologies and related norms will mean that the position of canonised artefacts are continuously challenged by non-canonised artefacts, which means that literary systems will evolve, and, in so-doing, ensure their continued existence. Delia Ungureanu (2011:88) attempts to simplify what is central to the discussion regarding canonicity. She writes that all discussions of the canon “involve three theoretical conceptions of literature: what is literature, what is the theory underlying the historical sense of literature, and what is the history of literary theories” (ibid.). In this, Ungureanu clearly illustrates why the notion of the canon can therefore never be a fixed idea, but rather remains a nebulous concept when not viewed as tied to cultural, political, temporal and spatial realities. In my research project, I do not wish to challenge the very notion of the canon. Rather, I want to explore how considerations of canonicity are dynamic parts of a specific polysystem, wherein the canon stands subjugated to

the forces of the greater polysystem, and canonising forces impact on the polysystem in diverse ways and in varying degrees of magnitude. The overlap between the canon and the polysystem is discussed further on.

The concept of the polysystem was conceived by Even-Zohar to study complex cultural systems. Even-Zohar had in mind specifically literature, which he, reliant on the work of the Russian Formalists, advocates should not be studied as an essentialist, substantial given, but primarily as a dynamic, open network of relations (De Geest, 1996:66). A multilingual country's literary system is one such cultural system, which can be subdivided into further distinguishable linguistic systems. The complexity of the system requires that one considers it as an open, active, changing network; a system that is "dynamic and heterogeneous," which "emphasizes the multiplicity of intersections and hence the greater complexity of structuredness involved" (Even-Zohar, 1990a:12). This stands in opposition to the Saussurean "static, synchronistic approach," which "can deal with the general idea of function and functioning, but cannot account for the functioning of language, or any other semiotic system, in a specific territory in *time*," and allows for the study of open, active systems (Even-Zohar, 1990a:11-13; original emphasis). It is this dynamicity that allows for the combined use of the notions of entanglement and polysystem, as the polysystem is "a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent" (Even Zohar, 1990a:11).

The various strata of a polysystem are not considered hierarchically equal. The continuous struggle between different strata in a polysystem is what ensures the dynamic state of the system (Even-Zohar, 1990a:14). There exists within the system centrifugal and centripetal forces that vie for dominance, and as such, there is a struggle between the centre and periphery of the system; the former being the more influential positioning, and the latter being the less desirable and less powerful station. Even-Zohar (1990a:17) maintains that, as a rule, the centre of a polysystem will be identical to the "most prestigious canonized repertoire," since "it is the group which governs the polysystem that ultimately determines the canonicity of a certain repertoire". The polysystem can therefore be used to understand and explicate the formation of a literary canon, though the forces that influence the formation of the canon, also influence the changes in the system.

Although the idea of the centre vs. the periphery of the active hierarchy in a system is a useful one, it must not be read simplistically, or it will become a bifurcated approach with one centre and one periphery. Because such a view would undermine the complexity that is central to the argument for the utilisation of the polysystem, one should rather conceive of various overlapping centres and peripheries in a polysystem that exist within proximity to others: “A move may take place, for instance, whereby a certain item (element, function) is transferred from the periphery of one system to the periphery of an adjacent system within the same polysystem, and then may or may not move on to the center [sic] of the latter” (Even-Zohar, 1990a:14). It is indeed these contending strata and the active tensions that offer the literary scholar interesting points of analysis that can lead to a better understanding of the development of literature. Relatedly, Dirk De Geest (1996:69-71) summarises the strengths of the polysystemic approach as, firstly, the simplicity and flexibility of the core theoretical model. This means that vastly heterogenous systems, both in terms of the social and cultural domains involved, can be analysed to understand complexities in multicultural and multilingual societies. Secondly, he argues that, on the one, hand the polysystemic approach allows the scholar to overcome the limitations of canonised literature by placing the focus on the constitutive interaction between canonised and non-canonised strata. In so-doing, the researcher can highlight the intersystemic dimension of literary phenomena, which allows for the very clear illustration of the dynamicity of the literary system (ibid.). On the other hand, as the focus of the study conducted is not principally concerned with exhaustiveness, but rather on representativeness of the material being studied, the formulation of hypotheses becomes possible, which can be tested through extrapolation.

De Geest (1996:71-76) highlights a few challenges that polysystemic studies face. According to him, a main concern is the difficulty in determining whether a specific artefact can be considered canonised and at the centre, or non-canonised and at the periphery, for instance, as these designations are not always obvious. Another challenge is the representativeness of the selected corpus, which determines the validity of the researcher’s hypotheses, and, if poorly determined, could lead to generalising statements and categorisations that go against the specificity that the polysystemic approach strives towards. With its focus on the literary text, De Geest notes that the use of polysystems theory can entrench the position and influence of certain texts, mostly canonised. Finally, the idea that the utilisation of a polysystem can avoid resulting in some form of value judgement and hierarchical structure, wherein some elements are still considered and stressed over others, is still problematic. In response to these challenges,

however, De Geest argues, the researcher can ensure proper demarcation of the elements of the system being investigated, while the employment of Bourdieu's notion of the cultural field, and its concomitant reflections of agents in the literary industry, can to some extent overcome the reliance on only textual elements (and the lack of reflected cognisance of the agents producing those texts) and the impact this might have on the system. While De Geest observes how the notion of the cultural field might remedy some of the shortcomings of the polysystems approach, he himself, in his own attempt at a more nuanced approach, does not take into due consideration the work of Bourdieu. I will briefly refer to De Geest's so-called functionalistic approach to literary phenomena, after which I pay attention to Bourdieu's notion of the cultural field. I do this because the context of my study requires including also those elements that are identified through the lens of the field, and so this study should not necessarily be limited to those elements that constitute Even-Zohar's formulation of the polysystem only.

### **2.2.2. The functionalist, systematic, and discursive approach of De Geest**

The work of De Geest (1996) is methodologically important when using the concepts of the polysystem and the cultural field. De Geest contends that there exists a gulf between the formation of literary theory and literary-historical practices. His approach – described as functionalist, systematic, and discursive (Leuker, 2012:107) – combines elements of the polysystem theory of Even-Zohar, the constructivist system model of Siegfried Schmidt, the sociological systems theory of Niklas Luhman, and Michel Foucault's notion of discourse. De Geest claims that literary historiography is necessary, but flawed (De Geest, 1996:7; Leuker, 2012:107). As the reality of literature cannot be present in its entirety, selection must take place, but, since this is unavoidably associated with reduction and the value judgements of the literary historiographer, De Geest reasons that the literary system, with its processes of canonisation, marginalisation, and censorship, should be mapped out so that value judgements and selection methods can thereby be disclosed and declared (ibid.). He believes that this approach will ultimately do justice to the complexity and contradictions of the literary past, as he maintains that the value of systems theory lies mainly in its cognitive and productive possibilities and the extent to which the theory successfully introduces, in a different context, new, relevant data that are insufficiently or not at all effective in other interrogative theories (1996:191).

De Geest maintains that the systems theoretical perspective is probably not equally suited to the study of all domains, but seems particularly suited to Western textual literature (ibid.). Furthermore, some phenomena seem more suited to this approach than others, partially based on particular regulative patterns and structuring principles, as well as on the level of discursivity and normativity (meaning through themes, genres, specific semantic relations, forms of codification, etc.) and on the level of institutionalisation (via organisations, magazines, series, etc.). Since my project touches on these various interconnected and interrelated systems and agents as they form part of the process of producing, evaluating, interpreting, and utilising Marlene van Niekerk's work, I will also attempt to effectively explore and describe these agents, thereby acknowledging the complexities and contradictions of the Afrikaans and South African English literary systems.

By approaching literature as a system, De Geest (1996:193) argues, the very concept of "literature" can be viewed differently. This requires shifting from "literature" as a (supposedly) mostly objective, a priori research domain – that is, an already existing body of literary texts – to the so-called literary discursive system, which encompasses all expressions related to literary phenomena. Subsequently, literary study requires not only the inclusion of a series of names and titles, but also the way in which "literature" is brought into being in a literary system – including the elements that comprise literature and the characteristics and meanings associated with it. Viewed thus, "literature," based on its discursive character, does not imply homogeneity, but rather implies a sort of collection of more or less overlapping but intentional or extensional coinciding discursive wholes, which takes into account internal literary norms, and external criteria that will influence the production, reception and evolution of literary phenomena (De Geest 1996:194-195). Importantly, this discursive approach to literary systems results in a multidimensional perspective. By this, De Geest means that one does not call upon or intend to create general literary systems that can be characterised globally, but that literary expressions can form part of more than one system (or parts of systems), concurrently and consecutively. Thus, the functional and systemic position of any element can vary from system to system, according to the specific valid norms of the respective systems (De Geest, 1996:195). This multidimensionality enables the researcher, such as in this study, to analyse and interpret the contradictory (or, one could argue, diverse) reception, interpretation and judgement of the same text (ibid.). The various layers of such a multidimensionality becomes even more acute in the case of a study that undertakes to explore the entanglement of two literary systems in different languages, within a multilingual society.

To engage the multidimensional systems specific to this study, and the layered role, function and position of elements of the systems, I shall utilise notions developed by Gérard Genette. At the same time, I shall focus on so-called temporal entanglement as one of the forms in which Nuttall (2009:4) considers entanglement to manifest. She mentions that it is Achille Mbembe who identifies this in his discussion of the complexity of time within the postcolony: “As an age, the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, re-versals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: an entanglement” (Mbembe, 2001:14). In the case of the literary systems under discussion, multiple active considerations of time, sequencing and textual circulation come into play in reading entanglements, due to the nature of the text and epitext.

The notion of the *epitext*, along with the *peritext*, forms part of what Gérard Genette has conceptualised as constitutive of the so-called *paratext*. The paratext, according to Genette, includes all the elements of a text that enable the text to become a book (1997:1). While we cannot always determine clearly whether these elements should be regarded as “belonging to the text,” Genette writes, “they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it” whereby the book’s “presence in the world” and its subsequent reception and consumption is supported by the paratext (1997:1; original emphasis). The paratext has much to do with the physical copy of the book (name of the author, title, cover design, etc.), while the epitext, which is more important for this study, is any paratextual element that does not materially form part of the text, and, as such, exists outside of the book (Genette, 1997:344). The publisher creates a part of the epitext surrounding a book through marketing campaigns, and the media and the academe further contribute to the epitext through book reviews (in print and online), author interviews, lectures, academic articles, papers, and colloquia. The epitext therefore contributes significantly to the processes that may lead to the inclusion of the text in the canon (Fourie, 2009:68). As I employ a systemic approach in this study, I will be utilising the concept of the epitext because of its usefulness in illuminating the connections within and between systems. Since I am not focusing on Van Niekerk’s literary texts themselves, and the object of this study is not the interpretation of these texts, I am not employing other forms of reception theory and reader-response criticism as espoused by, amongst others, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss and Stanley Fish.

To place the epitext within the dynamic system, time – which I consider a dynamic structure – becomes an important consideration. Firstly, there is the date of publication of an original work

by the author, viewed at an exact point in chronological time. Similarly, there is the publication (in the case of some of Van Niekerk's texts) of a translation of the work. Secondly, there is the creation of multiple epitexts relating to the text (the already mentioned book reviews, author interviews, academic articles, etc.)<sup>17</sup> that are published around the date of publication of the text. Whereas some epitexts might precede the publication of the text, for example marketing texts such as interviews and forthcoming publication announcements, the majority of epitexts will appear subsequent to the publication of the text. Though the production of most epitexts necessarily follows chronologically after the production of the text, the relationship between these two elements within the system does not remain static. So, for instance, the particular reading of the text offered by an epitext may stand in its own ever more complex relationship with other epitexts, which all ultimately reach back (or chronologically forward) to the text, but leave the system open to change through the re-use, re-evaluation, and response to both text and epitext. This persistent interaction of meaning – or at least the possibility of interaction – is but one illustrative instance of the dynamic nature of literary systems. Finally, it should be noted that epitexts come into existence through the actions of agents active in the system. Here, therefore, one must consider – insofar as is possible – the aspects of the system that are not always evident in the textual evidence that remains when glancing back by way of conducting research, but are moved towards the centre or periphery through the action of influential persons and entities.

I have selected to confine my study to the epitexts described above, but it must be remarked that one could of course further broaden the notion of the epitext to also include various texts from within the publishing industry. This would include a consideration of epiphenomena from within the operation of the publication process (correspondence between the author and publisher; the publisher's market research; reader reports on the manuscript requested by the publisher; correspondence between the author and publisher regarding the structuring and editing of the text and the design of the book cover; financial and marketing data that has influenced the decision to publish a translation; etc.). In a sense, this makes visible how the literary system bleeds over into the polysystem of the publishing industry. While such an expansion of the system is certainly a valid undertaking, the interrogation of the overlaps

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<sup>17</sup> Louise Viljoen (2014:6) also acknowledges these texts as elements that can be used to determine an author's stature within a literary system.

between the (more textual) literary system (and the more economic) publishing system remains a topic for further study outside of this dissertation.

### 2.2.3. The cultural field

The idea of the system, as used by Even-Zohar, bears some similarity to the complex sets or networks of relationships conceptualised by Pierre Bourdieu, which the latter refers to as “cultural fields”. Bourdieu’s notion may provide additional nuance to my analysis of the respective Afrikaans and South African English literary systems.

Like Even-Zohar’s notion of the polysystem, Bourdieu views the cultural field as referring to “fluid and dynamic, rather than static, entities” (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002:22). According to Webb *et al.*, the cultural field can be understood as “a series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles which constitutes an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorise certain discourses and activities” (2002:x-xi). The dynamic nature of this concept lies in that it “is also constituted by, or out of, the conflict which is involved when groups or individuals attempt to determine what constitutes capital within that field, and how that capital is to be distributed” (2002:xi). As is the case with Even-Zohar’s notion of the system, where the focus is on the relations between elements, rather than the substance of elements, Bourdieu also places significant emphasis on position:

The science of the literary field is a form of *analysis situs* which establishes that each position – e.g. the one which corresponds to a genre such as the novel or, within this, to a sub-category [...] – is subjectively defined by the system of distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other positions; that every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants on the other positions constituting the field; and that the structure of the field, i.e. of the space of positions, is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field.

— Bourdieu (1993:30; original emphasis)

The notion of “capital” refers to a broad range of things, which may include material elements, referred to as “economic capital”, abstract elements (which are not necessarily material or physically tangible), known as “symbolic capital”, as well as “cultural capital”, which includes elements of taste and consumption patterns (Bourdieu, 1979). Persons, groups, or institutions all act as agents within cultural fields, accessing and distributing power in different ways, thereby determining what is valued, or in other words, what can be considered “authentic” capital (Webb *et al.*, 2002:23).

Though there are similarities between the respective notions of the system and the field, they cannot simply be reduced to or converted into one another (De Geest, 1996:74-75). However, I want to show here why it might be useful to utilise elements from both in my project, especially as Bourdieu’s notion can expand the elements of the system beyond the textual level to include the influence of extratextual actors and agents in the system (such as reviewers and scholars).

Bourdieu uses a physicalist analogy to explain the notion of the field, his “objectivist moment of analysis”: In a magnetic “field, the electron is an *Ausgeburts des Feldes* [outbirth of the field]: it is an expression, an emanation of the whole field. Likewise, we may understand a writer or a painter as an *Ausgeburts des Feldes*, as a sort of emanation, a product of the field” (1991:27). Bourdieu here implies that to understand the emanation of a field, one needs to be cognisant of the entire structure of forces that operate on the field. Thus, every individual emanation of a field “exists only as a function of the structural constraints that define the field” (*ibid.*). To understand the field, we must understand the active agents that form it.

Bourdieu refers to the “space of literary or artistic position-takings,” by which he means “the structured set of the manifestations of the social agents involved in the field” (1993:30). Included in this space are, for Bourdieu, “literary or artistic works,” as well as “political acts or pronouncements, manifestos or polemics, etc.” (*ibid.*). He views the literary or artistic field “as a field of forces,” but also as “a field of struggles,” which tends to both change and maintain the field of forces – meaning that he views these as sites of contention for power:

The network of objective relations between positions subtends and orients the strategies which the occupants of the different positions implement in their struggles to defend or

improve their positions [...], strategies which depend for their force and form on the position each agent occupies in the power relations.

— Bourdieu (1993:30)

Any position-taking will therefore compete for value against other such position-takings, “and it receives its distinctive value from its negative relationship with the coexistent position-takings to which it is objectively related and which determine it by delimiting it” (ibid.). In short, in Bourdieu’s view, there exists a similarity

between the space of works (what the Russian formalists [sic] tended to subsume under the notion of intertextuality – the network of relations between texts) defined by their themes, their genre, all their formal properties, etc., and the space of positions held in the field of production.

— Bourdieu, 1991:30)

For the literary scholar, the object of analysis is made up of both the author’s position (in a relational sense) and his or her position-takings. To lay this out with my study as a case in point, it means that one can, firstly, come to particular insights based on “the basis of knowledge of the position” Marlene van Niekerk “[holds] in the field,” but secondly, through “the most internal reading of [her] work.” While the latter, internal reading of Van Niekerk’s work may bring certain ideas to light, the former, external reading may also confirm or complicate these ideas in interesting ways.

Due to the complexity of the various agents involved in the field, it is difficult to reconstruct these networks when looking back, because they are often “self-evident givens of the situation” and “remained unremarked” (Bourdieu, 1993:31-32). Subsequently, Bourdieu mentions, it is difficult to even conceive the myriad of information sources “which is linked to membership of a field and which all contemporaries immediately invest in their reading of works,” by which he is referring back to what he calls “the social agents involved in a field” (Bourdieu, 1993:31-32, 30).

Bourdieu emphasises in his discussion of the field that the influencers of power in networks of relation are difficult to track in retrospect. However, a focus on a broad range of epitexts might enable the reader to identify concretely the reciprocal forces at play, and their broader relational

effects. My use of Genette's notion of the epitext will therefore be useful in analysing how the different agents that contribute to the network surrounding Van Niekerk's work determine and emphasise different aspects of her work, and perhaps, as an approach informed by Bourdieu's notion of the cultural field might show, set, maintain, and create new hierarchies that have influenced Van Niekerk's position and how her work is read and received.

### **2.3. South African literature(s) and world literature**

#### **2.3.1. The notion of South African literature in context**

Pascale Casanova (2004:103) notes that the idea of national literatures was affirmed by philosopher and literary critic Johann Gottfried von Herder, who, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, established a strong connection between politics and literature, and so the link "between literature and the nation [...] was seen as something needing to be achieved." This strengthened "the bond linking literature (and language) with nation," and ultimately led to "[t]he national character of literature [being] fixed in terms of a series of traits declared to be peculiar to it" (Casanova, 2004:103, 105). The nation-state had become the paradigm that would dominate interpretations of literature for the next two centuries. Furthermore, Casanova writes, now that the idea of "the nation was seen as the natural and unsurpassable horizon of literature, national literary histories were composed and taught in such a way that they became closed in upon themselves" (Casanova, 2004:105). It serves little purpose for my study to dive too deeply into the growth of Western nationhood and how this influenced the development of the idea of a national literature, except to say that these struggles were exported to (or one could argue, forcefully imported into) what Casanova calls the "outlying lands" of European nations (2004:119). Others have written about how Afrikaner nationalism was served by certain forces and works within Afrikaans literature and advanced the respective cultural and language insularities embedded in the apartheid ideology and political system (see Van Coller, 2012; Willemsse, 2012; and Roos, 2015). Connections can certainly be made with the relations mentioned by Casanova above. Be that as it may, such a discussion falls outside the scope of this research project. More pressingly, if we are to consider the entanglement of two of the literatures (and literary systems) that form part of the greater notion of a national literature (and literary systems) in South Africa today, the picture becomes far more complex than the national literatures (and systems) of countries dominated by a single language.

Due to the complex nature of South Africa's diverse language demographics and related cultural texts and artefacts, Andries Walter Oliphant refers to the field of South African literary studies as "multilingual, heterogeneous and unstable" (2003a:236). This sentiment is not just echoed, but supported by, David Attwell and Derek Attridge in their introduction to *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (2012:3) – and further supported by the multiplicity of contributions to Attridge and Attwell's compendium.<sup>18</sup> Though my comparative study will not focus on the debate regarding the notion of South African Literature (with a capital L) per se, it is important to briefly consider the intricacies of this idea to understand how the work of an author like Van Niekerk is to be approached from a broader perspective, as her oeuvre straddles what are, as Stephen Gray had already imagined in 1979, two islands in an archipelago of literatures (1979:14).

Oliphant contends that South African Literature consists of "an ensemble of literatures in the African languages and Afrikaans and English" and is in no way single or uniform (2003b:253). "Taken separately or together," Oliphant writes in a subsequent article, "these literatures do not constitute a national literature"; meaning "[a] literature constructed metaphorically as a confluence of indices of commonality made up by a body of works bequeathed by the past in which a nationalist sentiment is expressed" (2004b:22). Though Oliphant concludes that South Africa for various historic reasons cannot yet be said to have a single, national literature, he does not rule out the development of such a literature in the future.

Attwell and Attridge (2012:5) identify several points of convergence for the different literatures of South Africa. Firstly, they note its "unifying history" that has, according to them, "produced some powerful national narratives," which they go so far as to collectively refer to as a "national mythology". At first glance, this suggests a kind of agreed-upon commonality by the various racial, cultural, and linguistic groups in the country, though Atwell and Attridge are quick to point out that they do not imply any "uniformity of experience, nor a consensus, not to mention a common identity" (ibid.). Rather, they believe that the commonality lies in "that South Africans generally understand what they disagree about" and share a common history that has been imposed on them by colonialism and the resultant events that mark the past four centuries of the country's history. This resonates in some ways with Leon de Kock's idea of

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<sup>18</sup> Such a "multivocal" approach to literary historiography is also taken by the contributors to two texts that feature further on in this study: *SA Lit: Beyond 2000*, edited by Michael Chapman and Margaret Lenta (2011) and the *Afrikaans Perspektief en profiel*, edited by H.P. van Coller (2015, 2016a, 2016b).

sites of conflict “where incommensurate bits are forced together but never heal” (Frenkel, 2010:42), in that that which holds the diverse literary fields of South Africa together, lies in the differences that mark these various fields. De Kock has in fact called, as is discussed above, the point where these literatures are bound into one a political bind, or a seam, drawing again upon his metaphor for understanding South African literary sites (2005:71). As such, the divisions enforced by the apartheid state resulted in a resistance from South Africans that they had the right “to act as one,” an approach of “false singularity” that does not hold true in the postmodern, globalised present (2005:81 and 75).

Attwell and Attridge’s second point of convergence is so-called translingual influence, which they see as “a persistent feature of South Africa’s cultural landscape” (2012:6). They make this claim, even though they acknowledge that in literary studies in South Africa, there is no consensus that the multilingual nature of the country’s various speech communities necessarily translates into a kind of noticeable, literary influence, or “cross-pollination” (ibid.). They argue against Malvern van Wyk Smith’s assertion that cross-cultural connections in South African literature are merely apparent due to the different writers “exploring the same subject matter because they happen to have been written in the same part of the world” (Van Wyk Smith in Attwell & Attridge, 2012:6). Van Wyk Smith’s argument was voiced in 1990, at the very beginning of the transitional period in the country, and I agree with Attwell and Attridge that his denial of translingual influence relies too much on attempting to determine whether “cross-cultural influence is discernible at the level of the individual author” (ibid.). It cannot be denied that this influence is present in “broader generic and rhetorical terms.” Importantly, Attwell and Attridge acknowledge that the “precise itineraries of these generic migrations are difficult to trace,” (ibid.) but I believe it is exactly in projects such as mine that we can draw out these migrations, and moreover, comment on what they might mean in a broader sense for the different literatures in South Africa.

Translingual writing and translation serve as the third point of convergence for South African literatures (Attwell & Attridge, 2012:7). Here reference is made of authors such as, amongst others, Sol. T. Plaatje, Eugène N. Marais, J.M. Coetzee, André P. Brink, and Antjie Krog. These authors are known for how their writing is informed by their knowledge of two or more of South Africa’s languages, and this is reflected in their works to various degrees; either through writing in more than one language, or through instances where “the reader is invited to hear, overhear, or imagine languages being spoken or written which are not actually the

language of the text” (ibid.). In agreement with Stephen Gray, cultural translation is viewed, by Attwell and Attridge, as a defining characteristic of South African literature. As the role of translation is considered in this project for how it has aided and (re)situated the work of Marlene van Niekerk, the possibilities and pitfalls of this point of convergence will also come to the fore in my discussion.

Attempts have been made, from various quarters of literary studies in South Africa, to compile different kinds of literary historiographies, in different languages. Relevant to my project are some of these texts, both in Afrikaans and English. There are two Afrikaans works, published and updated over the course of roughly the last 50 years, that have become central to the literary historiography of Afrikaans literature: Firstly, it is the series *Perspektief en profiel*, updated and republished most recently as three volumes in 2015 and 2016 under the editorship of H.P. van Coller, which features contributions by numerous scholars in the form of perspectives (historical developments, emerging trends, etc.) and profiles of canonised authors in Afrikaans. Secondly, it is J.C. Kannemeyer’s *Die Afrikaanse literatuur, 1652-2004* (2005), and older editions thereof, that offers a slightly different approach, but attempts to boldly chart the entirety of known literature in Afrikaans. These two texts often make brief links to literature in other South African languages. However, for the most part, the focus remains on the Afrikaans literary system and canon.

There are also some works, which have been published in English, that take a slightly broader approach. In 1996, Michael Chapman’s *Southern African Literatures* appeared, and it was followed almost immediately by intense critical debate in all corners of South African literary studies.<sup>19</sup> In his book, Chapman ambitiously departs from a very inclusive position, and includes literatures from a number of Southern African countries, in order to offer his “view of the several distinct but interrelated literatures of southern [sic] Africa” by way of an overview of 17 literatures (1996:i). The sheer scope of Chapman’s project demanded that he make certain selections in his analyses, and it is upon this that the main criticism of his undertaking is predicated. In a review article of *Southern African Literatures*, Helize van Vuuren writes: “It takes a certain hubris for one single author to tackle such divergent fields in one study, and it is inevitable that specialists will find gaps in the description or representation of their specific fields of knowledge” (1997:192). Despite some ardent critiques aimed at Chapman’s work,

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<sup>19</sup> A second edition was published in 2003 (see Chapman, 2003).

including what Van Vuuren views as its “superficial overview of Afrikaans literature,” she does acknowledge the book as “a courageous attempt at an inclusive literary and socio-cultural history of a specific region.” Importantly, Van Vuuren mentions, is the fact that Chapman’s book inspires further debate on, amongst other things, “the dynamics of change within the literary-cultural scene” – the extent of which my study seeks to explore by way of its analysis of the literary entanglements evidenced in the work of Marlene van Niekerk.

To address the intricate nature of South African literary studies, which often manifests in systems of reception being maintained and isolated according to language (as is also pointed out by Chapman, 1996:xvi), Oliphant calls for “a variety of [new analytical] methods which provide[s] tools for dealing with entanglements across literatures, disciplines as well as across spatial and temporal boundaries” (ibid.). My study, with its focus on the complex network of epitexts surrounding the creative output of a single author, aims to function as a comparative method of understanding the interrelatedness of at least two literary systems in South Africa. I do not set out in this project to directly explore the very notion of “South African literature,” nor do I seek to redefine it. In my project, even texts that, in their discussion and analysis of Van Niekerk’s work, attempt to explore or redefine the concept of South African literature, are considered as part of a polysystem to be analysed. While further conclusions on the notion of South African literature is not this project’s aim, the possibility of such conclusions emerging, while potentially interesting, remains secondary to the main research focus.

### **2.3.2. World literature and literature in translation**

In an article on the “Englishing of Marlene van Niekerk,” Derek Attridge comments that “in order to enter [the] world arena, of course, Afrikaans novels have to be translated, most importantly into English” (2014:396). This point demands nuanced interrogation, as it can be challenged when read within recent debates surrounding world literature, translations studies, and comparative literature.

David Damrosch has defined world literature as all works of literature “that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (2003:4). He places significant emphasis on the work entering into a literary system other than the one from which it originated. In terms of a holistic vision, Damrosch sees world literature as

a global phenomenon, sometimes even seen as a cultural expression of an emerging “world system”. More expansively still, world literature can be considered to be the sum total of the world’s literatures from every period since the invention of writing. Yet any view of the world is a view from somewhere, and in practical terms, world literature is experienced very differently in different places.

— Damrosch (2011:169)

He also states elsewhere that

world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable, canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike. [...] A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read *as* literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin.

— Damrosch (2003:5; original emphasis)

Similarly, Casanova (2005:277) writes that world literature must be conceived of as a space, not as a thing: “[the] conceptual tool is not ‘world literature’ itself – that is, a body of literature expanded to a world scale, whose documentation and, indeed, existence remains problematic – but a *space*: a set of interconnected positions, which must be thought of and described in relational terms.” The openness of this world without boundaries or borders speaks of a certain idealism of inclusivity. Claudio Guillén observes, however, that the very notion of world literature would have no meaning if it were not for the nations and national literatures that “have always been inseparable from the creation of world peripheries” (1993:38, in Tsu, 2012:158).

In an overview of world literature and its relationship with comparative literature, Sandra Bermann very briefly identifies the “serious critiques” levelled against world literature: “its lack of close readings and its frequent recourse to thematic approaches,” as well as “retaining a Eurocentric bias” (2012:174). Emily Apter argues that scholars of translation studies and world literature, including the influential Damrosch (2003) and Casanova (2004), in their work

extended the promise of worldly criticism, politicized cosmopolitanism, comparability aesthetics galvanized by a deprovincialized Europe, an academically redistributed area studies and a redrawn map of language geopolitics. Partnered, they could deliver still more: translation theory as *Weltliteratur* would challenge flaccid globalisms that paid lip service to alterity while doing little more than to buttress neoliberal “big tent” syllabi taught in English.

— Apter (2013:7-8)

Apter criticises the approaches of translation studies and world literature as “too pluralistic, too ecumenical” and inadequate in resisting universities who use them as an excuse to “justify the downsizing of national literature departments” (2013:8). Furthermore, she notes, these fields are both premised on a fundamental flaw: “translation [is] assumed to be a good thing *en soi* – under the assumption that it is a critical praxis enabling communication across language, cultures, time periods and disciplines” (2013:7-8; original emphasis), which seems to strongly disagree with the idea that, as Theo Hermans contends, the “self-reference of the translation” that supposedly maintains the alterity of the text to an acceptable degree (1999:144). This, Apter continues, leads to the denial of “the right to the Untranslatable” (Apter, 2013:8). Though not his intention, influential translation theorist Lawrence Venuti seems to acknowledge this problem when he writes that one cannot conceptualise world literature apart from translation, while at the same time, “world literature consists not so much of original compositions as of translations” (Venuti, 2012:180). Venuti claims that translation simultaneously enables the international reception of texts, and is a localising practice (*ibid.*). He writes quite positively about the translation process:

[T]he translation process, starting with the selection of a source text, including the development of a discursive strategy to translate it, and continuing with its circulation in a different language and culture, is mediated by values, beliefs, and representations in the receiving situation. Far from reproducing the source text, a translation rather transforms it by inscribing an interpretation that reflects what is intelligible and interesting to receptors. The transformation occurs even when the translator tries to maintain a fairly strict formal and semantic correspondence.

— Venuti (2012:180)

This sketches translation and its navigation within national, international, and transnational language politics as almost idyllic. Jing Tsu remarks, though, that in terms of language, there is an important vacuum that world literature is yet to fill (2012:160). Indeed, it seems that in Venuti's positive view of translation as enriching world literature, proper account is not always taken of problematic aspects of world literature and the way these can serve to entrench particular language politics enforced by cosmopolitan American and European metropolises onto globally less powerful minor literatures, cultures, and even countries. Venuti maintains that translation – seemingly necessarily, in his view – “deepens current definitions of world literature” (2012:108). The dominance of so-called major literatures is ascribed by Venuti to their “extensive traditions [that] have accrued cultural prestige,” and in comparison, the subjugated positions of so-called minor literatures are a result of limited development due to their size (Venuti, 2012:180-181). Venuti reasons that minority literatures import “forms and practices that its writers had not previously used” and thus transfer “the prestige that accompanies texts in major traditions” into the minority literatures (Venuti, 2012:181). The appearance of fewer translations in major literatures is a result of “its broad range of forms and practices” being able to “sustain independent development”. Echoing Casanova (2004:135), major literatures perform acts of “consecration” by translating texts from minor literatures into its own literature, thereby “invest[ing] source texts with [the major literature's] cultural prestige.” While Venuti goes further to show quite convincingly how formal features of major literatures might influence minor literatures and so can serve to destabilise and problematise the notions *foreign* and *local*, his argument implies that the hierarchical nature of so-called major and minor literatures on the world stage is far less problematic than it could be seen to be when one takes into account the continued domination of smaller languages by more powerful, larger languages. It is significant that this is often parallel to domination in economic and military terms – a domination that itself often reflects the continuing relationships first established through colonisation. This sentiment leads me back to the quote by Attridge with which I opened this section: “in order to enter [the] world arena, *of course*, Afrikaans novels have to be translated, most importantly into English” (2014:396; my emphasis). Both Venuti and Attridge comment on a status that is undeniably true. However, it is disquieting to see that, *of course*, this is simply being accepted not just as a fact, but to some extent, as desirable and acceptable.

Specifically relevant to my project, then, there is the dominance of English as a supposed global language. For one, Kathleen Shields scathingly sets out the result of books translated into

English and then read as world literature: “Prize-winning best-selling novels in their English translations tend to exemplify a formal blandness, a flattening out, and homogeneity” (2013:8). In the case of Van Niekerk, it seems that her one translator contradicts this point when he speaks of the benefits of translation resulting in the novel being “written twice” (De Kock, 2012:750-751). This idea becomes even more nuanced when one chooses to consider, as J.M. Coetzee did in 1981 in his acceptance speech for the CNA Prize, that South African literature in English (or indeed, at least a large part thereof) is inextricably bound to an Anglo-American literary tradition (Coetzee, 1981).

The importance of the English translations of Van Niekerk’s work as contributor to her international success and esteem cannot be denied, and so necessitates an engagement with the complexities that this adds to any consideration of the author’s work, both across and within the South African English and Afrikaans literary systems. Of course it must be acknowledged that Van Niekerk’s “international success” is in this view measured against the very hierarchical structure of world languages and world literature that Venuti (2012) and Attridge (2014) seem to accept and even endorse. Two of Van Niekerk’s most widely read and studied works – the novels that mostly make up what I refer to as her engaged phase (*Triomf* and *Agaat*) – have been translated into English, in addition to being translated into, amongst other languages, Dutch, Swedish, French, Danish, German and Italian (Viljoen, 2016: 254). The cases of the translations into languages other than English fall mostly outside the scope of this study. The issue my analysis will focus on in the next chapter will therefore be the role of translation in the work of Van Niekerk. I will specifically look at the (cultural) translation of these works as it is discussed by the translators, Leon de Kock and Michiel Heyns. As both De Kock and Heyns are also literary scholars and authors in their own right, the reciprocal relationship between their translations and their own positioning within the South African English literary system will be explored, as this influenced their translation choices (De Kock, 2009a; Heyns, 2009; Attridge, 2014; also Viljoen, 2016). Being at once literary scholars, authors, and the translators of the texts in question, De Kock and Heyns act as gatekeepers of South African English literature, and so hold power over both the possible symbolic, economic and cultural capital of Van Niekerk’s texts. Vanderauwera (1985:199) notes that “[t]he mechanisms of the literary market, and literary taste at the target pole appear to function as commercial and aesthetic censors affecting the distribution and reception of translated literature.” The influence of Heyns and De Kock, themselves entangled in the literary field and system in various ways, must therefore be accounted for.

The introduction of Van Niekerk's work into English via translation doubtlessly has a continuing impact on the structuring of the discourse that is considered the complex network I refer to as the South African English literary system. As Hermans remarks, "[t]ranslation actively contributes to the shaping of cultural and other discourses because, whatever its actual complexion, it possesses a momentum of its own, an internal memory resulting from operational closure" (1999:143-144). Cognisant of the tensions that exist between the approaches in world literature and translation studies, I will consider the effect the English translation of Van Niekerk's work has had on the entanglement of the Afrikaans and South African English literary systems. I will engage with the hierarchies noted above, aware of the possible pitfalls of the translation of Van Niekerk's texts. Spivak creatively summarises these dangers:

In the act of wholesale translation into English there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest. This happens when all the literature of the Third World gets translated into a sort of with-it translatese, so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan.

— Spivak (2004:371-372)

Shields, through her use of the term "unmediated supraliterature," that is, "a perceptible shift from literary translations which facilitate contacts between literatures", seems to be gesturing in a direction similar to that of Spivak – to a "pyramidal model [...] Hence literature in English, literature translated to English, literature written in order to be translated into English, literature written in English – where the subject is translation as a trope for mediation, but where the text itself is not translated – have become the dominant forms" (2013:2). It is therefore necessary to try and understand from a systemic perspective the impact that the Afrikaans and South African English literatures might have on each other, and what the nature of this relationship is. I am confident that while English literature remains in a powerful position due to the ever increasing dominance of English as a language, and will be found to exert this in various ways on a minor language such as Afrikaans, some reciprocal impact will become visible upon closer inspection.

What might be observed from the particular relationship between Afrikaans and South African English literatures when looking at the case of Van Niekerk's novels, are aspects of the dependencies that can take shape between two literary systems. Even-Zohar distinguishes in

this regard between “relatively established” independent systems and “non-established” dependent systems (1990c:55). Independent systems, according to Even-Zohar, like English and French, developed “within its own spheres. Sometimes an outside system or individual may be of some importance for it, but never when it comes to its very ability to exist over a longer period of time” (ibid.). Conversely, the “very existence or development” of a dependent system might rely on an external system, in cases where “a literature is young” or “in the process of emergence, or when conditions within it have created a certain situation which cannot be dealt with by the relevant literature exclusively – or mainly – by means of its own sources” (ibid.). Examples of such dependent literatures that Even-Zohar provides are Flemish in relation to Dutch, Austrian to German, and American (English) to British (English). In these cases, the “intra-literary interference may be superseded by inter-literary interference,” which results in that what could first be considered a system within a polysystem (e.g. American within British) becoming a polysystem in of its own (ibid.). This change is clear when one considers that today American English literature is certainly no longer considered a mere subordinate site within broader British literature.

Even-Zohar states that the relationship between two literatures is different in each case (ibid.). In the case of South African English literature, the position expressed by J.M. Coetzee in the early 1980s was that broader Anglo-American literature included English literature produced in South Africa (Coetzee, 1981:16), by which he was suggesting that the latter literature had not yet become independent of the far larger, far more resilient literatures of North America and Great Britain. The ever-increasing dominance of English internationally has doubtlessly contributed to the strengthening of the position of South African English literature on the world stage, if only, simply put, by its ease of access for an international audience (not to enter into discussions of the obvious notable literature that has been produced in South Africa in English and deservedly gained such attention), whereas at the same time, the political situation in South Africa – where English is legally considered but one of the official languages of the Republic of South Africa, yet has been made for all intents and purposes the official language of Government – has ensured the continued growth of English in all sectors, including basic and higher education, often at the expense of the development of the country’s other languages.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This issue has in recent years come into even sharper relief, particularly for Afrikaans, but to an extent also in terms of how arguments might similarly be applied regarding the stifling of the development of the other official languages, both within the higher education sector, as well as in terms of legal practice in the Republic of South Africa. In 2017, Mogoeng Mogoeng, Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, announced that it had been decided that English would become the only language of record in the South African courts. Noting that

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Afrikaans was institutionalised and supported by a strong sense of nationalism, the language enjoyed a majority status in relation to both English and the other indigenous languages of the country (Vosloo, 2014:365; Viljoen, 2017a:39). This changed with the implementation of a new constitution; Afrikaans lost its position as central, dominant (and dominating) language in relation to the country's other languages (Vosloo, 2014:365). Subsequently, English quickly rose to a more prominent position in institutional, socio-political, and cultural spheres, and now enjoys a central position not afforded the other languages of South Africa (Minter, 2013:53; Vosloo, 2014:365; Viljoen, 2017a:39). Surprisingly to many, the end of apartheid thus did not bring about greater recognition of African languages, but has instead seen the growing hegemony of English at the expense of all other official languages, Afrikaans included. Unlike when Afrikaans held a central position in the political and cultural spheres of South Africa, English is supported by its far greater international status, therefore locally possessing a high amount of literary capital due to its specific prestige, historicity, and the sheer volume of texts published in English internationally. This unequal distribution of capital, and therefore power, with which smaller languages will struggle to compete, can have far reaching consequences for how cultural artefacts are received and used (Vosloo, 2014:365).

In Chapter 3, I explore how this problematic positioning is navigated in Van Niekerk's texts. I also pay attention the role of Van Niekerk in the translation process, as she, like Antjie Krog (and other South African writers), can, through her involvement in the translation of her work,

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it would still be possible for citizens to speak in their mother tongue in court, the decision to allow only English as language or record was explained as necessary for administrative efficiency, as English was the language understood by most judges (Chabalala, 2017).

In October 2017, the High Court in Cape Town ruled that Stellenbosch University was justified in changing its language policy to remove Afrikaans as primary language of instruction and to implement a new, dual-medium policy that utilises both Afrikaans and English (Chambers, 2017). In the case of *Afriforum v University of Free State*, the first applicant challenged the constitutionality of a new language policy by the second applicant, which would see the university's parallel-medium language policy (Afrikaans/English) replaced by a single language policy (English only). The Court dismissed Afriforum's application (Constitutional Court of the Republic of South Africa, 2017: n.p). Justice Johan Froneman offered a dissenting judgement, with which Justice Edwin Cameron and Cynthia Pretorius concurred, therein taking "the view that the Court ought to have set this matter down for hearing. He considered that such an approach would have enhanced the legitimacy of the outcome and better reflected the Court's practice" (ibid.)

In 2019, a similar case between Stellenbosch University and the organisation Gelyke Kanse (Equal Chances) was heard by the Constitutional Court. The court found that "the university's process in adopting its 2016 policy (establishing English as primary medium of instruction) was thorough, exhaustive, inclusive and properly deliberative" (Shange, 2019). The court further confirmed in their ruling that the university would only be required in terms of the language policy in question to "maintain" Afrikaans "subject to demand and within the university's resources" (ibid.).

be considered a “multilingual writer in a complex sociocultural and sociolinguistic environment,” who “continually operates at a dialogic and heteroglossic level” (Vosloo, 2014: 359-360). From this perspective, the author exerts some indirect influence on the epitexts that surround her translated works. I will consider the ways in which the translated works are positioned in relation to so-called Anglo-American literature and world literature by the literary systems they circulate in, and how this might in turn reciprocally influence the approaches to Van Niekerk’s work in the South African systems. The body of epitexts in English that surround the author’s work will be mapped out and discussed extensively, as it can be related to both the local and global perspectives that have come to characterise engagements with her oeuvre.

## Chapter 3: Van Niekerk in English

### 3. Introduction

In a 1996 article titled “Postcolonialism and Recent Women’s Writing in Afrikaans,” Louise Viljoen engages with what at that time was becoming an ever more obvious shortcoming of postcolonial literary studies focused on and in South Africa. Her critique focuses on *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), a book that became a seminal contribution to postcolonial studies, in which Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin limit their discussion to literature produced in English. The book’s account of South African literature is, according to Viljoen,

limited to that written in English, which is then described in terms of a simplistic binary division that obscures the heterogeneity of the languages and literatures in South Africa. It is argued that the white English literature of South Africa can be compared to the literature produced in settler colonies while the black English literature in South Africa can be more fruitfully compared to the literature of other African countries.

— Viljoen (1996a:63)

I do not wish to engage here with continuing debates surrounding the problematic domination of postcolonial criticism by English (on the levels of both theory and creative output). I do, however, want to highlight how Viljoen had two decades ago already identified how international scholarship was further entrenching the linguistic, cultural, and scholarly binaries enforced over centuries on South Africa.

Although acknowledged in their introduction, Ashcroft *et al.*’s description of the South African situation implicitly affords English a position of elevation above other languages in South Africa. As Viljoen notes, this description serves only to continue the linguistic and cultural hierarchies entrenched by apartheid: “This is an important oversight in the South African situation, in which the Afrikaans and English literatures were institutionally privileged because these languages had official status in predemocratic South Africa while black languages [sic]

were not afforded the same status and means of literary production” (ibid.).<sup>21</sup> Of course, the very root of such dichotomous thinking is not being laid solely at the feet of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin. Rather, I am engaging with a larger question of language politics within cultural and scholarly spheres.

Much has changed in South Africa since the first democratic elections in 1994, including English becoming ever more prominent in the South African linguistic landscape, while Afrikaans has lost its formerly privileged status. In this chapter, I take a closer look at Marlene van Niekerk’s work in English in the order of prose, drama, and poetry. As such, I consider the position of Van Niekerk as an author in English, and, in so-doing, I also begin to tease out the “the interaction between the different literary systems in South Africa” (Viljoen, 1996a:63). To achieve this, I seek to offer here a holistic view of Van Niekerk’s position in the English literary system in order to illuminate the active and relational figures and features that continue to direct interactions between the English and Afrikaans literary systems.

The works in Van Niekerk’s oeuvre that have to date received the most critical praise and scholarly attention are certainly the novels *Triomf* (Afrikaans 1994, English translation by Leon de Kock 1999), *Agaat* (Afrikaans 2004, English translation by Michiel Heyns 2006) and *Memorandum* (both the Afrikaans original, and the English translation by Michiel Heyns published 2006). To a far lesser degree, the short story “Labour” (2007), translated from the Afrikaans short story “Klein vingeroefening rondom die nosie van hibriditeit” (2001) by Heyns, and *The Snow Sleeper* (2019), translated by Marius Swart, are included in the delimitation, but on the latter translated text, no research has to my knowledge appeared to date.<sup>22</sup>

Below, I consider, firstly, the English translations of Van Niekerk’s three novels. I begin by looking at the positioning and conceptualisations of these translations offered by both the translators, De Kock and Heyns, and by Van Niekerk herself. I focus specifically on what may

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<sup>21</sup> To put this into statistical perspective: According to South Africa’s first post-apartheid census, conducted in 1996, less than 3.5 million people, of the more than 40 million citizens of the country at the time, identified English as their home language, with Afrikaans coming in at just over 5.8 million home language speakers (Government of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). The ease with which the importance of English is deemed greater than the latter, not to mention the (at the time) more than 9.2 million speakers of isiZulu and 7.1 million speakers of isiXhosa, as well as the other smaller – yet no less significant – main languages of the country, is telling.

<sup>22</sup> Some research has been written in English on *Die sneeuslaper*’s original Afrikaans text before the publication of the English translation in 2019. More on this will follow.

be revealed of these three figures' own understandings of the mutual influences between the Afrikaans and English literary systems. Thereafter, I look at studies concerned specifically with these texts as translations and within translation studies, followed by a reflection of the English texts within both popular critical and scholarly reception.<sup>23</sup> This section of the chapter engages with the vast majority of studies in English on Van Niekerk's work, and maps the central conceptual and analytical nodes around which popular and scholarly reception has coalesced. This section of the chapter functions simultaneously as an encyclopaedic account of the critical reception of Van Niekerk's translated work within the English literary system, and as an analytical rubric for thinking about how the relevant scholarship has contributed to some of the predominant themes in South African literary studies. This structured approach is necessary in order to achieve both a critical overview and to organise the existing research into manageable categories, which will simplify the comparative discussion in Chapter 5 on the respective research that has appeared on Van Niekerk's work in English and Afrikaans.

I thereafter consider Van Niekerk as Afrikaans playwright in the South African English literary system, followed by an examination of the position of her English poetry, and the dearth of scholarship on this part of her oeuvre. I also consider the possible reasons for her English poetry receiving less critical attention than her other works. Lastly, and just before my concluding remarks, I discuss the scholarly reception of her work outside of the field of literary studies.

### **3.1. Van Niekerk's prose in English**

#### **3.1.1. Translating *Triomf*, *Agaat*, and *Memorandum***

Michael Chapman writes in an article on the state and future of South African literary criticism that "[i]n a country of linguistic variety Michiel Heyns and Leon de Kock signal the importance of linguistic and cultural transfer in their translations of Marlene van Niekerk's Afrikaans novels" (2010:12). What Chapman does not explicitly acknowledge here, are the inevitable processes that accompany such transfers, which are in a sense endemic to the larger South African cultural system. That is to say that the nature of language politics results in "linguistic

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<sup>23</sup> As with all texts, the response of the reader can only be directed so much by the author or the translator. My research project will not so much consider the translations of the Van Niekerk texts in themselves, but rather, their positionality within the larger system in which they exist, and to some degree, how they are considered by those who engage with them in tangible ways, such as in scholarly work and critical reception.

and cultural transfers” that often flow unevenly between two languages, one perhaps considered a minor language, while the other is a large global lingua franca.<sup>24</sup> This does remind the reader of the matter-of-factness with which South Africa’s third largest mother language, Afrikaans, can be portrayed as a mere nutritional vein, which through the translation of its works into English contributes to a process of national “linguistic and cultural transfer”. This is interesting in that it reveals a need for us to continually and critically re-approach endemic language dominance. After all, as Östen Dahl reminds us, the very act of labelling languages as either “minor” or “major” is revealing. He explains that “[t]he notion of a ‘minor language’ is essentially a negative one – it is a language which lacks the features qualifying a language as ‘major’” (2015:15). To put it differently, I argue that we should not just accept the various cultural flows without offering deeper interrogation of relations of influence, erasure, and, indeed, entanglement. It is my contention that South African literary scholars should approach the country’s current linguistic and cultural state of affairs in such a way as to try and understand what the entanglements that occur between cultural fields in different languages might reveal about how we think about literature today – both locally and internationally.

In the previous chapter, I referred to Derek Attridge’s statement that, “in order to enter [the] world arena, *of course*, Afrikaans novels have to be translated, most importantly into English” (2014:396; my emphasis). In an interview with Jesse Osborne, Leon de Kock expresses a similar sentiment in relation to *Triomf*: “On the whole, translation also serves the function of giving minority literatures and languages some ‘speaking room’ in the more powerful hegemonic languages” (De Kock in Osborne, 2016). This does seem to at least acknowledge a language hierarchy between so-called major and minor languages and their literatures that many have come to accept. However, De Kock presents a more nuanced approach elsewhere. He places translation in a primary position in considerations of South African culture when he writes that, “[i]f a ‘national’ culture can be seen to exist in South Africa, then, it exists in translation, in a literature of compulsive crossing over” (De Kock, 2012: 745). As influential literary figure – being translator, literary scholar, and author himself – it is necessary to consider De Kock’s views on literary translation, most importantly in relation to the work of Van Niekerk, but also how this might ripple out further (or might have been rippling out further for quite some time) in the literary field.

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<sup>24</sup> This is not to criticise Chapman, as his article uses a discussion of the criticism of the work of J.M. Coetzee as point of departure, and as such, by the position of Coetzee’s work, is grounded in South African English literary studies.

Writing specifically about translating *Triomf*, De Kock identifies what he sees as the two central difficulties in the undertaking. Firstly, he contends that experience, as it takes shape in language, is innately defined and captured by “irreducibly localised expression” (De Kock, 2009a: 17). Secondly, within the context of the “literary scene [...] in South Africa, in which the ‘translation’ of *experience* itself, not just the literary *representation* of that ‘translation’ of experience” across different value systems, cultures, epistemologies, and outlooks “has historically been the core matter of the writing project itself” (2009a:17-18; original emphasis). Due to the heterogeneity of South African cultural fields – seen by De Kock through the metaphor of the seam – layered types of “untranslatability” come to the fore (ibid.). At the same time, he is aware that translating in this context makes the translator “potentially complicit in the unequal cultural trade-offs which are the stuff of colonial experience” (ibid.). Intercultural translation, in practical terms, De Kock posits, is a difficult task, “marking [...] the key purpose of literary translation: to exchange literary meaning between different languages in a textual object which shows the highest equivalence of style, meaning, matter and form when read against the source text” (ibid.).

Michiel Heyns, like De Kock, is translator, literary scholar, and author. Equally important, therefore, are his views on literary translation of Van Niekerk’s work, but also, more broadly speaking, on South African literature. Heyns puts forward his understanding of the role of the translator in an “after-the-fact reflection” on translating *Agaat* into English (2009). He calls translation a “licensed trespass upon rich but relatively unknown territory, upon which the translator has to report back to people to whom the territory is not only unknown but foreign” (Heyns, 2009:125). Heyns feels that the translator-explorer must give an accurate account of the foreign territory “to enable his audience to understand something of this territory in their own terms but *without losing the sense of foreignness*” (ibid.; original emphasis). Marius Swart, in his analysis of Heyns’s English translation of *Agaat*,<sup>25</sup> also highlights the translator’s choice between “domesticating” and “foreignizing” [sic] the text (2007:64).<sup>26</sup> Swart takes this perspective from Lawrence Venuti, who states that “[a] translation project may conform to values currently dominating the target-language culture [or it] may resist and aim to revise the dominant [culture]” (Venuti, 1998:240 in Swart, 2007:64; the latter’s additions). This same position is reflected in Heyns’s analogy; it is rich with deeper meaning due to its references to

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<sup>25</sup> This article is part of Swart’s larger MA study (see Swart, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Swart would later translate *Die sneeuslaper* (2009) into English as *The Snow Sleeper* (2019).

colonial and postcolonial language politics and to modern processes of cultural globalisation, as well as the global arena of world literature. It also represents for Heyns his theory of translation, which is captured most completely and succinctly when he writes, that “[i]f all countries looked the same, nobody would travel” (ibid.). Swart points out that Heyns’s travel metaphor can be ascribed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who stated that a translation can acquaint “us with the foreign country on our own terms” (Goethe in Swart, 2007:66).

If being able to successfully speak to a foreign audience is the mark of a good novel, then *Triomf* has been, according to De Kock, very successful. He says in his interview with Osborne that the novel in translation seems to speak “very well to an audience that doesn’t necessarily understand its context” (De Kock in Osborne, 2016.). He goes on to compare the reception of *Triomf* to that of Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), calling both novels “books that spoke to the world, speaking across cultures in a way that’s kind of universal, without sacrificing their specificity” (ibid). De Kock’s comment here is interesting in how it reveals the reciprocal relationship that exists between the local (the South African English system) and the foreign (the Anglo-American system). Both De Kock and Heyns therefore acknowledge the power relations between the local and the foreign that play out in translation. De Kock explicitly admits the complicity of the translator in the “cultural trade-off” that replicates historical sites of colonial exchange through his own theorisation of the translation process, and Heyns also implies this in the charged metaphor he employs to illustrate this process.

Both translators appear to eschew the criticism Kathleen Shields levels at translations of works into English that are then read as world literature – that being that they are formally bland, flattened out, and homogenous (Shields, 2013:8). One could read into Shields’s argument that these possible negative resultant uniform textual characteristics of works translated into English might lead the Anglo-American reader to experience the non-English (read: foreign) subject as speaking (or experiencing in) a kind of universalised language. To return to Spivak’s powerful formulation of this in the previous chapter, she calls this “a sort of with-it translatese, so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan” (Spivak, 2004:371-372). This could be the result of forcing a text into a master discourse – world literature – and uprooting it too much from the context in which the text came into existence and to which it relates most closely – something both De Kock and Heyns actively try to counter. Both translators appear as if they are well aware of the possible pitfalls of translating into a major global lingua franca a work originally produced in

a minor language. Furthermore, Heyns's desire that in the translation the "sense of foreignness" should not be lost echoes De Kock's views (discussed further below) on how translations, as a second writing of the text, can be beneficial firstly to the minor source language, by providing otherwise inaccessible exposure, and secondly, to the major target language, which is enriched through the otherness of the source language that impacts on the target language.

De Kock opines that being translated into English "has become a special mark of success" for an Afrikaans novel (De Kock, 2012:750-751). In the interview with Osborne, he explains that "[*Triomf*] truly deserves world acclaim, and has proved itself worthy of that by the reception it has received since its translation. In the South African/Afrikaans market, selling 5,000 copies would be considered very good. *Triomf* exceeded that by a long margin" (De Kock in Osborne, 2016). The mark of success comes not only because translation into English "potentially globalises the novel's reception," he writes, but also because "the novel gets written twice" (De Kock, 2012:750-751; my emphasis). The process of being "written twice" is, as De Kock views it, a mutually beneficial process for both languages (and literatures) involved, as one text is created in "the writer's native language," which he describes as "redolent of the *younger*, arguably *less trodden* registers of *indigenous* Afrikaans," while another text appears in the other language, "in the now *enriched* and *transcoded* registers of an ever so slightly *transformed* English" (De Kock, 2012: 751; my emphasis).

As noted above, Heyns lays at the foundation of his approach to translating *Agaat* the choice between what he calls foreignising or domesticating a text (Heyns, 2009:127) – an approach already identified as such at an earlier point by Swart (2007). Arguing that it seemed pointless to situate *Agaat* in "some international no-place," Heyns appears to admit to not just the undesirability of a so-called translatese version of the text, but he also expresses the view that situating the novel in such a fashion would be impossible: "the novel has its being and its meaning inextricably in the Overberg, and though its cultural frame of reference is very wide, it is in the first place founded on an Afrikaans culture" (ibid.).<sup>27</sup> Thus, Heyns expressly aligns his role as translator with the position of Umberto Eco, who views translation as a "shift, not between two languages but between two cultures [...] [The] rules [of a translation] are not strictly linguistic but, broadly speaking, cultural" (Eco, 2003:89 in Heyns, 2009:127). According to Heyns, in other words, for the novel to function successfully as a narrative, it

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<sup>27</sup> The same case is made by Swart (2007).

cannot be separated from the local linguistic, cultural and geographical specificities that are to be found at its very foundations.

Heyns's discussion of the translation of *Agaat* is juxtaposed with his translation of Van Niekerk's third novel, *Memorandum*. In the case of *Memorandum*, he writes that the text comprises amongst other things "a report of a conversation between two knowledgeable and cultivated white men [...] exchanging allusions, mainly to Western cultural practices and possessions" (Heyns, 2009:128). Though working with the same source and target languages, *Agaat* and *Memorandum* were different because the former draws "on a cultural tradition that was to a large extent unique to Afrikaans and grounded in a South African context" (ibid.), whereas the latter is already situated firmly within the Western epistemologies and ontologies that dominate much of the global north, large parts of which are English-speaking or have a long history of translation into English. In all of this, therefore, Heyns emphasises and re-emphasises *Agaat*'s particularly strong and authorially intentional enmeshment in its distinctly South African, Afrikaans heritage.<sup>28</sup>

In a detailed discussion of his translation, Heyns sets out what he views as both the "losses" and the "gains" in the process of re-rendering *Agaat* into English. Heyns's approach was to always attempt to find an equivalence of sorts, whether it be in the so-called encyclopaedic aspects of the novel such as the farming lore, or in the cultural allusions, such as songs and rhymes (2009:128). He readily acknowledges the "irreparable loss" the text suffers through translation; he refers for instance to the title of the novel, being also the name of the titular character, and how in agreement with the author, the name had to be left unchanged, even if it might remain somewhat foreign to readers who have no understanding of Afrikaans. For English-speaking South African readers – even those with a limited knowledge of Afrikaans – the guttural sound of the name would still be apparent, suggesting, if only superficially, a novel situated in an Afrikaans context. Despite the translator adding a phrase to the translated novel in order to try and clarify the sound of the name, the British publisher still opted to publish the novel under the title *The Way of the Women* (Heyns, 2009:125-126), which does point to the different expectations in terms of how foreign readers would receive the title. The contextual

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<sup>28</sup> Andries Visagie (2006) argues convincingly that Marlene van Niekerk's dealings with Afrikaans's cultural heritage and artefacts in her work are not aimed at abolishing or abandoning them, but rather at preserving and documenting them. He refers to an interview with Van Niekerk in which she readily admits that she views herself as a "beskeie ... dokumenteerder" (humble chronicler) of a certain kind of culture or heritage (Van Niekerk in Loots, 2004:36).

differences here do seem to suggest that South African English cannot be conflated as easily with any sense of a simplistic Commonwealth or a settler English literary tradition as envisioned by Ashcroft, *et al.* (1989), an assumption that I referred to at the beginning of this chapter.

With relation to the difficulty of translating certain racist terms, Heyns admits that his attempts are often “example[s] of a negotiation that doesn’t really satisfy either party: it’s neither very faithful to the original, and it’s not entirely convincing in the English either” (2009:130). When translating what Heyns calls the “positive cultural aspects of the novel” (such as folksongs, rhymes, and hymns), he feels that he achieved a greater level of success. This, he argues, is because “sound and rhythm [here] generally matter more than strict lexical meaning,” and he was able to convey – through his own creative translations – aspects of the Afrikaans heritage, by weaving into the novel something of the sound of the cultural expressions. In these instances, Heyns inserted into the novel certain references to the work of T.S. Eliot – specifically *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943). He explains that “it’s not as if you’re imposing something on the original; you take a hint from the original and expand it; and because you’re working in a different language and it has a different cultural tradition, you can draw on that” (Heyns in De Kock, 2009b:137).<sup>29</sup> Though he asserts that Van Niekerk acknowledged that “these poems had in fact been very much present to her in writing *Agaat*,” he expanded this presence considerably:

I felt that this licensed me to interpolate from time to time references to Eliot that underlined *Agaat*’s place (and *Agaat*’s place) in a different tradition, of what one might call ‘formal culture’ [...] By almost subliminally citing Eliot (and also, elsewhere, Shakespeare and Donne), I could establish links between *Agaat* and an English cultural context enriching to both.<sup>30</sup>

— Heyns, 2009:131 and 132)

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<sup>29</sup> Marius Crous considers Heyns’s approach to his translation of *Agaat* as an “example of intertextual reading and intertextual translation” (2013:13). Andrew van der Vlies, in discussing the English translation of *Agaat*, remarks how Heyns’s translation, with additional material added by the translator, has been used for at least some of the other translations of the novel, for instance into Swedish (2016:196). “Consequently,” he writes, “translations like the Swedish, which use the English as a bridge text, run the risk of rendering words spoken in a ‘world language,’ like Heyns’s imported quotation from [Alfred, Lord] Tennyson, in a way that suggests to readers of these translations (Swedish readers, in this case) that they are spoken or thought in Afrikaans in the original – because they are translated (here, into Swedish)” (*ibid.*).

<sup>30</sup> See the article by Frank England (2013) for a detailed discussion of the insertion of references to Eliot in *Agaat*.

What Heyns is not explicitly engaging with here, is what the “different cultural tradition” and the “English cultural context” signifies in relation to its supposed counterpart, the Afrikaans cultural context. Heyns reasons that it is the connection between the “novel [being] very much *uit eie bodem*, [literally ‘from own soil’]” while at the same time it “subsumes [a] good European tradition” (Heyns in De Kock, 2009b:138). The novel being “from this country,” but not existing only in “an African tradition” is, Heyns asserts, what gives *Agaat* “a worldwide appeal.”

Already in Heyns’s summation above, we see some elements of how *Agaat* might function in the arena of world literature. In order to understand the system that is world literature, Franco Moretti (2000) compares it to that of the inherently unequal international capitalism. It is, he writes,

a system that is simultaneously *one*, and *unequal*: with a core, and periphery (and semiperiphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality. One, and unequal: *one* literature (*Weltliteratur*, singular, as in Goethe and Marx), or perhaps, better, one world literary system (of inter-related literatures); but a system which is different from what Goethe and Marx had hoped for, because it’s profoundly unequal.

— Moretti (2000:55-56)

*Agaat*’s entry into English literature through translation and the creation of clear intertexts with its canon (albeit a seemingly very white, Anglo-American, male canon) undoubtedly enriches the English corpus.<sup>31</sup> The question of how this flow returns to Afrikaans literature remains. After all, English literature (both locally and abroad) gains a new text that additionally also offers a reworking or repositioning of some of its own canonical English texts through intertextual references, while Afrikaans literature gains – dare one say, *only?* – *indirect* exposure through this translation of one of its texts. The enrichment is, at least insofar as its immediate results are concerned, far greater to the benefit of English literature than to its Afrikaans counterpart, it would seem.<sup>32</sup> I am furthermore in agreement with Andrew van der

<sup>31</sup> See also the brief discussions on this point of Ester Levinrad (2010:109) and Shannon-Lee Moore-Barnes (2010:8-9).

<sup>32</sup> This rather ill-defined sentiment of “exchange” has surfaced again recently. Leon de Kock and Karin Schimke were awarded the English Academy of Southern Africa’s Sol Plaatje Award for Translation for their English translation of *Vlam in die sneeu: Die liefdesbriewe van André P. Brink & Ingrid Jonker* (*Flame in the Snow: The Love Letters of André Brink and Ingrid Jonker*). In their commendatio, the adjudicating panel draws attention to how “the English translation of this collection [is] a pleasure to read” and “[enriches] the canon of English works

Vlies, who argues that Heyns’s insertion of Eliot, for instance, and his explanation as to how and why he felt this apt, suggests, problematically, “an attitude to canonicity and hybridity indicative of a reading of white South African English culture as provincial,” which ultimately puts forward an “Anglocentric sense of a ‘world’ literature,” for “[i]mporting markers of a canonical transatlantic modernism instead imposes, rather than disrupts, codes of the northern Anglosphere” (Van der Vlies, 2016:197). In addition,

[t]here is here evidence of a two-way feed for writing *not* in a global language, writing that must perhaps transcend – in translation – both a provincial language (Afrikaans) and the provincial version of that global language (South African English) – in order for its potential global attractiveness to be realized, for it to be synchronized with a putative global readerly expectation that requires works of World Literature to be immediately accessible, their codes and cultural contexts legible in a kind of global now-time, because they have travelled across linguistic borders, because they are able to have been translated – linguistically, metaphorically, and materially.<sup>33</sup>

— Van der Vlies (2017:95-96; original emphasis)

What complicates this further is the way in which South African English literature can easily be collapsed into the greater body of Anglo-American literature. Of course, referring to “Anglo-American” serves to highlight the two global English-speaking centres of power. In complex ways, however, there are connections (to varying degrees) between these two centres and some predominantly English-speaking parts of the world, including Australia, Canada and New Zealand. I elaborate on this point of difficulty later in this chapter.

Through their perspectives, one could say that Heyns and De Kock work towards finding a golden mean in the contested zones of translation and world literature. On the one hand, they argue that there is a vibrancy to the original Afrikaans text. On the other, De Kock sees the translation as a form of English *changed* by Afrikaans and Heyns sees the translation as a form

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available for study in South Africa” (Malec, 2019). Most notably, the translation is praised for “promoting cultural exchange.” The possibly skewed power relations between the languages and cultures involved in this exchange are not commented on, however.

<sup>33</sup> Van der Vlies elaborates on these aspects of *Agaat*’s English translation in a chapter of his monograph, *Present Imperfect* (2017:90-98). Though there are certainly resonances between my own argument here and Van der Vlies’s, my reading considers the systemic influences of both of the translators and the translations. In contrast, Van der Vlies approaches the effect of certain choices of the translators of *Triomf* and *Agaat* as the texts travel across borders and through time.

of English *enriched*, with new references and allusions to an English cultural heritage having been created. De Kock does appear to apply his view to literary translation as a whole when he writes that

[t]ranslation into English for a non-English text means that the text now enjoys a double life, both in terms of communities of readers, and in the sense that the text is doubled, in representational terms, and comes to reside in a mirror condition. It perpetually mirrors another version of itself, and displays the play and torsion of that cross-appropriation. At the same time, it consists of writing that, in itself (that is, before interlingual translation) is implicated in cultural translation, in a perpetual contestation with otherness.

— De Kock (2012:751)

Elsewhere, De Kock describes the translation of texts within a heterogenous context such as that of South Africa as a “vital transmission, a cultural blood transfusion,” since “whole languages and literatures are at stake” as they attempt to resist “the drift towards being miscast, misheard or misconstrued” (2009a:21). Heyns seems to gravitate away from the notion of simplistic overlaps, quoting Venuti (2004:2) in that translation is “an attempt to compensate for an irreparable loss by controlling an exorbitant gain”.<sup>34</sup> In doing so, he holds to the principles of his translation-as-travel metaphor:

Language in action is such a manifold and slippery thing that a one-to-one correspondence is by no means invariable: what Eco calls translation as negotiation entails the correlation of two cultural contexts, each sacrificing something of itself in return for gaining something from the other.

— Heyns (2009:135)

The translator here readily admits to what he views as certain shortcomings in his translation, though he does argue that this is made up for in what the new text has also gained. Swart (2007:70) claims that the translation theory that forms the foundation of Heyns’s approach – i.e. operating within the threshold space between domesticating and foreignising the text – is

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<sup>34</sup> This is echoed by Levinrad, who, in her discussion of the translation of *Agaat* into English, quotes Walter Benjamin: “[T]ranslation is [...] ‘charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original [source] language and the birth pangs of the new’” (2010:97).

not such that challenges in rendering the text into English can be decided on by simple black and white distinctions. Rather, he views domesticating and foreignising as the two poles of a sliding scale: “In certain cases, Heyns domesticates by utilising English equivalents for idioms, for instance, while in other cases, he works to foreignise, such as with some of the offensive words and words that are difficult to translate” (2007:70).<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, Swart contends, Heyns’s translation succeeds in telling an Afrikaans story in English (ibid.).<sup>36</sup> Indeed, he even goes as far as to state that, with the English translation of *Agaat*, Heyns has rewritten the South African “guide” to literary translation.<sup>37</sup>

It is not the purpose of this study to extensively engage with and critique the technical translation aspects of Van Niekerk’s texts. Indeed, I leave that to scholars such as Swart (2007) and Van der Vlies (2016) to judge. What I am more interested in is the underlying architecture of Heyns’s and De Kock’s arguments, for therein are traces of a problematic Manicheanism, to differing degrees. Afrikaans and English are positioned against one other as respectively local and global. The description of the Afrikaans text as “younger” and “indigenous” (De Kock, 2012: 751) might, when generously read, refer to the importance of a text retaining its sense of source, which, as I have mentioned earlier, and as Heyns reminds his reader repeatedly (2009), is undeniably tied to the language in which it first came into being. English, on the other hand, again generously read, finds itself to be “enriched” and “transcoded” into a “slightly transformed” version of itself (De Kock, 2012: 751). To be fair to De Kock, this view is firstly informed in terms of how he positions both himself as translator and his translation of a Van Niekerk text, and secondly in terms of his own scholarship. And so, the role and implications of translation in this context strongly align with the valorised strife and strain implicit in the concept of the seam, which De Kock has often employed:

Deeper acts of translation – borderline crossings, intermeshing identity-tagging, mutual ascriptions across linguistic and cultural confluences, imperfect couplings, experiments

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<sup>35</sup> Orig.: “In sekere gevalle domestikeer Heyns deur Engelse ekwivalente vir byvoorbeeld idioome te gebruik, terwyl hy in ander gevalle weer vervreemdend te werk gaan, soos met party van die ‘offensive’ [...] en moeilik-vertaalbare woorde.”

<sup>36</sup> David Reiersgord has mentioned that, as American reader who can only experience Van Niekerk’s work in translation, his first reading of De Kock’s translation of *Triomf* made him think that “the novel did not ‘feel’ English; it was ‘from’ elsewhere” (Reiersgord, 2015:7), which sounds like the effect Swart proposes the translation of *Agaat* might have on readers.

<sup>37</sup> The respective discussions by Levinrad (2010:110-116) and Minter (2013) of *Agaat*’s English translation come to mostly the same conclusions already expressed by Swart (2007) and by Heyns (2009). This is also the case for a large part of Derek Attridge’s discussion of the translation of *Agaat* (2014).

in hybridity, like tattoos on skin, marked on the bodies of people as much as on the texts of higher learning – these engagements have all been inscribed in the country’s very nature as a “seam”, a cross-stitched fabric of “quilted” subjectivities, interwoven but straining at the joints.<sup>38</sup>

— De Kock (2009a:20)

Some resolution to the strain and strife seems for De Kock to reside in translations into English, which he calls “the great South African lingua franca” (2009a:21). The “other” languages of South Africa become sites “where the bartering and trading of meaning most commonly occur,” and they are yet required “to speak their integrity, their otherness” in English (ibid.). In the case of the translation of *Triomf*, this “otherness” of Afrikaans, something already problematised in the original Afrikaans text by the main characters’ assault on the notion of a pure Afrikaans, ultimately seems to have been limited when travelling beyond the borders of South Africa. Working with Van Niekerk on the translation, De Kock writes that the acceptance of the novel by Little, Brown and Company for international publication in English led to both translator and author realising that “we needed a thoroughly *Anglicised* text to deliver to the international publishers” (De Kock, 2003:353; my emphasis).

De Kock explains that this resulted in two versions of the English translation of *Triomf*: one for South African publisher Jonathan Ball, “which would retain certain ‘Afrikanerisms’ and ‘transgressions’ of the fundamental rule of translation, namely that everything in the source language be translated into the target language,” and another version for overseas publication (De Kock, 2003:357). The motivation for the former version was that the translator and author felt that South African readers “would be reliably multilingual,” especially insofar as “untranslatable” words and phrases went, such as “the moer in” (ibid).<sup>39</sup> In the international

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<sup>38</sup> Something similar is expressed by Van Niekerk in an interview in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, when she writes that the “undertow of [the] local debate [South Africa’s context and politics], or the positions in the debate [...] capture the international reader. There is always a judge, a blackmailer, a complainant, a confessor, an accomplice, a collaborator, a rescuer, a resister, an accuser, an accused, a refugee, a prisoner, a warden, a witness, a victim, a prey, a parasite, a predator, a torturer, a mute, a translator, in these debates. This obsession with power struggles causes a torque in the writing; a constriction of the breath that I think sometimes captures a certain kind of kinky foreign reader even if the setting is local” (Van Niekerk in Man Booker International Prize, 2015).

<sup>39</sup> Levinrad (2010) expresses the view that there was far closer collaboration between author and translator in creating the English translation of *Agaat* than was the case with *Triomf*. She seems to base this on the fact that the copyright for *Agaat*’s English translation resides with Van Niekerk and Heyns, while the English translation of *Triomf* resides only with De Kock (Levinrad, 2010:108). She states that “[a] novel translated in collaboration with its author becomes a *new* work. One translated in isolation by a translator becomes a *copy*” (Levinrad, 2012:109; original emphasis). Based on my reading of De Kock’s account (2003) of his experience of translating *Triomf*, as

translation, these phrases were rendered in English – “the moer in” became “the hell in,” for example. Similarly, and as example of the *modus operandi* of the translation process, De Kock refers to some longer dialogue by the character Sonnyboy, rendered in Afrikaans in the South African English version, but translated into English for the international version. The original appears in an Afrikaans strongly indicative of the Afrikaans spoken by some coloured speakers of the language, which seems logical, as Sonnyboy admits learning “Coloured Afrikaans”:

“Kyk, daai’s nou my luck in Jo’burg gewies, nè! Ek’s ’n Xhosa, ek kom van die Transkei af. En ek’s maar so.” He touches his face. “Toe dag die Boesmans ek’s ok ’n Boesman, toe kry ek ’n room in Bosmont tussen hulle. En hulle praat met my regte Coloured Afrikaans. En toe leer ek maar so on the sly en ek sê fokol, want hoe minder ’n Boesman van jou af weet, hoe beter. Dis ’n bad scene, die Boesmanscene. Hulle lê dronk en suip en steel en steek jou met messe en goed ...”

— Van Niekerk (1999a:227-228)

The version of this piece of dialogue in the international translation of the novel attempts to convey the hybridity expressed both in Sonnyboy’s characterisation and his way of speech:

“Look, that’s how the dice fell for me here in Jo’burg. I’m a Xhosa, I come from the Transkei, and some of us are yellow.” He touches his face. “That’s why the bladdy Bushmen thought I was one of them, so I got a room in Bosmont right in among them. And they began talking real Coloured Afrikaans to me. So I got the hang of it on the sly, and I didn’t say nothing, ’cause the less a Bushman knows about you, the better. It’s a bad scene, the Bushman scene. They drink themselves stupid and then they rob and stab you and leave you for dead ...”

— Van Niekerk (1999b:275)

Although the reasoning behind the latter version might be clear, and the translation of the novel as a whole succeeds “in conveying a great deal of the original’s linguistic energy” (Attridge, 2014:402), there has been obvious translational loss here, despite De Kock’s argument that the

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well as the conversation between De Kock, Van Niekerk, and Heyns about the translation of Van Niekerk’s novels (De Kock, 2009b), I disagree with Levinrad’s assumption. Furthermore, as my discussion and the mentioned translators’ discussions bear out, a neat distinction between such binary notions as a “new work” and a “copy” are tenuous.

enactment of Sonnyboy's linguistic hybridity can be conveyed in either of the languages, even if it appears less forceful in English (De Kock, 2003:358).<sup>40</sup> In the process of Sonnyboy's utterances being transposed into English, a great deal of the meaning in terms of *how* the character speaks has been lost, even though *what* he says is translated. The international version of Sonnyboy, being without his evident linguistically unique expressiveness, requires that the reader's understanding of the character relies far more on his characterisation outside of his way of speaking in order for him to be fleshed out as a character. Perhaps this came as a result of the translation in such cases being too often too close to a particular pole on Swart's sliding scale of translation (2007), which gave rise to the translatese that Sonnyboy speaks in, to borrow Spivak's (2004:372) term again.<sup>41</sup>

De Kock's translation of *Triomf* and Heyns's translations of *Agaat* and *Memorandum* doubtlessly remain significant achievements. All three translations have received critical acclaim and awards. Inevitably, though, in the English translations there is a sense of loss. Whether this is necessarily a case of the text becoming, as Shields (2013:8) suggests, formally bland, flattened out, and homogenous, due to the necessity of making the novel understandable to readers unfamiliar with Afrikaans, falls outside of the scope of this study. What stands out here are the perspectives of the translators, who, as agents in the cultural field, wield immense power. As their translations enter into the realm of world literature through English, the very positions taken by the translators, whence the texts are sent off, might ripple out into literary systems in interesting ways.

In both the approaches to translation detailed by De Kock and Heyns, there was to some extent consultation or collaboration with Van Niekerk in the production of the translations of her novels. There was also creative input by the translators to render the texts accessible to the non-Afrikaans reader, both locally and internationally, through different strategies of trying to evoke in the translations something of the original texts' Afrikaans character. To some degree, the frequency of consultation with the author herself shows that the English versions of the texts could be viewed as what Wail Hassan refers to as "translational texts;" that is, "texts that straddle two languages, at once foregrounding, performing, and problematizing the act of

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<sup>40</sup> Van Niekerk has also noted that some parts of the original Afrikaans novel were not translated into English and thus do not form part of De Kock's final translation (Van Niekerk in Nieuwoudt, 1999:6).

<sup>41</sup> To provide another brief view on the "success" of the translation: Levinrad (2010:124) feels, admitting the subjectiveness of the statement, that "the full effect of the [English] translation [of *Agaat*] presupposes a knowledge of Afrikaans."

translation” (2006:754). These types of texts, Hassan continues, are party to the building of cultural identities in the very threshold space that they occupy between two languages (ibid.). This is the sentiment that De Kock (2009a) seems to echo when he reads the translation space in South African literature through his metaphor of the seam; using similar imagery of sewing, he has even referred to the collaborative process between the translator and author as the novel being written “in a threaded kind of way” (De Kock, 2009b:139). Much like De Kock’s references to translation as “borderline crossings, intermeshing identity-tagging, mutual ascriptions across linguistic and cultural confluences, imperfect couplings, experiments in hybridity” (De Kock, 2009a:20), Hassan identifies translational texts as “performances of interlinguistic, cross-cultural communication, operating on several levels of mediations and contestations” (Hassan, 2006:755). It is important to keep in mind, though, that “translational texts both mediate and contest, that they not only celebrate transnational, interlingual and crosscultural movements but also complicate and problematise them, thus linking the translational with the transnational” (Viljoen, 2017a:27). Furthermore, translational texts are, according to Viljoen, “indispensable in the attempt to retain cultural diversity while at the same time building understanding between different groups” (2017a:43).

What is interesting here, is, on the one hand, the order of the creation of the original Afrikaans texts, followed by the English texts, and, on the other, how the primary agents of the translation process both views their roles, actions, and responsibilities as translators, and position the text through their agency within the literary system. Unlike Van Niekerk’s *Die sneeuslaper* (2009), which was first published in Dutch, and then in Afrikaans, yet in its very creation was born out of a translation process from Afrikaans to Dutch – with the original being influenced and adapted throughout by the gradual translation of parts of the texts into Dutch by Riet de Jong-Goossens (see Viljoen, 2016) – *Triomf*, *Agaat*, and *Memorandum* were translated after the fact from Afrikaans into English.<sup>42</sup> Van Niekerk, De Kock and Heyns, in their various discussions of the translation of *Triomf* and *Agaat*, show an awareness of the process of linguistic and cultural mediation that is both intentional and unintentional in the translation of Van Niekerk’s work. Strictly speaking, then, these texts are not translational texts in the same way as Viljoen (2016) argues is the case with *Die sneeuslaper*, but, through the express positioning given to

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<sup>42</sup> Adèle Nel refers to this as a kind of cross pollination (“kruisbestuiwing”) (2012:90). I return to this in the next chapter.

the translations by the translators, they were clearly intended to take on the role of mediating texts, straddling two languages and different cultures.

In what is only a cursory consideration of the position of Afrikaans literature in the global space of world literature, Attridge states the following about translation of minor language (Afrikaans) texts into a major language (English):

Some see [translation] as contributing to the effacement of minor languages, since the vast majority of translations are from minor to major languages, and to English in particular; others see it as a way of bringing to the attention of the speakers of those major languages important cultural productions in minor languages which they are never going to learn.

— Attridge (2014:406)

Attridge admits that he is convinced more by the latter argument, and so “the existence, and dissemination, of these translations of novels that deserve their place on the world stage is vital to the flourishing of Afrikaans” (ibid.). While one cannot deny the reality of global language politics, it is noteworthy that Attridge seems to unload the responsibility of ensuring the production of good translations on “readers who are able to cross language [boundaries...] to assess and comment on translations that will, ideally, lead to new translations bringing out different aspects of the original” (ibid.). Despite what he calls the “extraordinary achievements” of “a minor language from the corner of Africa,” the arguably self-satisfied position of the monolingual English reader remains unquestioned and unchallenged. South African literary scholar Margaret Lenta similarly remarks, with de facto acceptance of the linguistic status quo, that “to speak to the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need either competent translations or individual skill in English, at present the major commercial language” (Lenta, 2007:10).

To take a step back, Lenta’s piece does argue for the necessity of translation in a country like South Africa. She maintains that South Africans need to be able to share and understand each other’s experiences and this could be greatly facilitated by translation. What is curious, though, is that Lenta leaves unchallenged the idea that not just is translation important, but it is particularly so in the case of translation into English. Responding to the notion of certain things being untranslatable – aspects of a language that she claims translators call “the untranslatable

residue” – she contends that “meaning” should win out, as that is “the most valuable component of a work” (2007:10). An appreciation of “experiences and messages [...] in the original [language with its] sound and associations of words and phrases” become less important to Lenta than, apparently, an essentialised notion of meaning. It is hard not to notice the negative implication of a phrase such as “untranslatable *residue*” (my emphasis) – that which is left after something else (that is, meaning) has been taken or used, or even that which remains, in a negative sense, after a production process of some kind. After all, is it a weakness or failing on the part of the source language, or on the part of the target language that certain things cannot be translated? In this light, Spivak writes about what she calls “translation-as-violation”:

The structure of translation-as-violation describes certain tendencies within third-worldist literary pedagogy more directly. [...] Our own mania for “third world literature” anthologies, when the teacher or critic often has no sense of the original languages, or of the subject-constitution of the social and gendered agents in question (and when therefore the student cannot sense this as a loss), participates more in the logic of translation-as-violation than in the ideal of translation as freedom-in-troping. What is at play there is a phenomenon that can be called “sanctioned ignorance,” now sanctioned more than ever by an invocation of “globality” – a word serving to hide the financialization of the globe, or “hybridity” – a word serving to obliterate the irreducible hybridity of all language.

— Spivak (1999:164)

A drive towards so-called global accessibility very easily becomes shorthand for a kind of ignorance that the speaker or reader of the “global” lingua franca, like English, is allowed, and translation thereby becomes an act of erasure – to the detriment of the minor language and its culture. Perhaps the case of Van Niekerk can provide nuance here, if still not the means to challenge this status quo. How does the carefully considered translation-as-negotiation of Van Niekerk’s novels bear out in studies on her work? The relationship between the Afrikaans and English that is facilitated through the original Van Niekerk texts and the English translations was intended, through the translators’ own admissions, to be an enablement of interlinguistic and intercultural conversation and barter. As De Kock writes:

The fact that we come out of separate language traditions, and that specifically the translation is creating a book that straddles the language traditions, and that it can more

properly call itself “South African”; also because its range of allusiveness – talking English/Afrikaans now – is bigger and something that I’m not sure other novels have achieved.

— De Kock (2009b:140)

In this way, De Kock, Heyns, and Van Niekerk have become agents of entanglement, or, to use a comparable term by Even-Zohar (1990c) that I discuss in the previous chapter, interference. Interference is a relation or relationship between literary systems, whereby one literary system “may become a source of direct or indirect loans” for another literary system (Even-Zohar, 1990c:54). Accordingly, “what may move, be borrowed, taken over from one ‘literature’ [read: literary system] to another is not just an item of repertoire, but also a host of other features/items” (ibid.).

Below, in an overview of some of the major research and reception of Van Niekerk’s novels, I explore the different readings of her work. Briefly in this chapter, but in more detail in Chapter 5, I consider how these readings situate Van Niekerk in relation to the South African English literary system, as well as the far larger body of Anglo-American literature, and then world literature.

### 3.1.2. Positioning Van Niekerk’s prose in English

In this section, I present a discussion of the scholarship and popular reception that has been conducted in English on Marlene van Niekerk’s three novels, *Triomf* (1994, trans. 1999), *Agaat* (2004, trans. 2006), and *Memorandum* (2006, trans. 2006), as well as the short story “Labour” (2000, trans. 2007) and the short story collection *Die sneeuslaper* (2009).<sup>43</sup> Firstly, I offer a brief discussion of the critical reception of Van Niekerk’s work by considering reviews of mostly the English translations of her work, as well as some other relevant opinion pieces that have appeared in the popular press (predominantly newspapers and online). Secondly, I will look at those research undertakings that are illustrative of the (English) transnational circulation of Van Niekerk’s work, as well as Van Niekerk as (English) postcolonial author. Thirdly, I will consider the main themes that are predominant in research on Van Niekerk’s English oeuvre.

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<sup>43</sup> I include the Afrikaans version of the text here, as it has been mentioned in the English critical reception. The English translation, *The Snow Sleeper*, has not, to date, been mentioned in reviews or research.

The aim of this section of the chapter is to provide an expansive overview of how literary criticism and scholarship in English has tended to place Van Niekerk within literary studies in South Africa and further abroad – and, in so-doing, within the South African English literary system, the Anglo-American literary system, and the system of world literature.<sup>44</sup> Along with the preceding section on the more systemic aspects of Van Niekerk in translation, the discussion below will map how the author’s work forms a system that is part of the South African English literary polysystem shaped by virtue of how scholars and critics, both locally and internationally, have chosen to situate her work. If we consider not just the relations between different systems important, as polysystemic approaches are required to do, but also consider the “field of forces” and “field of struggles” that is the literary space under scrutiny here (Bourdieu, 1991:27), scholars and critics become agents who access and distribute, and therefore determine, what is valued. My considerations here will further flesh out the reciprocal relationship of the South African English literary system with and within the greater Anglo-American system, which I return to in my conclusion to the chapter. A similar expansive overview of Van Niekerk’s position in the Afrikaans literary system will be undertaken in the following chapter, to enable a comparative reading of Van Niekerk in the respective systems in the penultimate chapter of this dissertation.

### **3.1.2.1. The popular reception of Van Niekerk’s prose in English**

#### **3.1.2.1.1. *Triomf***

An early review of *Triomf* to appear in English is that of Marion Hattingh in the *Southern African Review of Books* in 1995 – well before the English translation of the novel would appear in 1999. The review draws the reader’s attention to the novel’s reception by Afrikaans critics, calling the novel “a most important milestone in the history of Afrikaans literature” (Hattingh, 1995). The reviewer praises the novel by likening it to Etienne Leroux’s highly regarded *Seweda by die Silbersteins* (1962; translated into English by Charles Eglington as *Seven Days at the Silbersteins*, 1968), claiming that *Triomf* “exposes the myths of a ‘new South Africa’” like

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<sup>44</sup> No overview of such a large body of scholarship can claim to be entirely complete. Though this project therefore does not claim to report every piece of research in English that engages with Van Niekerk’s work, every effort has been made to locate and include the majority of research within these parameters. It should also be noted that any study that only makes passing mention of Van Niekerk or her work has been excluded on a case-by-case basis, to limit the texts I engage with here to only those that have Van Niekerk and/or her work as express focal points.

Leroux's text had exposed some of the myths of apartheid South Africa. Hattingh implies that Van Niekerk's novel would be more accessible to Afrikaans readers (who it is implied might probably find Leroux's work to some extent inaccessible), but that it offers in its more accessible Afrikaans a point of junction for English readers who might wish to engage with Afrikaans literature's questioning of its own myths.

Hattingh also mentions *Triomf's* connection to Jeanne Goosen's *Ons is nie almal so nie* (1990), noting that, rather than repeating what Goosen achieves in her novel, Van Niekerk builds upon it, exploring "the epistemological possibilities" of the characters' perspectives, revealed through their "self-delusion and racist self-righteousness." The review provides an overview for the English reader of what to expect in the novel, drawing attention to its use of "a colourful and earthy, non-standard Afrikaans," as well as the novel's conscious oscillation between what is morally acceptable and the profane, the postmodern game it plays with so-called high and low literature, its critique of the patriarchal family and concomitant gender relations, and its illustration of the illusionary successes of sudden societal and political changes. Broadly, then, the review places the novel within the socio-political, historical, and (Afrikaans) literary frame of the day, showing no sign that the novel would be unapproachable for a second-language reader with a good grasp of Afrikaans.

Both Z.B. Molefe (1999; *City Press*) and Joanna Walus (1999; *The Star*) point to the significance of the translation of *Triomf* from Afrikaans to English. Walus finds satisfying the English text "peppered with" Afrikaans words that will be familiar to the average South African English reader (1999:10), and Yves Vanderhaeghen (*The Natal Witness*) also writes in a positive tone of the translation retaining "much of the local idiom," resulting in "an unarguably South African flavour" (1999:17) – thus suggesting that the choices of the translator, and particularly the retention of some Afrikaans, add strongly to the inherent *South Africanness* of the text. Molefe's review draws this point out even further, as he identifies what he calls the "trend of dipping into translation to tell the South African story under apartheid" (1999:7).

While Molefe expresses his excitement to see how De Kock's English translation is received, he hopes for translations of Afrikaans texts into the other official languages of South Africa as well. Guy Willoughby's review (*The Sunday Times*) also expresses appreciation for De Kock's translation (1999:22). Peter Randall (*The Financial Times*) is less enthused by the translation, merely calling it "competent," while also mentioning "occasional infelicities and off-key

oddities” (1999:11). The international translation is praised by Maya Jaggi (1999; *The Guardian*, UK), Christina Patterson (1999; *The Observer*; UK) and Rob Nixon (2004; *The New York Times*, USA). Jaggi calls De Kock’s translation “fluid” (1999:1), while Patterson is impressed by a novel “beautifully translated” (1999:13) and Nixon calls the translation “exhilarating” (2004). Elizabeth Lowry (2000; *The London Review of Books*, UK) notes a strength of *Triomf* lies in it not “[spelling...] metaphors out,” showing that,

[o]n the whole, mainstream Afrikaans literature seems to tolerate a greater degree of abstraction and schematism than its English equivalent. In this case it works equally well in translation: Leon de Kock has done an excellent job of turning *Triomf*’s lapidary prose into taut, abrasive English.

— Lowry (2000:37)

Much like Hattingh does in her review, Molefe, Jaggi, Patterson, Lowry, and to a lesser extent, Walus, situate the novel within the socio-political landscape of South Africa in the run-up to the country’s first democratic elections. Charlie Hill (1999; *Birmingham Post*, UK) summarises this well in his positive review when he describes *Triomf* as “a novel that demands to be read on the grounds of both outstanding literary merit and profound historical significance” (2000:53). In addition to drawing attention to the novel’s irreverence towards not just this history, but also the present, especially as it takes aim at notions of Rainbow nationalism, Molefe and Jaggi place the emphasis on the obviously ironic title of the text, concluding that “Van Niekerk’s book [...] tells us that apartheid built a number of individual hells for some South Africans” (Molefe, 1999:7). Jaggi finds that “the novel suggests the limits to which even momentous political change can improve the lives of the very poor” (1999:1). Molefe also links the novel by way of its concerns with working-class people to the work of Athol Fugard. By linking the novel to the work of Fugard, in many ways a doyen of South African English literature, the reviewer therefore again emphasises the opening idea of his review that the novel tells “the South African story under apartheid” – albeit in an English translation of the Afrikaans text. Willoughby even more directly states that “the post-apartheid novel [...] begins right here” (Willoughby, 1999:22).

The international edition of De Kock’s translation is compared to J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) by Julie Wheelwright (1999; *The Times*, UK) in her short review of the novel, though she finds that “Van Niekerk’s territory could not be further from” the territory explored in the

Coetzee text (1999:21). Though not directly compared to it, *Disgrace* is also mentioned by Jaggi (1999),<sup>45</sup> who laments that very few of the South African novels to reach British shores by the time of her review are by black authors (1999:1) – a sentiment shared by Emran Mian in his review of the translation of *Triomf* (1999; *The Herald*, UK). Jaggi lists the authors Achmat Dangor, Mandla Langa, Zakes Mda and A.H.M. Scholtz as writers who have struggled to find publishers in Britain. She also asks why “South African writing published in Britain [is] still so overwhelmingly in English and by white writers, even though fewer than 10 per cent of South Africans speak English as their main language.” Though her reflections in this regard do well to remind readers of the daunting institutionalised challenges faced by non-English, and particularly black and coloured, authors (even those who do write in English), the reasons why novels published in Britain are in English seem rather self-explanatory when one takes into account the language demographics of that country. Even by 1999, the global position of English as a major international language offers itself up as a fairly apparent reason why publishers would gravitate towards English works. Perhaps Jaggi meant to ask why more of the texts published in English translation in Britain are not of texts that originally appeared in other South African languages (besides English) and are not by non-English-speaking authors – in which case, her question is indeed a burning one, the answer to which might, sadly, upon further investigation, not appear to have changed if we reflect on current publication trends. Jaggi writes sagely that “[i]f British publishers were to perpetuate [the white] bias [towards South African literature created by apartheid], the loss would be [that of British readers]” (ibid.).

Randall’s review of the translation of *Triomf* refers to the reading public’s response to the original text in 1994 as a “shock reception” (1999:11); a reception similarly called “a deep cultural trauma” for Afrikaans speakers by Willoughby (1999:22). Walus points to this controversy as a clear illustration of how “a conservative way of thinking” like apartheid “still dies hard” (1999:10). She draws attention to a certain expected shift in the reception of the English translation that she puts down to the distance between the potential (assumed) English-speaking reader and the subject of the novel; “close enough to be relevant but distant enough to be comfortable.” Here one does see a somewhat more bifurcated view of how readers from different language groups in South Africa might experience the novel. This view is also born

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<sup>45</sup> As I explore in the section on existing research on Van Niekerk’s work, the comparison of Van Niekerk’s work with that of Coetzee is a frequent refrain, albeit to differing degrees.

out in a discussion on “the poor whites” by John MacLennan (1999; *Sunday Tribune*), in which *Triomf* is incorporated. MacLennan contextualises the historical events that led to many Afrikaners flocking to cities (he uses the loaded word “trekked”) during the 1930s due to drought and the depression “to live as poor whites” (1999:6). The odd moralist phrasing here – implying that the very purpose of Afrikaners moving to cities was to live as poor whites, rather than seeking better economic fortunes – continues in his description of this group of people as a “sub-culture of little hope” that “[gets] by on Klipdrift and Coke and Russian sausages and chips from the local store” (ibid.).

While MacLennan recognises what both Molefe and Walus noted – that is, that Afrikaners were meant to be the beneficiaries of apartheid, yet some (like the Benade family in the novel) were still failed by this system – he remarks that “they remained losers” – a rather unnuanced way of discussing a complex socio-economic issue. The reviewer seems to fail to see the exaggerated events in the novel, open as they are to allegorical interpretations, as part of the complexity with which the author imbues both the grand myths of the Afrikaner and the intricacies of a nascent democratic dispensation as he humourlessly explains how the Benades are simply illustrative of existing stereotypes of (poor) Afrikaners, which he seems pleased to be able to regurgitate in confirmatory tones.

MacLennan’s reading seems to miss this ironic humour that is balanced out somewhat in the text by the empathy it elicits in the reader for the miserable Benades. The character of Lambert is reduced to being mentioned as “a violent, misshapen retard,” entirely disregarding the deep pathos this (admittedly reprehensible) figure manages to evoke, his vile actions notwithstanding. The reader “is forced into a kind of unwilling compact” with this and the other characters, and “driven to celebrate [their] insistent life” (Willoughby, 1999:30). Despite the moralistic and misplaced tone of his discussion, MacLennan seems positive at least about the quality of the text in translation.

Almost as if responding to MacLennan’s reading of *Triomf*, Eve Bertelsen (*The Sunday Independent*) comments in her review on “this superb translation of *Triomf*” and writes that it would “be a pity if the book is read as a quaint tale of Afrikaners,” drawing attention to the novel’s postmodernist occupation with narrative, showing that “manipulative myths never die,” but rather, “they are simply recycled” (1999:12). It is as a result of these constantly recycled and repeated myths that “shrewd readers may [as they read *Triomf*] see this story currently

being replayed with a new cast of black Benades” – in other words, Bertelsen sees the text as being critical of apartheid ideologies, but also the ideologies that followed on apartheid (ibid.).

In 2004, *Triomf* was voted by members of the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) as one of the top ten books “focusing on democracy and contributing to the development of democracy in South Africa,” along with works by, amongst others, Nelson Mandela, Antjie Krog, A.H.M. Scholtz and Elinor Sisulu (Smith, 2004:10).<sup>46</sup> Some of the strongest international praise for the novel comes from Rob Nixon’s review in *The New York Times* (2004). He calls the novel “South Africa’s only world-class tragicomic novel,” naming Van Niekerk as the only South African novelist who has effectively used the country’s “comic vernacular” – something he claims the country’s other most famous novelists (such as Coetzee, Gordimer, Brink and Mda) have not been able to achieve (2004). The reviewer sees *Triomf* as far more akin to the work of playwrights Fugard and John Kani, due to its theatrical qualities. We again see here a sort of benchmarking of Van Niekerk’s work against that of other South African English writers, with *Triomf* being, in the view of Nixon, at least, the highest achievement by a South African author within a certain subgenre of the novel form. In fact, it is particularly noteworthy that Nixon views *Triomf* as an achievement unmatched by the internationally acclaimed, Nobel Prize-winning Coetzee and Gordimer, and it serves as a moment of clear indication that Van Niekerk had, within ten years of the publication of *Triomf* in Afrikaans, risen through the ranks of South African literature – *in English*.

### 3.1.2.1.2. *Agaat*

The way Van Niekerk’s work ties into broader trends in South African literature is clear in Chris Dunton’s review (2006a; *The Sunday Independent*) of the English translation of *Agaat*, which, according to the reviewer, “revives [a] passion for the *plaasroman*” (2006a:18). Dunton interestingly does not pay much attention to the political allegory of the novel. Rather, he homes in on the narrative complexity and depth of content presented to the reader, noting both the in-text presence of William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930) on Milla’s bookshelf, as well

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<sup>46</sup> The full list, in no particular order (Smith, 2004:10): *Country of My Skull* (Antjie Krog, 1998), *Long Walk to Freedom* (Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, 1994), *Disgrace* (J.M. Coetzee, 1999), *A place called VDMAAR* (A.H.M. Scholtz, 2000), *The Day Gogo went to Vote: 27 April 1994* (Elinor Sisulu, 1994), *Beyond the Miracle: Inside the new South Africa* (Allister Sparks, 2003), *The Madonna of Excelsior* (Zakes Mda, 2002), *Madiba Magic: Nelson Mandela’s Favourite Stories for Children* (edited by Maguerite Gordon, 2002), *A Change of Tongue* (Antjie Krog, 2003).

as the similarities with this book in terms of linguistic flair and the revisiting of a past in the present. Liesl Schillinger (2011; *The New York Times*, USA) does acknowledge the allegorical possibilities offered by the text, and she calls the text “a monument to what the narrator calls ‘the compulsion to tell’” (Schillinger, 2011).

Dunton (2006a) draws broad parallels between *Agaat* and the subgenre of the *plaasroman*, and points to a transnational connection (in form, if not content) with Faulkner. Jane Rosenthal (2006; *Mail & Guardian*) situates the novel locally, reading it similarly within the literary tradition of the farm novel, explicitly associating it with the works of Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith and Karel Schoeman, since *Agaat*, like some of the works by these authors “[examines] that old affair with the land, and the great battles of race, class and gender” (2006:4). To Bill Krige (2007; *The Herald*) these are also the predominant concerns of the novel. The narrative “pivots on women,” he writes, while men in its world are “woeful” (2007:5). It is also here that the novel receives some criticism, as Krige views the character of Jak as flat and “simply a megaphone for apartheid.” Beyond that, however, he receives the novel in a positive light.

Michiel Heyns’s translation of the novel received accolades from reviewers. Not only is the novel praised as “remarkable” (Dunton, 2006a:18), “exceptional”, “a magnificent book” (Krige, 2007:5), “fluidly translated” (Schillinger, 2010), for “[reading] very smoothly” – despite the translation of such a text being “a prodigiously difficult task” (Rosenthal, 2006:4) – but it is also lauded for its “boundless intellectual range” (Krige, 2007:5) and “its stylistic range and its linguistic virtuosity” (Dunton, 2006a:18). Rosenthal does feel that in the case of one of the racial slurs, the translator has missed the mark, as the word in question (“woolly” for the Afrikaans pejorative “meid”) would be unfamiliar to South African readers (2006:4). It is argued that the translation would have been better served if the author had kept the original Afrikaans word, to “let it, too, be subsumed into the lexicon of South African English.” Implying the importance of the *South Africanness* of the text, Rosenthal remarks that “[t]he rest of the English-speaking world will cope, eventually” (2006:4).

The detail and scope of the text is not appreciated, however, by Arja Salafranca (2007; *The Star*), who is neither discouraged by the “grim subject matter,” nor by the “depressing” story, but rather by the text being too long and not being, in her view, very readable (2007:10). The length of the novel is also criticised by Helen Elliott of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (AUS), but it seems a small concern for a novel that she otherwise praises as “an extraordinary book”

(2008:30). For Elliott it is again the scope and texture of past and present aspects of gender, race and land within the South African context that leaves the strongest impression.

The “exploration of the complexities of truth, reconciliation and the dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa” is what characterises the novel for Charlie Hill (2007; *The New Statesman*, UK). Hill views comparisons with Coetzee’s *Disgrace* as “glib,” celebrating *The Way of the Women*’s<sup>47</sup> length, humour, and stylistic playfulness, as opposed to the understated style of Coetzee (2007:58). Hill calls *The Way of the Women* “a landmark South African novel,” not due to the abovementioned qualities, but rather because of the novel’s roots in Afrikaans. The presence of some untranslated words in the English translation (albeit with a supplied glossary) is for the reviewer important, as “even in translation [the novel] is a definitive affirmation of Afrikaans.” This language, he writes, “remains, inescapably, one of the mediums for the truth of South Africa,” unlike English, which, with Hill quoting from *Disgrace*, “more and more [...] [seems] an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa” (2007:58). What Hill offers, I would argue, is the idea that while the English translation is welcome, it is the creation of this particular narrative *in Afrikaans*, bound-up as it is with its locale, that is something to be celebrated.

The positive critical reception of the English translation of the novel is reflected in the numerous nominations it received for South African and international prizes and awards. The novel was shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (2008, UK), the Independent Booksellers’ Choice Award (2011, US), and the Best Translated Book Award (2011, US). It won the *Sunday Times* Literary Award (2007), the English Academy of Southern Africa’s Sol Plaatje Award for Translation (2008), as well as the South African Translators Institute’s Award for Outstanding Translation (2009), the latter having also been awarded to Leon de Kock in 2000 for his translation of *Triomf*. The awarding of the *Sunday Times* Literary Award and the Sol Plaatje Award offer an interesting insight into how translations have become a seminal part of South African English literary output. The translation of *Agaat* could be nominated for the *Sunday Times* Literary Award due to an earlier change in the rules for this award that allows for originally non-English texts to be entered if they are generally available in (English) translation (Accone, 2007:4). The result of this is that, in the words of Darryl Accone, “South African English literature [is] enhanced, thanks to author and translator – and

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<sup>47</sup> *The Way of the Women* is the title under which the English translation of *Agaat* appeared in the United Kingdom.

[thanks to] publishers in pursuit of new readers and a far larger market” (2007:4). Translations are therefore responded to by institutional actors in the system as, apparently, a force for “exorbitant gain,” to utilise Heyns’s words (2009a:21), not just in cultural and canonical, but also in economic terms.

Some time after the publication of the English translation of *Agaat* in the United States, Van Niekerk’s appearance at an event of PEN International further underscores the esteem which she had begun enjoying as an author. At the PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature, the author appeared in conversation with Toni Morrison and Kwame Anthony Appiah (Morrison, Van Niekerk & Appiah, 2010). Morrison, in her first speaking turn, praised the novel: “I found [*Agaat*] so beautifully written, so interesting in its architecture, where meaning really lies, and it was powerful and fully imagined – fully and completely imagined [...] It’s absolutely the most extraordinary book that I’ve read in a long, long time” (ibid.). Both Morrison’s praise, as well as Van Niekerk’s appearance at this event, attended by other noteworthy authors such as Umberto Eco, Nadine Gordimer, Ian McEwan, Orhan Pamuk, Wole Soyinka and Mario Vargas Llosa, are a testament to how Van Niekerk had come to be considered on the world stage by 2010. I discuss this more explicitly in the conclusion to this chapter.

### 3.1.2.1.3. *Memorandum*

Compared to the voluminous reception of the translations of *Triomf* and *Agaat*, the translation of *Memorandum*, which was published at the same time as the Afrikaans text, received a far more muted reception. This is possibly at least partly because of the text only being published in South Africa. The novel also does not offer the same level of possible allegorical interpretations related to South African history and politics that *Triomf* and *Agaat* did, and so it situates itself somewhat outside of literary preoccupations with current affairs and issues of the day. This could be related to what Ronit Frenkel (2008) argues is a certain expectation placed upon South African novels. In order to receive international attention, she reasons, South African novels must fulfil certain Western stereotypes, depicting South Africa “as [a place] of bitterness and unrelenting historical determinism” (2008:77).<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, Chris

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<sup>48</sup> See in this regard also Charl-Pierre Naudé (2016), who writes about the pressures of the South African political reality exerted both literature and the practices of reception of literature.

Dunton (2006b; *The Sunday Independent*) identifies a thematic link between *Memorandum* and *Agaat* in the “stand-off with death” and the “gallows humour,” and he is positive about both Van Niekerk’s text in translation and Adriaan van Zyl’s paintings (2006:17). Arja Salafranca, in an apparent reference to her negative review of *Agaat*, states that *Memorandum* is “[w]ritten in plain simple language,” but she makes neither a positive nor negative judgement in her short review, rather just summarising what the reader is to expect.

#### 3.1.2.1.4. Short story collections

Van Niekerk’s collections of short stories, *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* and *Die sneeuslaper*, have received very little critical attention in English. The former collection has to date never been translated into English, while the latter has only been available in English translation since early 2019. The Afrikaans edition of *Die sneeuslaper* has received some brief attention insofar as it was included by Jane Rosenthal (2010; *Mail & Guardian*) in her list of recommended books for the festive season of 2010. She describes the collection as “remarkable and beautiful” as well as “erudite and funny,” and finally, “[l]ayered, dense and magnificent” as “a distillation of meditations on writing and the creative process” (2010:3). I pay more attention to the position of Van Niekerk’s short stories in her oeuvre in the subsequent chapter on Van Niekerk’s work in Afrikaans.

### 3.2. Van Niekerk in transnational circulation

Besides the salient points in the popular critical reception of Van Niekerk’s work that is set out in the section above, some academic scholarship has explicitly situated her work within what I have been referring to as the Anglo-American tradition. This could perhaps more productively be thought about as a broader transnational English literary tradition. Even before the English translation of *Agaat* was published, English literary scholar Andries Wessels published an article (in Afrikaans) wherein he considers *Agaat* as a Big House novel, due to its “personal and intimate narrative within a significantly broader politic-historic context”<sup>49</sup> (Wessels, 2006:32). The links with this Anglo-Irish genre are based on Wessels’s close reading of the novel, and on the historical similarities between the Anglo-Irish landed gentry and white South

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<sup>49</sup> Orig: “persoonlike en intieme narratief binne ’n beduidende breër politiek-historiese konteks.”

Africans. In the case of both these countries, ruling groups occupied a territory and gradually began identifying with it in such a way that they began viewing themselves as the real people of the land, to the exclusion of the indigenous peoples (Wessels, 2006:34). Both groups politically and socially dominated the claimed countries, until they lost their power due to the rise of what Wessels calls “an indigenous nationalism” (“’n inheemse nasionalisme”), resulting in them being politically marginalised (ibid.). Wessels also draws attention to Karel Schoeman’s *By fakkelig* (1966), which was written within the genre of the Big House novel “to illuminate the problematic nature of the South African political and social situation (2006:43). My interest lies not with details of how *Agaat* can be read as Big House novel. What is enlightening, is that Wessels draws, firstly, a generic relationship between Schoeman and Van Niekerk’s work within Afrikaans literature, and secondly, a relationship between Afrikaans literature (through the historical and political context of some of its speakers) and Anglo-Irish literature, which can be considered a part of the greater body of English literature – and even Anglo-American literature.

The English translation of *Triomf* is utilised by Jack Shear (2006) in an article exploring the novel as a “South African postcolonial Gothic”. *Triomf* can be considered a gothic novel, Shear insists, as “Gothic haunting deploys itself through South African cultural productions that mine the territory of acute anxiety surrounding the ideology of apartheid policy” (2006:71). He shows not only the way in which *Triomf* can be read as a Gothic, but also how Van Niekerk reinvents the genre by utilising a particular South African context.<sup>50</sup> In this way, the English translation of the novel manages not only to present a South African version of a well-known genre to which South African English literature can hearken back as part of its Anglo-American heritage, but it also reinvents and continues building on this genre by utilising Afrikaner cultural identity as its source.

Related to Shear’s reading, but far broader in its considerations of works that can be included in the genre, is a study by Gerald Gaylard (2008), wherein he projects the possibilities of the Southern African postcolonial Gothic locally, within the greater body of English literature, and then within world literature. Gaylard includes both the well-known South African literary genre of the *plaasroman* in his consideration of what constitutes Gothic, as well as a number of

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<sup>50</sup> See also Hunter (2008), who very briefly compares gender politics and the Gothic in Karel Schoeman’s *This Life* (2005) with *Agaat* and *Triomf*.

Southern African authors (Gaylard, 2008:3).<sup>51</sup> The postcolonial Gothic, which takes on specific local forms, has for Gaylard very clear European and American forebears, the latter through the Southern Gothic, that has also influenced authors such as Derek Walcott, Gabriel García Márquez and Toni Morrison (2008:5-6). In drawing attention to the transnational links between the works of authors from across the global south, Gaylard shows how an author or novel may stand in differing degrees of relation to a national English literature, a broader Anglo-American tradition, and also a body of world literature that includes both original English texts and texts translated into English – a breadth that would arguably embrace authors such as Morrison, Márquez, and Van Niekerk.

Mark Sanders (2008) reads *Agaat* (making use of the English translation, and somewhat of the Afrikaans text too) against A.O. Neville's *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* (1947) in order to understand South Africa and Australia's "contrasting responses to miscegenation" around the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Sanders's article is notable in its comparative reading that speaks to transnational links between two former British colonies.

The notion of "epochal weaving" is employed by David Reiersgord in his study on the narrative strategies utilised in *Triomf* and *Agaat* (both in translation) (2015). In his reading, he pays attention to a number of metaphors that suggest "new and creative modes for illustrating historical overlap between South Africa's colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid frameworks" (Reiersgord, 2015:6). At the same time, the researcher relates his work throughout the study to his own experiences as an (American) exchange student in South Africa, and how these may "emphasise the transcending significance of South African literature encountered in spaces beyond the country's national borders, and what this suggests about narrative imaginings on a transnational scale" (ibid.). Reiersgord admits that his study encountered challenges due to the inaccessibility (to him) of, firstly, the Afrikaans versions of *Triomf* and *Agaat*, and, secondly, the untranslated nature of expansive epitexts, such as "criticisms, reviews and interviews with the author" (2015:106). This acknowledgement is an honest account of a non-Afrikaans-speaking reader's experience of not just Van Niekerk's novels, but also with a select part of the literary polysystem that exists around her work. While the access to the text via translation and the lack of access to certain epitexts "no doubt affects a foreign reader's interpretation and

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<sup>51</sup> Gaylard includes in this, amongst others, William Plomer, Doris Lessing, J.M. Coetzee, Mike Nicol, Karel Schoeman, Etienne van Heerden, K. Sello Duiker, Dambudzo Marechera, Bessie Head, and Zakes Mda (2008:3).

understanding of specific local contexts informing” Van Niekerk’s novels, Reiersgord feels that his “moments of misunderstanding and feelings of disjointedness led to more enlightening self-discoveries” in both his research and his “experience [...] of a new culture and language” (2015:106-107). I return to Reiersgord’s relation of his experiences and the impact this has on his scholarship in Chapter 5.

In one of only two published critical readings of Van Niekerk’s short story, “Labour” (2007), Denise deCaires Narain (2013) reads the story comparatively against two other short stories, one by Scottish author Kate Clanchy, and another by Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid. Her article explores the foregrounding of “the problems, possibilities and struggle involved in forging affective connections across difference between women” (2013:274). DeCaires Narain focuses on the “intimacy of domestic spaces” in these short stories, looking into the “process of struggle and labour” (2013:277). She remarks that she actively selected these three authors in response to a call for “a more messy narrative of feminism [...] rather than relying exclusively on the ‘big names’” (2013:277). Noteworthy about this article is its express choice to include Van Niekerk with the works of Kincaid and Clanchy. By doing so, the author implicitly situates Van Niekerk in a broader Anglo-American tradition that encompasses both the former colonial centre (the United Kingdom) and some of its former colonial settlements on the so-called periphery (i.e. Antigua and South Africa, and, in a more nebulous way, Scotland).

### **3.3. Van Niekerk as postcolonial author**

The earliest explicit mention of Marlene van Niekerk as a postcolonial author is in an article by Louise Viljoen, wherein she considers a handful of women authors and their writing in Afrikaans (Viljoen, 1996a). In her discussion of *Triomf* (Afrikaans version), one already sees the identification of certain themes that will come to permeate much of the subsequent research on the novel in later years. For instance, Viljoen writes that the novel depicts the “monotonous daily lives of a family of poor white Afrikaners, showing how apartheid failed even those it was ideologically designed to benefit” (1996a:71). Attention is drawn to the novel’s subversion of the (Afrikaner) nuclear family and how it “becomes symbolic of the extremes to which the apartheid philosophy of racial exclusivity led” (ibid.). Viljoen furthermore draws attention to the novel’s “symbolic perversion of the myths of origin found in several world religions,” and

highlights the aspects of the novel that opens it up to Freudian readings.<sup>52</sup> Brief attention is also paid to gender in the particularly significant position of the character Mol and her intersectional subjectivity (Viljoen, 1996a:72). *Triomf* is noteworthy for Viljoen because of how it “signifies an important element in Afrikaans literature’s postcoloniality”: the simultaneous feelings of revulsion and compassion for the Benade family that the novel evokes reveals the “intricate relationship between the colonial and the postcolonial that must be negotiated when writing the new South Africa” (ibid.). The novel shows, according to Viljoen, an “awareness” that the “colonial cannot be eliminated from the postcolonial in a simple act of political amnesia” (ibid.), nor, I would insist, can Afrikaans be removed from the corpus of postcolonial literatures in the way that Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin did in *The Empire Writes Back*.

The engagement with the postcolonial aspects of Van Niekerk’s work again readily comes to the fore in a 2009 article by Alyssa Carvalho and Helize van Vuuren (2009). They argue that in *Agaat*, the eponymous character’s “verbal and non-verbal expressions” undermine the narrative points of view of the novel, which are dominated by the character Milla (Carvalho & Van Vuuren, 2009:39). They contend that *Agaat*, a subaltern, coloured woman, works towards challenging the dominant perspective of Milla, a white woman, “to provide another dimension to the story [Milla] tells” (2009:40). Based on divided views on whether *Agaat* is ultimately able to speak, it thus becomes another possible answer to Spivak’s question – arguably one of the central questions shaping postcolonial scholarship for decades – whether the subaltern can speak (Spivak, 1988). An interesting aspect of Carvalho and Van Vuuren’s article (written in English) is that they rely strongly on the Afrikaans critical reception of the novel to direct them towards the identification of the critical debate surrounding *Agaat*’s ability to speak. They refer to Wessels (2006), in addition to reviews by Joan Hambidge (2004) and Hein Viljoen (2005), as well as an essay on aspects of the novel by Willie Burger (2005). Despite Carvalho and Van Vuuren’s use of the English translation of the novel in their dissection of the text, they resort to the reception of the Afrikaans text in a way that would suggest that for them, at least, the overlaps between the respective Afrikaans and English texts are so great that they represent the same text.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Such a reading is offered by Tracy Symmonds (2013).

<sup>53</sup> The article of Carvalho and Van Vuuren (2009) is partially extracted from Carvalho’s Masters thesis (Carvalho, 2009). Some very essentialist readings of *Agaat*’s characterization that appear in the thesis are not included in the article. For a more detailed view on my disagreements with Carvalho’s reading of the novel, see Fourie (2011).

My own research on the work of Van Niekerk that predates this project engages to differing degrees with some of the research themes I identify in this chapter. My Masters thesis, situated firstly within postcolonial studies, considers the importance of place, especially the farm Grootmoedersdrift, in the Afrikaans version of *Agaat*, which I typify as a postcolonial *plaasroman* (Fourie, 2011:2). Against the framework of the novel as *plaasroman*, I explore the power relations between respectively Milla and *Agaat*, wherein postcolonial theories of race are foregrounded (the *subaltern*, *mimicry*, and *hybridity*), as well as Milla and Jak, wherein postcolonial elements of gender are paramount (the *volksmoeder*). Into this, I weave a secondary ecocritical approach to the postcolonial spatiality of Grootmoedersdrift, showing how the land can be read to further elaborate on my discussion of the two mentioned relationships in the novel. In an article based largely on this thesis, I focus on the relationships between identity, land and gender in the novel against the background of the *plaasroman* subgenre (Fourie, 2016). In this article, I utilise the English translation of the novel, yet in terms of how I consider the text, I have made little distinction in my argument between this version and the original (very similar to the approach by Carvalho & Van Vuuren, 2009).<sup>54</sup>

Reading *Agaat* (English translation) expressly as historical fiction, Greg Forter (2019) marks the novel as “suspicious of any *naïve* project of historical recovery,” problematising its “own attempts to let the historically silenced ‘speak’” (2019:11; original emphasis). Forter utilises Van Niekerk’s novel along with Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist* (2002) to explore the politics of the notions *hybridity* and *mimicry*. Departing from the critique of Bhabha’s work, that is, that he “equates the operations of colonialism with those of language itself,” (Forter, 2019:27), Forter argues that the mentioned novels

elaborate versions of hybridity and mimicry that are intensely attuned to the interplay between historical forces and subjective experience; they grasp the *limited yet real* agency of colonized [sic] selves in fashioning responses to colonial power; and they situate colonialist textuality in a dynamic relation both to extra-discursive institutions of domination and to subjective interiority.

— Forter (2019:27-28)

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<sup>54</sup> The only exception to this is a passage where I argue that the English translation has failed to create equivalence in meaning so that the metaphoric possibilities of a certain phrase is lost in translation (Fourie, 2016:47-48).

The concept of voice and the “depiction of the failed act of speaking for the dispossessed” is similarly considered by Maria Olausen in her analysis of *Agaat* (Olausen, 2017:255). Much like Carvalho and Van Vuuren (2009), Olausen finds that the novel depicts “a process of changing power-relations [sic] where the heritage and language of the dominant culture are undermined as the means through which to understand and describe life on a farm in South Africa during the apartheid years” (2017:260). At the same time, she finds that a definition of voice needs to be redefined when looking at the novel, so as to take into consideration the entire structure of the novel, “from the frame narrative by the absent male heir” to the important point that the “main part of the story is narrated by a dying person who no longer has voice” (ibid.). Olausen’s discussion also draws attention to *Agaat* as *plaasroman* – she refers erroneously to the subgenre as the “Afrikaner *Plaasroman*” (2017:256), rather than the phrase usually employed for the subgenre, i.e. the “Afrikaans *plaasroman*” – and, surprisingly, consistently gives Milla’s name incorrectly as “Millie” throughout her article. In all respects Olausen’s article builds upon already existing research on *Agaat*, and she relies in her piece on the English translation of the novel, as well as studies exclusively published in English on Van Niekerk’s text. The invocation of the South African prose subgenre of the *plaasroman* or farm novel specifically links to some studies engaging with issues of Afrikaner nationalism and the Van Niekerk text as *plaasroman*. These are both thematic concerns in research on Van Niekerk’s work that are discussed below.<sup>55</sup>

### **3.4. Major themes in the critical reception of Van Niekerk’s translated works**

#### **3.4.1. Nationalism, history, allegory**

A strong theme in Van Niekerk’s work that has been engaged in various ways is nationalism. In her Masters thesis, Chandré Carstens (2002) explores metaphors of Afrikaner identity, as depicted within the family, in three texts spanning more than a decade and viewed as “representative of three distinct stages in the recent South African past, and more specifically,

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<sup>55</sup> This identification is also made by Martina Vitáčková (2011) in her doctoral dissertation titled *Back to the Roots?* In her study, she attempts to determine “whether the solution” to what she calls “the postcolonial identity crisis” is “to turn back to one’s (socio-cultural) roots” (Vitáčková, 2011:19). In her brief engagement with *Agaat*, Vitáčková utilises the novel both in its original Afrikaans and English translation. The section of her dissertation that engages with *Agaat* is very short, however, and offers mostly only an explanation of the very basic allegorical reading of the novel within the context of South African history.

in the recent past of Afrikaners”: Reza de Wet’s play, *Diepe grond* (1987), Marlene van Niekerk’s *Triomf* (in the original Afrikaans) and André Brink’s *Devil’s Valley* (1998, English translation) (2002:11-14). The examination of these texts considers how “three Afrikaner families are presented” in a “crisis of confronting, if not yet ‘finding,’ their ‘own history’” (Carstens, 2002:11). What is fairly remarkable about Carstens’s project is that it is a thesis submitted for a degree in English, and yet it concerns itself explicitly with Afrikaner identity (and through that, Afrikaner nationalism) and Afrikaans literature. Carstens does not directly address this noteworthy characteristic of her project, nor does she comment on her decision to use two texts in the original Afrikaans, but another text in its English version, even though it too is readily available in Afrikaans. This might suggest a very broad conception of South African literature, in which translated works are considered almost interchangeable, in a way that is similar to Richard Samin’s approach (2005).<sup>56</sup>

Samin views the English translation of *Triomf* as one of the “most outstanding” literary texts produced in South Africa during the 1990s (2005:81). Without commenting on the possible complexities inherent in working with a translated text, Samin reads Van Niekerk’s novel along with Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying* (1995). The importance of Van Niekerk being read as one of South Africa’s other great English-language novelists, is noticeable. Interestingly, Samin acknowledges South Africa’s “linguistic heterogeneity” and the influence this might have on literary cultures in the country, but he does not interrogate how this impacts on the dialogic reading he undertakes between an original English text (Mda) and a translation into English (Van Niekerk). This article is revealing of an approach that acknowledges the diversity of South African literature in the broadest, national sense, but that does not interrogate how this becomes possible because of both texts ultimately being available in English.

Reading *Triomf*’s English translation as a psychological allegory, Matthew Brophy investigates “how *internal* violence induced by a nationalist Afrikaner culture is projected outwards” (2006:96; original emphasis).<sup>57</sup> Through a psychoanalytical reading of aspects of the novel, Brophy contends that the guilt of Afrikaner nationalism has been repressed within Afrikaner national identity, leading it into a “serious crisis,” concluding that *Triomf* is “a penetrating

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<sup>56</sup> I return to this notion of the translated work as interchangeable in Chapter 5.

<sup>57</sup> In an article published in 2000, Michiel Heyns very briefly refers to some of these issues in *Triomf*. However, as he does not (in this article) discuss the novel in any depth, except as one of several texts produced during the 1990s that deal with types of confession and narrative, I do not cover it in more depth here. See also Shaun Irlam’s considerations (2004).

account of the consequences of the projection of psychic violence onto the external world” (2006:111). Very similarly, Nicole Devarenne seeks to show how *Triomf* offers “a radical interrogation of the racist and sexist underpinnings of Afrikaner nationalist thought” (2006:106). With reference to the Afrikaans version of the novel, Devarenne argues that the “demotic” language and recurrent code-switching so frequently associated with the novel are very deeply connected to the novel’s “antinationalist project,” which seeks to satirise both notions of racial purity amongst Afrikaners, and by extension, the purity of the language; Devarenne refers to the “linguistic ‘integrity’ of ‘white’ Afrikaans,” whereby the novel “refuses to comply” with the claims to the language set by nationalist ideology (ibid.). The researcher’s choice to utilise the Afrikaans version of the novel is due to what she views as a difference in the possible interpretations of the endings of the novel in Afrikaans and English. While the English version provides “narrative closure” that seems “to offer only a dead end, the linguistic vitality of the Afrikaans version proposes another possible outcome.” Simon Lewis also interrogates the demotic language of *Triomf*, arguing for “a national language of the new South Africa” in a “deracialised Afrikaans, a further creolisation of the language” into what he calls “Zoot Afrikaans” (Lewis, 2002:73). Interestingly, and controversially, Lewis calls for “a new hybrid” language that “gains some sort of public recognition” in order to be “a unifying, anti-elitist force among the South African urban working class” (2002:79). Though he makes some interesting arguments, the notion of “Zoot Afrikaans” seems more like a kind of South African Esperanto born of Rainbow nationalism than an achievable socio-political and cultural goal.

Using Nuttall’s notion of entanglement in a different fashion from how I am deploying it in my project, Eva Hunter responds to “Nuttall’s invitation to investigate the ‘potential [...] for imminent change’” (Nuttall, 2009:11), applying entanglement as a rubric to the English translation of *Agaat* and to *There Was this Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile* (Antjie Krog, Nosisi Mpolweni and Kopano Ratele, 2009). Hunter notes that both texts contain “calls for change, as they explore the complex and subtle ‘entanglements’ of South Africans in the past, present, and future” (2012:74). Her analysis places a very strong focus on the entanglement between the characters of Milla, the “madam,” and Agaat, the “maid,” within the domestic space and how this serves to explore aspects of Afrikaner nationalism. The novel also reveals for Hunter the ambivalence that is central to entanglement: “*Agaat* includes a new form of opposition – to rigid notions of white Afrikaner identity – while registering wariness about the nature of the inheritors of the land and their ability to live justly with each other, given the country’s history of brutal oppression”

(2012:87). In what seems to me an echo of Visagie (2005), Hunter observes that the novel “both deconstructs inherited cultural goods and points to ways in which, reconstructing the resources available to them, Afrikaners might discover a new kind of being within contemporary South Africa” (2012:87).

Nadine Moonsamy (2014a) uses the recurring theme in recent South African literature (including, amongst others, the English translation of *Agaat*) of the young protagonist living outside South Africa, returning home to deal with the dying or death of a parent as a functional point of departure into the notion of what has come to be defined as “post-transitional” South African literature.<sup>58</sup> What is ultimately interesting about Moonsamy’s study, for the purposes of my own, is, firstly, the way in which Van Niekerk as an author is positioned. Of the texts included in her study, *Agaat* is the only one to not have appeared originally in English. The novel is presented by the researcher as an English South African novel – to the extent that it is never explicitly mentioned that the novel has been translated from Afrikaans (except in the entry for the novel that appears in her list of references). Secondly, *Agaat* is used along with other literary texts to theorise a particular conception of South African literature. The significance of this is discussed in Chapter 5.

Memory and identity in relation to history, and the different ways in which these elements are explored in narrative, have been the focus of some research that has included Van Niekerk’s work. J.U. Jacobs looks at the South African novel after 1990 in his analysis of J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990), Karel Schoeman’s *This Life* (1993), André P. Brink’s *Imaginations of Sand* (1996) and Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat* by focusing on the “protagonist/narrator [who is] a stricken and dying old white woman who recalls her personal story in the context of national identity” (2012:72). Jacobs considers how the “discursive intersections of memory, gender and race, and individuality” retell the story of South Africa before and during the “advent of freedom” (ibid.). What is interesting about Jacobs’s approach is that he utilises two novels that have been translated from Afrikaans (Schoeman and Van Niekerk), one text that was written simultaneously with the Afrikaans text (Brink) and one text that appeared originally in English (Coetzee). In posing the question, “How, then, is the story of the subaltern to be told in the

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<sup>58</sup> Her study, Moonsamy’s PhD dissertation, is published elsewhere in parts (Moonsamy 2013, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b), and undertakes analyses of Justin Cartwright’s *White Lightning* (2002), Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light* (2006), Anne Landsman’s *The Rowing Lesson* (2007), Imraan Coovadia’s *High Low In-between* (2009) and Mark Behr’s *Kings of the Water* (2010), in addition to the English translation of *Agaat*.

white English and Afrikaans South African novel?” there is seemingly the implication of a very close relationship between the English and Afrikaans novel during the period under discussion in his article (2012:86). This overlap between the two (admittedly “white”) literatures is found in a story element across the four novels: the white subjects’ “relationship with another, coloured, or black woman” (ibid.). This suggests a conceptualisation of two very entangled literary systems on the part of the researcher.

In a sombre reading of the English translation of *Agaat*, as well as J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) and Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* (2000), David Medalie states that “these novels show that, having once summoned the past, it is extraordinarily difficult to set it aside, to divest it of its atavistic elements, or to reconcile and integrate it with the present in a meaningful continuum” (2012:15). He reasons that since 1994, most “significant literary texts” have focused on “the relationship between the apartheid past and post-apartheid present” in what Njabulo Ndebele called a “process of becoming” by representing “change as complex, knotty, jolting and subject to unexpected turns and reversals” and avoiding “the possibility of social unity [in South Africa]” (Medalie, 2012:4 and 12). In a view that is slightly different from the implicit positionings of Carvalho and Van Vuuren (2009) and Fourie (2011, 2016), and important for considerations of my project, Medalie suggests that the English translation of *Agaat* is (more) distinct from the Afrikaans original: “The creative translation which Heyns provides instead may to some extent be deemed an original work in its own right” (2012:15).

Narrative construction is explored by Rossman (2012a), who calls attention to the importance of the character Jakkie’s frame narrative in *Agaat*, arguing that it is used as a tool by the author to disrupt the reconciliatory and redemptive mother-daughter story of Milla and Agaat: “Jakkie ‘skews’ the frame by encouraging the reader to question and critically ‘re-view’ the perspectives of both Milla and Agaat” (2012a:35). She argues that *Agaat* might be read as a call for a period of mourning – an idea that is also explored by Symmons (2013) in a close reading that is limited to a single chapter of the novel.

Lily Saint considers *Agaat* (English translation) as a text “preoccupied with the overlap between narrating the history and the present of twentieth-century South Africa and the construction and deconstruction of narrative genres” (2019:217). She opines that Van Niekerk’s novel is “grappling – in Afrikaans – with the problem of narrating the South African present,” which is for her also an active “unraveling [sic] of the apartheid fantasy” that also

problematizes Afrikaner identity (Saint, 2019:224). The researcher makes a number of arguments regarding how *Agaat* both aims at encyclopaedic representation of life on an African farm, but can only ever fail at offering any true and complete form of such an undertaking. This incompleteness speaks, according to Saint, as illustration of the “unpredictable” transitional period in which South Africa still exists (2019:232).

### 3.4.2. Van Niekerk and the *plaasroman*

The relationship between Van Niekerk’s work and the subgenre of the *plaasroman* has been the subject or secondary focus of numerous studies. Nicole Devarenne offers an overview of the development of the *plaasroman* in South Africa and how it reflects “South Africa’s experience of colonial conflict, white supremacy, gender struggle and nationalism” (2009:627). As what she calls a “feminist and anti-nationalist work,” Devarenne shows how *Agaat* “inhabits” the subgenre as a “reinvented farm novel [...] to indict the ideological frameworks that the *plaasroman* helped to establish” (2009:642). The researcher also feels that the subgenre is important in a post-transition South Africa because it deals so explicitly with the connection between white supremacy and land ownership, while also being illustrative of “how certain constructions of race and gender come to be established as ‘natural’ in a nationalist context” (ibid.).

Similar to the work by Brophy (2006) and Devarenne (2006), Du Plessis (2009) views *Triomf* as a “transgressive *plaasroman*” that explores Afrikaner identity (2009:n.p). In a wide-ranging study, Du Plessis considers how the Afrikaner is “deconstructed” through “myths, stories, symbols [...] and] intertextuality” (2009:n.p.). Considering the Benade family on three levels – primordial, personal, and national – Du Plessis utilises Jung to “deconstruct the archetypal mythological structures Afrikaner nationalists used to develop identity and unity” (ibid.).

A sense of agreement seems to exist between my ecocritical reading of *Agaat* (Fourie, 2011) and the Masters thesis of Shannon-Lee Moore-Barnes (2010). She argues that, in “ecocritical terms, [...] the novel’s revitalisation of language as an act of ecological recuperation [...] alleviates dis-eased [sic] consciousnesses by potentially recognising, valuing and responding to situated knowledges revealed in land narratives” (Moore-Barnes, 2010:1 and n.p). For her understanding of the subgenre of the *plaasroman*, Moore-Barnes relies heavily on

J.M. Coetzee's seminal, yet quite outdated *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), as well as the more recent *'n Hele os vir 'n ou broodmes: Grond en die plaasnarratief sedert 1595* (2000) by Ampie Coetzee. In her study, Moore-Barnes also considers how the novel dismantles aspects of Afrikaner mythologies (as is done by Devarenne, 2006 and 2009) and concludes that the novel expands "the *plaasroman*'s emphasis on lineal consciousness to an ecological consciousness, thereby adapting the traditional *plaasroman* to enable its continuation in an ever evolving world" (2010:136). Scholarship on land and space in *Agaat* thus opens up opportunities for rethinking the *plaasroman* as a literary genre, which has significant implications for both English and Afrikaans literary criticism.

Approaching *Agaat* as *plaasroman* and pastoral, but focusing strongly on biblical parallels imbedded in the narrative, Marijke van Vuuren engages the English translation of the novel on the level of the questions it raises about guilt and forgiveness (2010a). Focusing on the spatial context of the farm, Van Vuuren claims that, "though the narrative is always unreliable, the novel does suggest the possibility of an 'impossible' forgiveness" (Van Vuuren 2010a:92). In a very positive reading of the text, which chimes with the biblical elements she highlights in her close reading, Van Vuuren concludes that "[i]t is only when Agaat digs up her grief [...] to recover the child destroyed by Milla's cruelty and her own defence against it, that she seems to recover her divine capacity for grace" (2010a:105). Very much within a narrative recognisably influenced by discourses of truth and reconciliation, Van Vuuren writes that "[t]his [forgiveness] is not forgiveness owed; it is not even forgiveness asked for – it is independent of the perpetrator. If indeed Agaat forgives, it is the free gift of a free woman" (ibid.).<sup>59</sup> Using Jacques Derrida's ideas on forgiveness, Thapelo Teele reads in *Agaat* (English translation) the "dialectic between the rhetoric of self and the rhetoric of space" in order to determine whether the end of the novel does imply a kind of forgiveness (2019:145). It is concluded that it is "immaterial that Agaat never speaks, and says 'I forgive you'. For Derrida, whether the victim of the worst says that they forgive or do not forgive is a zone of experience that remains inaccessible to others, a secret to be respected" (Teele, 2019:162).

There is an overlap with Marijke van Vuuren's positive reading of *Agaat* (Van Vuuren, 2010a) in the argument made by Jean Rossman and Cheryl Stobie in their article that posits that the

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<sup>59</sup> This article was adapted from Van Vuuren's doctoral dissertation (Van Vuuren, 2010b), which deals more broadly with forgiveness in post-apartheid narratives.

novel “presents the future of Afrikaner culture in a new matrilineal and racially hybrid genealogy” (2012:17). Also clearly placed within discourses of truth and reconciliation, they note that “[t]he final stream-of-consciousness passage and the symbolic last supper shared by Milla and Agaat answer the call for reconciliation and restoration in the plea, ‘*who will chew me til I bind*’” (2012:29). Furthermore, they offer a very positive reading of the ending of the novel, concluding that “the final image of mother and daughter hand in hand [...] offers the utopian ending that is so deeply desired by the reader who sees this reconciliation as an allegory for reconciliation between the races and the yearned-for ideological fantasies of social harmony inherent in the notions of the Rainbow Nation and the African Renaissance” (ibid.).<sup>60</sup>

Stobie incorporates the central tenets on theorisations of the *plaasroman* in her 2009 article wherein she finds the biblical figure of Ruth in the novel. Her article engages with the text in ways similar to those of Van Vuuren (2010a) and Rossman and Stobie (2012). Stobie (2009) seeks to pay attention to the importance of the representation of religion and spirituality in the English translation of *Agaat*. Her discussion of the novel refers to how Van Niekerk adapts both the *plaasroman* that is *Agaat* and the biblical tale of Ruth and Naomi and she (Stobie) offers a parallel reading between these two texts (2009:59). In a very positive reading of the relationship between Agaat and Milla, Stobie finds that Milla’s ultimate death is significant not only in the novel, but also in an extrapolation to South African society at large: “The mystery of death unlocks a spirit of generosity and reconciliation between Agaat and Milla, who also resonate as modern South African counterparts of Ruth and Naomi” (2009:69).<sup>61</sup>

The “mythical” elements of the *plaasroman* genre, and how these are central to the structure of *Agaat*, are discussed in Caren van Houwelingen’s 2012 article wherein she considers “the assumed ownership and domestication of the African land” in order to better understand “Afrikaner whiteness” (2012a:93).<sup>62</sup> It is argued that Van Niekerk demythologises Afrikaner identity by approaching the past through the subgenre of the *plaasroman* with a nostalgic impulse that demythologises this identity’s “relationship to the land, the cultivated space of the farm, and the racial Other” (Van Houwelingen, 2012a:94 and 104). Important also is how Milla’s corporeality “symbolizes her identity as Afrikaner” (Van Houwelingen, 2012:103).

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<sup>60</sup> For criticism against this reading, which falls outside the scope of this study, see Fourie (2016).

<sup>61</sup> This article also appeared in *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa. New Perspectives* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), edited by Duncan Brown.

<sup>62</sup> This article is adapted from Van Houwelingen’s Masters thesis (2012b), wherein she discusses a number of novels by white women writing in the (post)colony.

Fourie (2011, 2016) also offers some perspective on these points. Studies that engage more directly with the theme of corporeality and/or the body as meaningful aspects of *Agaat* are discussed further on.

The ownership (or “stewardship”) of land and its relation to the *plaasroman* are measured through cartography in *Agaat* by Gail Fincham (2014). She asserts that the much-discussed relationship between Milla and *Agaat* in the novel “demonstrates this de/reconstructive reading of maps both in the novel’s frame narrative and in its central narrative” (Fincham, 2014:130). Using and extending the idea of the farm, Fincham argues that Heyns’s English translation of the novel “extends the physical and metaphysical maps which the novel makes us see,” creating “new linguistic and territorial dimensions” due to the translator’s insertion of references to Eliot (and other Anglo-American authors) into the text (2014:134 and 133). Fincham seems to argue, in her reading of both Heyns’s and De Kock’s views on this point, that the intertextual relationship with English literature that is furthered by the translator’s insertions is central to the novel’s “conscious act of revisionism” (De Kock, 2009b, quoted in Fincham, 2014:134) of the *plaasroman*, because *Agaat* “subsumes European traditions within an African language” (Fincham, 2014:134). Fincham’s argument almost appears to imply that both Afrikaans and a predominant subgenre within its literary tradition are much improved through the creation of links with English literature in the English translation of *Agaat*. What is more, for Fincham, the “Englishing” of the text is central to the active reinterpretation of the *plaasroman* as subgenre. While the latter point is arguably interesting to make, what the researcher does not appear to consider in her argument are the myriad other ways in which the novel undermines and rewrites the *plaasroman*. With these other arguments in mind, Fincham’s contention becomes but one possible way of thinking about how the novel re-presents the *plaasroman*, and the centrality of the “Englishing” of the novel might not be as central as Fincham believes.

### **3.4.3. Issues of race, gender and sexuality**

Many studies refer to issues of race and gender in Van Niekerk’s novels, even when these areas are not the primary focus of their investigations into her work. Zoë Wicomb (2001) considers five “Afrikaner texts,” in which she includes Van Niekerk’s *Triomf* (Afrikaans original), that are “concerned with Afrikaner identity and focus on the textual strategies for refiguring Afrikanerhood in relation to whiteness” (2001:159). In her article, Wicomb proceeds to show

how whiteness as ethnic category has constantly developed since the final years of apartheid, and that it continues to operate in the present – often in ways that would seek to mask its very existence.

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and Van Niekerk's *Agaat* (English translation) feature in an article by Rosemarie Buikema, in which she attempts to “to rethink the relationship between literature and the gendered construction of national boundaries” through a reading of these two “postcolonial novels” (2009:309). Buikema acknowledges the debates that were set off by both these novels, especially in terms of the conversation surrounding the connection between literature and identity construction. She considers the international reception of the novel, including in South Africa, and to a far lesser extent, in the Netherlands. Buikema summarises how these debates ranged from the fatalism in the depiction of black stereotypes and overstressed white guilt (in the case of *Disgrace*), to the “voluntary elimination” (“selfopheffing”) of a minority culture, or the celebration of cultural heritage without implications of cultural hegemony (in the case of *Agaat*), and political allegory (in the case of both) (2009:310-311). Key to Buikema's article, for my study, at least, is her direct and indirect assumptions about literary figures in South Africa that are revealed. In her article, Coetzee is never named as “a great South African author” or by any descriptor of the like. However, when referencing Van Niekerk, Buikema calls her “that *other* giant of South African literature” (2009:310; my emphasis). Of course, the implication of this statement is two-fold: Van Niekerk is both giant of South African literature (in its broadest, most diverse conception), but also, she is a giant along with the *English* author, Coetzee. In other words, Van Niekerk's position as important figure in South African English literature – even on the world stage – is undisputed by Buikema.

The intimacies of the family, complicated by aspects of race and gender, and specifically the relationship between Milla and *Agaat*, are discussed by Ksenia Robbe (2010; 2015), Sue Kossew (2012) and Kerry Bystrom (2016). Robbe reads the English translation of *Agaat* dialogically with two other important Afrikaans novels that have been translated into English: Elsa Joubert's *Poppie* (1980, translated by the author from *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*, 1978) and Wilma Stockenström's *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* (1983, translated by J.M. Coetzee from *Die kremetartekspidisie*, 1981). Robbe shows that these novels “by white South African women writers foreground relations that are not reducible to simple oppositions along racial, ethnic, or class lines” (2010:123). It is specifically through the depiction of the

relationship between Milla and Agaat in *Agaat* that she sees a recognition of and reflection on persisting power structures between white and black women in South Africa, in what “could be seen as a first step towards their subversion” (ibid.). In a subsequent study, Robbe reads *Agaat* dialogically with Sindiwe Magona’s *Mother to Mother* (1998), arguing that both texts, though very different in some ways, show “several common patterns in their narratives and imaginaries,” evidencing “representations of mother-child relations [...] [imagining] new kinds of *reciprocity* that emerge precisely *within* the context of the violence, past and present, of colonial subjectification” (2015:117 and 168; original emphasis). Focusing on the two female characters, Sue Kossew (2012) argues that this same “love-hate relationship of interdependency represents wider shifts in political power in South Africa as well as a changing relationship between individuals” (2012:368). Through her reading of the novel, she concludes that it “both performs and patrols the limits of the expressible,” referring to the issue of the unrepresentability of trauma and traumatic experience, and puts forward “the hope that through imaginative representation it can offer versions and perspectives on the past that, at the very least, enable the wound to be imagined” (Kossew, 2012:377). Bystrom situates her discussion of the novel as building on the work of Carvalho and Van Vuuren (2009), extending it to “explore [...] Milla’s attempts to ‘read’ Agaat’s words, performances, physical touch, and other sensory cues, and her corresponding attempts to convey her changing feelings toward a woman who has been both servant and daughter” (2016:99).

Mary West (2009a) is the only other researcher who engages in depth with “Labour”. As in the study by DeCaires Narain (2013), West considers both race and gender – particularly gendered whiteness – in her study. Preceding her analysis of the short story, West makes a claim for Van Niekerk’s position within the South African literary system that is of special interest to my project. She observes that, like Antjie Krog, Van Niekerk’s work is “preoccupied with a current crisis of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa” (2009a:173). Her inclusion of Van Niekerk in her larger research project “hinges on [...] the historical divide between English- and Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans,” which “may best be understood in relation to the ostensible innocent and benevolent liberalism of the former, and the supposed conservative culpability of the latter group.” Moreover, she writes, “it is ‘poetic justice’ that the white Afrikaner woman writer [Van Niekerk], rather than her English counterparts, provides [...] the most indicting examination of the politics of suburban whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa” (ibid.). West’s analysis of “Labour” finds that “the conflicting discourses” therein – “through [the author’s] satirical exposure of her own complicities, as well as the implicit

subversive alternate identification uncovered [–] unsettle the conventional authority of white suburban domesticity” (West, 2009a:187). In the conclusion to her piece, which considers broadly the notion of “madamhood” in suburban South Africa, West reiterates this statement when she names Van Niekerk as a 21<sup>st</sup> century successor to Nadine Gordimer: “Certainly, *Triomf* [...], ‘Labour’ and her novel, *Agaat* [...] suggest that she (Van Niekerk) is telling the world about white South African preoccupations as fearlessly as Gordimer did in the twentieth century” (West, 2009a:188). For West, it would seem, there is a sense of entanglement between the Afrikaans and South African English literary systems, even though much of this might historically be sites of conflict that spring from supposed political alignments associated with broader language politics.

Almost as if to temper the (somewhat totalising) praise lauded on Van Niekerk by West, Eva Hunter (2009) conducts a comparative reading of some works by Antjie Krog, Van Niekerk and Jo-Anne Richards on the one hand, and some fairly recent texts by black women writers Sindiwe Magona and Kopano Matlwa on the other. Hunter appears to warn against being too restrictive in reading especially famous white authors’ work as representative of the lingering inequalities that still plague post-apartheid South Africa. As her comparative reading bears out, “recent black women’s writing reveals [...] that their concerns and their lives continue to diverge markedly from those of white women” (Hunter, 2009:78).<sup>63</sup>

Whiteness, and “its off-colour moments,” is the focus of Leon de Kock’s article that considers *Triomf* (English translation) along with Charles van Onselen’s *The Seed is Mine* (1996) and some of the work of Wopko Jensma (2010:18). All three of these texts are read by De Kock as illustrative of disruptive instances in the binary of whiteness versus the (black) other enforced by the former colonial powers that previously controlled South Africa. What makes De Kock’s project quite interesting is his use of a literary text (*Triomf*), a socio-historical text (*The Seed is Mine*), as well as a series of poems (Jensma) in his reading.

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<sup>63</sup> In another piece, Hunter and Siphokazi Jonas (2011) similarly discuss the different situations of black and white women authors in South Africa by considering texts produced mostly after 2000. In discussing Van Niekerk’s *Agaat*, Hunter and Jonas call Van Niekerk “arguably one of South Africa’s finest living poets and novelists,” while also noting that Van Niekerk “continues to write her prose in Afrikaans and, upholding her role as an *Afrikaner* artist in post-apartheid South Africa, tempers her criticism of her cultural inheritance by recording” the diverse expressive capacities of Afrikaans (2011:107 and 109; original emphasis).

As I have discussed above, considerable frequent attention has been paid to the character Aagaat as marginalised other, and as a subaltern voice that subverts (or attempts to subvert) the dominant discourse(s) of the character Milla in *Agaat*. Danyela Demir (2016) acknowledges this, pointing out that critical reception of the novel has mostly neglected paying attention to Aagaat's discriminatory conduct towards the other coloured labourers on Grootmoedersdrift. Demir deploys the concept of racial melancholia in order to argue that Aagaat's behaviour towards other labourers on the farm "can be seen as Aagaat's attempt [to] painfully and melancholically [repress] and, at the same time, [remember] a part of her coloured identity which she has to negate in the first place in order to gain acceptance by Milla" (2016:23). Demir reads in the relationship between Milla and Aagaat an "impossibility between the two women" that speaks to the "continuous tensions within interracial relationships" in the post-apartheid present (2016:33).

There are several studies that deal directly with aspects of gender in Van Niekerk's work. Some of these, which encompass other concerns as well as gender, have already been mentioned in the preceding sections (Viljoen, 1996a; Fourie, 2011 and 2016; and DeCaires Narain, 2013). Jennifer Fuhler's Masters thesis is concerned with the sexual violence against women that often marks the political allegory that is used in South African literature to critique the transition to a democratic dispensation (2006). Fuhler considers how women's bodies and the violation of their bodies are respectively depicted in Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and Van Niekerk's *Triomf* (English translation), noting that "[w]hat makes the sexual violation of [the female character in each of the respective texts] significant is that these women are expected to sacrifice for the welfare of their families, but yet remain voiceless after their violation" (Fuhler, 2006:ii). Mol is different from the characters in the other two novels, it is argued, as she is given the "mental and emotional escape she needs to endure her violation" and is ultimately able to "take control of her own body and home" (Fuhler, 2006:i-ii).

Antoinette Pretorius (2014a) approaches an aspect of gender very directly in an article that considers masculine identity in *Agaat*. Though patriarchy and elements of masculinity are referenced in some other studies, Pretorius attempts to offer a far more nuanced perspective on the character of Jak within these framings, as he is often relegated by critics to a secondary position due to the strong thematic presence of the relationship between the two women in the novel. She cites a few reviews and studies that associate Jak with patriarchy – to such an extent

that he becomes a “patriarchal stereotype of Afrikaner nationalism” (Pretorius, 2014a:29). Pretorius calls for a more nuanced perspective on Jak’s character, wherein his “sophisticated subjectivity [...] does more than simply mirror the failures of the apartheid regime” (ibid.). Through this reading, Pretorius convincingly uncovers a complex humanity in Jak, which simply fails to manifest due to “his desire to conform to stereotypical masculinity” (2014a:42). In another study, Pretorius (2014b) engages with aspects of gender again, but her focus here is on the representation of the ageing (female) body in *Agaat* and other transition-era South African texts. Gender here becomes secondary to corporeality, and the study is therefore discussed further on.

Sexuality is a theme in Van Niekerk’s work that has not received much attention. Marius Crous (2006) briefly mentions the lesbian couple depicted in *Triomf* within the frame of voyeuristic male desire, arguing that the couple counters such a view in that the abused female subject (Mol) associates them with “caring intimacy, the need for being understood and the need for intimate compassion and erotic stimulation in a non-phallic way” (2006:54).

Responding to the dearth of any other critical engagement on this front, Jessica Murray explores “the representation of lesbianism” in the English translation of *Triomf* and Yvette Christiansë’s *Unconfessed* (2006) (2012:88). This lack of critical consideration becomes for Murray illustrative of the larger case in contemporary South African fiction. She refers to the situation as an “erasure,” which “amounts to a type of discursive silencing” (ibid.). The lesbian characters in *Triomf* are mostly of marginal importance to the plot of the novel (as Murray also points out), which might explain the lack of intense critical analysis in this regard. However, her study does well to show how the novel illustrates “the pervasive heteronormative assumptions that structure the contexts within which lesbians must negotiate their relationships with one another” within current South African scenarios (2012:95). She argues that the lesbian couples depicted in Van Niekerk’s and Christiansë’s novels defy the social expectations of them in the extreme racist, sexist, and homophobic South African settings in which they find themselves (ibid.).

The intersection of race and same-sex sexualities receives attention in a study of the English translation of *Triomf* by Christine Emmett. Emmett posits that the novel is problematic due to its incapability to suggest a post-apartheid, white identity (2013). Within a broader project that focuses on an “inherent” ambivalence in texts written by white South African authors in post-

apartheid South Africa, Emmett contends, in agreement with Munro (2009) and Crous (2006), that the representation of “lesbianism” in the novel offers “a benign alternative to the Benade’s subversion through incest” (2013:31).<sup>64</sup> Mol’s admiration for the lesbian couple who lives across the road from the Benade home in *Triomf* leads Emmett to argue that the couple’s life is sketched as utopian, suggesting both a positive identity and a “legitimate place for white (Afrikaans) South Africans in the new multicultural nation where victims such as Mol will be treated as equals and given a voice” (2013:32). Ultimately, though, Emmett strongly critiques the novel for the depiction of the character Mol and her “affiliation” with the lesbian neighbours, which she views as an unsuccessful “attempt to position Mol in [a] more meaningful position of empowerment” (2013:34).<sup>65</sup> A point of interest in Emmett’s study is her justification for using *Triomf* alongside Shaun Johnson’s *The Native Commissioner* (2007). Whereas she acknowledges “the distinction between English-speaking white South Africans and the Afrikaans white South Africans,” she feels that their shared whiteness and benefitting from apartheid allow for a certain level of overlap in reading the identities of white characters in the novels under discussion.

#### 3.4.4. Corporeality/the body

The predominance of the *plaasroman* in critical discussions of Van Niekerk’s work is acknowledged by Lara Buxbaum (2011) in an analysis of the English translations of *Triomf*, *Agaat*, and *Memorandum*. She contrasts the extensive scholarship on the *plaasroman* with the dearth of scholarship (at the point in time when her research appeared) that engages with the role of corporeality in Van Niekerk’s work, despite how the “visceral descriptions of the body and embodiment in her fiction challenge conventional understandings of the relationship between corporeality and spatiality” (2011:29). Notably, Buxbaum situates her study as a “extended comparative critical discussion” of Van Niekerk’s oeuvre (ibid.). However, she very clearly limits this to Van Niekerk’s three novels in their English translations, thereby hinting at Van Niekerk’s oeuvre, in this light at least, being constrained in a somewhat troubling way. In a subsequent paper published in 2012, Buxbaum further elaborates the case of corporeality

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<sup>64</sup> As Munro’s article only makes tangential remarks about *Triomf*, it will not be discussed in further depth.

<sup>65</sup> Though some of Emmett’s points are well argued, they are undermined by the researcher’s lapse into the intentional fallacy. As such, the study does not just criticise the novel, but argues that “the latent anxiety of a loss of hierarchy” may even be read as to “inhere in Van Niekerk (who identifies herself as an Afrikaner lesbian)” an attempt to “create for herself, rather than [for] her characters, a place in” a changed and changing South Africa (Emmett, 2013:35 and 34).

in *Triomf*, noting that “Van Niekerk’s visceral descriptions should not be classified as merely sensationalist or exhibitionist. Rather, they represent an ethical intervention and an attempt to explore the formation of intimate relationships which, for Van Niekerk, are always mediated by the body” (Buxbaum, 2012:197). Continuing the argumentative thread established with her article published in 2011 and continued in 2012, Buxbaum in 2013 penned an article that considers how the characters in *Triomf* and *Agaat* all “experience a degree of physical or psychological trauma, [...and] ‘speak’ of their trauma primarily through their wounded bodies” (2013:83 and 82). Positing that TRC-style<sup>66</sup> narratives are insufficient as attempts “to understand the embodied experience of trauma and [as] attempts at healing” in the Van Niekerk texts under discussion, Buxbaum formulates “an alternative understanding of healing and ‘mending wounds’ that is not necessarily predicated on attaining narrative coherence, but rather on recognition” (2013:83).<sup>67</sup>

Melissa Adendorff and I have suggested yet another approach to bodies in Van Niekerk’s work (Fourie & Adendorff, 2015). Delimiting our study to the relation between bodies and power, we investigate how “the power relations portrayed through the bodily spatial interaction of the characters of Milla and Agaat” in *Agaat* (Afrikaans edition) can further our understanding of the complex relationship between these two characters (2015:5). We identify this relationship as a cyclical power play “that does not come to any true conclusion of dominance or submission because of the inhabitation that they enact through each other” (2015:18). Only after Milla’s death is Agaat “ultimately othered by the freedom of the potentiality of her own inhabitation in what is to become her own space” (ibid.).<sup>68</sup> This reading shows how the novel serves to problematise easy allegorical readings that might be imposed on it. Pretorius (2016:64) follows a similar approach to how *Agaat* offers nuance that is not easily moulded to simple allegorical readings by invoking the notion of Bakhtin’s grotesque to illustrate how the novel itself both invites and resists conflation “of the diseased, dying older body” and the “demise of the apartheid regime.”

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<sup>66</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

<sup>67</sup> Buxbaum presented these articles, slightly revised and compiled together, as her doctoral dissertation (Buxbaum, 2014).

<sup>68</sup> We distinguish between the so-called other within the theoretical rubric of Lefebvre and Soja’s Thirthing-as-Othering, and the “other” in postcolonial readings of *Agaat* as Other/other (Fourie & Adendorff, 2015:6).

Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject features as a structuring critical lens in studies by Marius Crous (2016a), Rossman (2012b) and Pretorius (2014b).<sup>69</sup> Crous brings his study in line with existing research on Van Niekerk's novels in English translation, arguing that her work transgress[es] and deconstruct[s] the norms" of "patriarchy, racism, and nationalism" (2016:52). He sees Van Niekerk as deliberately engaging the abject in her novels through "the use of expletives, obscenities and vulgar expressions; the depiction of sordid details and the setting of the texts in dilapidated houses, sick rooms and hospitals," focusing attention on figures on the margin, and, to different extents, their bodies: the Benades (*Triomf*), Milla and Agaat (*Agaat*), and Mr Wiid, Mr X and Mr Y (*Memorandum*) (Crous, 2016:53).<sup>70</sup> In his study, Crous typifies the novels under discussion as "treatises on abjection": "horror, suffering and defilement" in *Triomf*, "the inescapable power of the abject mother" in *Agaat*, and the opening of "the boundaries [...of] the sanitised, yet dehumanising world of the hospital" in *Memorandum* (Crous, 2016:72).<sup>71</sup>

Much like Crous's exploration of the abject mother in *Agaat*, Rossman considers the character of Mol in *Triomf* as "a composite Christ/Mary figure," who is both "sacrificial and abject mother" (2012b:160). She focuses on the female body when she writes that "Mol's concrete act of compassion and hospitality is to offer her body," like Christ does in the Gospels (2012b:161). In similar fashion, Mol is read as a figure reminiscent of the biblical character of Mary (Martha) of Bethany, who "idealistically seeks love" in different parts of her life (2012b:162). Though she uses the English translation of the novel in her analysis, Rossman draws attention to the Afrikaans pronunciation of Mol's full name – Martha – and reads into that a (dubious) homophonic parallel to the word *martyr*, extending her reading of Mol as Mary-figure to Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary. She reads Mol as the "whore to" Pop, Treppie, and Lambert – "the Benade Holy Trinity" (*ibid.*). Through her use of biblical imagery and figures as a rubric to understand this aspect of the novel, Rossman offers welcome nuance to other readings of Van Niekerk's work through religious ideas and possible parallels (for instance Stobie, 2009 and Van Vuuren, 2010).

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<sup>69</sup> Pretorius (2014b) uses abjection along with the notion of the grotesque in her doctoral study, which includes an analysis of *Agaat*. However, the grotesque, more than the abject, seems to be applied in her discussion of *Agaat*.

<sup>70</sup> Adèle Nel (2013) explores the abject in the film adaptation of *Triomf* (2008), directed by Michael Raeburn. It does not fall within the scope of this project to also consider the film adaptation of *Triomf*. More on the film adaptation follows further on in this chapter.

<sup>71</sup> Crous (2016) has been adapted from Crous (2013a), a doctoral dissertation.

### 3.4.5. Animals and nature

In both *Triomf* and *Agaat*, an interaction with non-human animals and aspects of nature are consistently part of the respective narratives in different ways. One of the earliest studies on Van Niekerk in English that speaks to this point is Wendy Woodward's 2001 article, wherein she explores the "continuum between humans and other animals, dogs in particular," in *Triomf* (English translation) and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (2001:94).<sup>72</sup> Woodward argues that *Triomf* implies the need for "a new natural contract" (ibid.). She also mentions that the novel poses ontological questions "about what it is to be human in relation to other animals, most often dogs," whereby the novel alters "the anthropocentric focus of conventional adult narratives" – specifically so in post-apartheid South Africa (ibid.). The article concludes that *Triomf* and *Disgrace* make reflective ecological statements about the recurring patterns that are to be found within the binary thinking of racism and speciesism, questioning the supposed right of humans, "as an apparently privileged species, [that can] impose [its] will on animals, and, by implication, on the earth" (2001:113).<sup>73</sup>

The representation of human and non-human animal relationships is central to Jeanne-Marie Jackson's study on isolation in the English translation of *Triomf* (2011). Unlike Woodward, who conducts her study with the express aim of questioning the age-old binary of human versus animal, Jackson uses her reading of the human and animal relationships in *Triomf* to understand the novel and its relationship to global literature. She writes that *Triomf* is "a poignant, individuated, and in some sense trans-historical accomplishment over and against its participation in South Africa's meta-narrative of transition" (2011:360). Thus, she claims, the novel remains a relevant moment – in the past, but also into the present of South African literary history. In this statement, it would appear, lies the implication of *Triomf* as important to the broader South African literary system, and not just to the Afrikaans system.

Mark Libin uses the phrase "between dog and wolf" to invoke "the trope of metamorphosis between day and night, hope and fear, the domesticated dog and the wild wolf, and finally, aesthetics and politics" in his reading of *Triomf* (English translation) (2009:37). Rather than positioning his study within the realm of animal or ecocritical studies, he finds "disturbing

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<sup>72</sup> This article appears, in slightly expanded and revised form, as part of Woodward (2008).

<sup>73</sup> The ecocritical elements of my discussion of *Agaat* as postcolonial *plaasroman* are discussed above (Fourie, 2011). It is not discussed again in this section.

transformations,” especially in his analysis of the “indisputable grotesque” Benade family, which he reads as marker of transition. He sees the Benades as “somewhere between dog and wolf”: at times “docile and insular [...] yet simultaneously transgressive”. In this representation, Libin writes, “the figure of the canine” – which he shows as a shifting state of the family, shifting between dogs and wolves – “occupies a literal and figurative space” that “straddles the realms of the physical and metaphysical,” presenting a narrative that is both apocalyptic and utopian” (Libin, 2009:47). This view is extrapolated to the South African present, into which the post-apartheid nation has emerged (ibid.).

#### **3.4.6. The relationship between writing, music and visual art in *Memorandum***

Compared to *Triomf* and *Agaat*, Van Niekerk’s third novel, *Memorandum*, has received considerably less scholarly attention. The novel is published in large, hardback format, and is accompanied by full-colour paintings by Adriaan van Zyl. Mark Sanders explores the relationship between memory and mimesis in his simultaneous analysis of the Afrikaans original and English translation of the novel (2009). Not only does the novel address itself to “the formidable enigmata of mimesis and memory,” it even unravels and clarifies them, Sanders claims (2009:108). The inclusion of both the paintings and the text in *Memorandum* is for Sanders a process of “discovering what if anything painter and writer have in common in the basic nature of their art” (2009:121). He finds that “[w]riter follows painter” and the common element between them is mimesis. However, this mimesis is not “in the sense of the imitation of something that already exists,” nor does it represent a record of events from the past that have been memorised: “The thing represented comes after, and not before, the representation;” or, to put it another way: “A language is learned, and meaning comes later” (2009:121-122).

That *Memorandum* is an “accompaniment to the paintings,” and not a “commentary on the paintings,” is the point of departure for Crous’s discussion of the novel (2011). His analysis of the English edition looks at the intratextual relation between the novel’s paintings and the (textual) narrative. This reading of the novel shows the subversion of several binary oppositions: “Van Zyl/Van Niekerk; paint/write; painting/novel,” without ever creating a hierarchy between these two forms of representation (or artistic expression) (Crous, 2011:33). The novel therefore offers a textual commentary on different spaces, and concurrently

confronts the reader with “two perspectives on pain, suffering, care and the clinical observation of the diseased body by the medical fraternity” (ibid.).<sup>74</sup> This “visual-verbal dialectic” is also one of the central points in Rossman’s analysis of the final “prose poem” of the English translation of the novel – the main character and narrator Wiid’s “Passacaglia” (2014:58). Again, the novel is approached on a threshold of sorts; “the forces in life and art” in this Passacaglia are examined as evidence of the “apotheosis as an artist” of Wiid. Like the binaries identified by Crous, Rossman draws attention to “the constant struggle in life and art between chaos/order, intuition/reason, permanence/contingency, individuality/relationality, nature/culture and destruction/creation” (2014:59). In another article, Rossman (2015) further explores *Memorandum*, again hearkening back to the Dionysian forces in art already utilised in her previous study (2014). The researcher investigates the role of chaos (or mania) in the novel, inferring that the novel, as a combined vision by Van Niekerk and Van Zyl, “vivifies a story of crossing over, of embracing chaos and discovering life in the face of death” (Rossman, 2015:39 and 49).

### 3.4.7. Urbanity and space

Ampie Coetzee (2001) considers the connections between *Triomf* (the Afrikaans text) and some older Afrikaans novels. In some ways, he sees *Triomf* as part of a continuum in the development of the Afrikaans novel. This continuum – which he calls a “history of consciousness” – shows, according to him, the history of the Afrikaner. Against the backdrop of a discussion that covers both the literary history of the Afrikaans novel genre and the (parallel and related) processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism during the course of the twentieth century, Coetzee reads Van Niekerk’s novel as an illustration of the destruction of the “Afrikaner Ideal” (“Afrikaanse Gedagte”): “The grotesque nature of the representations, the apocalyptic associations compel one to read in *Triomf* the end of the *bywoner* [sharecropper], the poor white and the spent farmer who had to leave his farm for the city. A sad and terrible ending” (2001:156). Coetzee’s article appears in the book *Strangely Familiar: South African Narratives in Town and Countryside* (edited by Chris van der Merwe, 2001) and offers the non-Afrikaans reader a wealth of information, as Coetzee translates all Afrikaans concepts and quotes into English.<sup>75</sup> However, the dissemination of the text might have been

<sup>74</sup> Very brief mention is made of *Memorandum* in an article on hospital ethnography by Debbi Long, Cynthia Hunter and Sjaak van der Geest (2008).

<sup>75</sup> Coetzee is firmly situated as a scholar of Afrikaans literature.

limited due to the text being published by the now defunct Contentlot.com, a print-on-demand and digital publisher (the latter at the time meaning CD-ROM). In a number of ways, Coetzee's article exists in tandem with or as precursor to some later Afrikaans research (Van Coller, 2003; Burger, 2016), which will be discussed in the following chapter.

Carol Clarkson (2005) approaches South African urban landscapes as “sediments” in her analysis of three novels set in Johannesburg in the mid-1990s: *Triomf* (English translation), Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001). This grouping reveals that the researcher is taking a much broader view of South African literature in her selection of texts for her study, even if Van Niekerk's text is still used in its English translation. Clarkson refers to how the characters in these novels encounter “things [...] from a different time and place” in their own here and now – an overlap, thus, between different spatial temporalities (2005:84). This overlap leads to the past surfacing to challenge the “supposed stability of the present” (2005:85) and the many different readers of these texts are challenged to consider the sense of shared lives, or “sedimentary patternings” of their own South Africa (2005:93) that the novels draw attention to.

In a reading of the “historical processes of erasure” signified by the urban space of Sophiatown, Meg Samuelson views the suburb as a “symbolically charged and contested” space that can be understood as a type of palimpsest, “whose past topographies linger as traces resistant to effacement, [...] which [...] underpin or haunt the imprint of superimposing layers” (2008:63). The structuring metaphor in Samuelson's article bears some similarity to that of Clarkson (2005), and also utilises *Triomf*, as well as Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1949) and *Drum* magazine during the 1940s and 1950s. She draws attention to the demythologizing of Afrikaner history that the novel undertakes, and refers to how the novel persistently “draws attention to the traces of the black urban presence – the sediment of Sophiatown – on which *Triomf* was erected” (2008:70). In this way, the novel suits the idea of the urban space as a palimpsest, as it presents the necessity of white people “[encountering] and [coming] to terms with the black presence cleared but not expunged from the city's surface” (ibid.). Samuelson then places the novel as an urban counterpart to Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974), in that the former “does for the white city” what the latter “did for the arrogated land: the returning black corpse and the returning rubble ensure that the white presence in South Africa cannot assert its innocence” (ibid.). Samuelson, who in her article uses the English translation of *Triomf*, thus implies that Van Niekerk's text (and by extension, Van Niekerk as

an author) embodies a far larger symbolic space in South Africa than just what she represents in Afrikaans literature on the one hand, and even South African English literature on the other. If the urban space under discussion is read as palimpsest, and *Triomf* is read as a layer within that palimpsest (in relation to other white and black South African authors) then such a palimpsestic view of South African texts rooted in either the English and Afrikaans literary systems becomes an instance of entanglement, even if it is likely a purposeful entanglement on the part of the author in the attempt to speak to the complexity and cultural loadedness of an urban space. A similar project that focuses on urban multi-layeredness is undertaken by John A. Stotesbury, who “explore[s] the urban spaces traversed by two very different literary narratives”: the English translation of *Triomf* and Linda Fortune’s *The House in Tyne Street: Childhood Memories of District Six* (1996) (Stotesbury, 2004:19-20).

Also focusing on the urban space is Emma O’Shaughnessy (2012), whose study reads Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Exploded View* (2004), Van Niekerk’s *Triomf* (utilising the English translation) and Kgebetli Moele’s *Room 207* (2006) “to argue for the persistence of geopathic disorders in post-apartheid Johannesburg” (2012:3). In her study, the intertwined relationships between characters and setting are “nodes through which to examine the complex and disordered *place* of [the] contemporary urban environment and to show how the city’s apartheid history informs the present” (ibid.; original emphasis). O’Shaughnessy acknowledges the use of the translation of *Triomf*, but, like Clarkson (2005), she does not interrogate the possible significance of using two novels published originally in English alongside a translated text.

Stephen Poggendorf (2013) reads Van Niekerk’s *Agaat* (using the English translation published internationally under the title *The Way of the Women*) along with Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light* (2006) and Kopano Matlwa’s *Spilt Milk* (2010) to read “the intersections of race, space, and gender as they occur in specific locations” in South Africa’s history. He views these texts as multi-layered, and as “palimpsest[s], as the replaying and revision of past events [that] place different conceptions of the same stories on top of one another” (2013:iii). The selection of texts is not interrogated in too much depth by Poggendorf, but it is interesting that both Wicomb and Van Niekerk, who can be considered more established authors, as well as the work of Matlwa, a newer author, are read together. In terms of his engagement with Van Niekerk’s work, Poggendorf’s discussion focuses predominantly on *Agaat* as *plaasroman*, and

in that sense, he offers little additional insight to that already provided in this light by other scholars.

### 3.5. Van Niekerk as an Afrikaans playwright in English literary criticism

As previously mentioned, *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.* has only appeared in Afrikaans, and was published by the theatre company TEATERteater. As a theatre piece, it has also only been performed in Afrikaans, and what is predominantly at Afrikaans cultural and literary festivals. There is therefore limited critical feedback in English on the play, besides reviews by Leon de Kock (2011; SLiP) and Tyrone August (2011; *The Cape Times*). August relies on his readers to deduce that the play is in Afrikaans, based on the title, and makes no comment about the entire production rendered in Afrikaans. He is positive about the play's production quality and its engagement with issues of the day, calling it "bold and challenging" and "utterly breathtaking in the range of its ambition," though he does comment that the writing is at times "rather shrill" and might even be experienced as "verging on the propagandistic" (2011:9). De Kock does not see this as a characteristic to be criticized, though. Rather, he dubs the play "the 'new' protest theatre," which is, more accurately described, a "*return* to protest theatre" that is "violently, abusively, corrosively effective" (2011; original emphasis). It is of course not possible to determine in further detail the level of attention performances of this play received from English theatregoers, but it does seem that by the time of the play's performances, Van Niekerk's name was respected widely enough to receive some mention from English critics – even for a work that was performed exclusively in Afrikaans. The limited critical attention given to this text is possibly explained by the fact that, though it was published by the production group that premiered the play (TEATERteater) and was received by attendees to the performance both in Potchefstroom and later in Stellenbosch, it has not been disseminated in the same way that Van Niekerk's other texts have, which were published by traditional publishers.

The only scholarly article to appear to date that looks at the play *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.* is by Leon de Kock and Annel Pieterse (2012). De Kock and Pieterse analyse both the playscript, as well as partial recordings of the production, through which they illustrate "that the play might be read as a performance of perceived social decomposition in which the materiality of language itself is staged as a substance which must, if it is to convey the feel and

texture rather than the mere rational ‘sense’ of pervasive social decay, itself undergo a process of decomposition” (De Kock & Pieterse, 2012:61). Though their article appears in English, De Kock and Pieterse perform a close reading of the Afrikaans text, while also considering very broadly the reception of the performance at the relevant Afrikaans arts festivals.

### 3.6. Van Niekerk’s poetry in English: A curious critical absence

None of Van Niekerk’s volumes of poetry have been translated into English in their entirety. Whereas Van Niekerk’s longer prose texts were translated, her earlier short fiction (*Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*) remains untranslated along with her first two volumes of poetry (*Sprokkelster* and *Groenstaar*) – again, at least into English. *Kaar*, her first volume of poetry since *Groenstaar* (1983), appeared in 2013 and was critically very well received. While I will elaborate on the reception of *Kaar* in the next chapter, Van Niekerk herself has made an interesting observation regarding her return to poetry. Despite the positive positioning of reviews later being confirmed with the awarding of several esteemed Afrikaans literary prizes to *Kaar*, the “literary establishment” thereafter “met [*Kaar*] with a huge critical silence” (Van Niekerk in Steyn, 2016). The author mentions that the reason for this might be related to “some influential Afrikaans fellow poets [thinking] the collection is rubbish for various reasons” (ibid.). She then contrasts the reception of her prose and poetry, both nationally and internationally: “I think there might be a problem on home turf (let alone in the Anglophone world) to align the literary judgement of the novels with the verdict on the poems” (ibid.). By this, Van Niekerk does seemingly wish to draw attention to a certain critical disparity that has come to dominate the reception of different genres of literature worldwide – a disparity that has also affected her reception as a poet.

Van Niekerk mentions in her interview with Steyn that she is making an effort “to get [her] poetry translated to see whether it holds up internationally,” but, she adds, such an undertaking is a time-consuming process (ibid.). In an interview with Rosie Goldsmith, Van Niekerk gives some indication as to why there has not been more extensive translation of her Afrikaans poetry into English:

I write in Afrikaans because it’s the only language that I feel I have enough of a command of in order to mess in it. When I write English, I can’t mess in it, because I’m

not so comfortable in it. So I write only in Afrikaans and then sometimes I dare to translate something, or I ask a friend or a colleague to help me with English translations in order to reach a broader audience.

— Van Niekerk (in Goldsmith, 2015)

She has made several attempts in recent years towards translating her own poetry into English – seven of her poems, for instance, appear in the anthology *In a Burning Sea: Contemporary Afrikaans Poetry in Translation* (2014), edited by Marlise Joubert and with an introduction by André Brink.<sup>76</sup> In the preface, Joubert explains that the book is explicitly aimed at “address[ing] a long-standing need to introduce Afrikaans poetry to a local as well as international audience” (2014:13).<sup>77</sup> She further expresses the hope that the publication of these translations will encourage further publication of Afrikaans poetry.

In his introduction to *In a Burning Sea*, Brink observes the following about Marlene van Niekerk:

[She] draws on a broad historical and cultural canvas where the sacramental is intimately linked to the mundane; in her rhythms the psalmodic carries overtones of honkytonk; often, the political and the philosophical, the sardonic and the deeply serious are engaged in a constant dialogue, charging her poetry with pyromanic intensity.

— Brink (2014:19)

The observant reader who is familiar with Van Niekerk’s greater oeuvre will immediately see in Brink’s words the thematic and technical links between her prose and poetry to which he subtly draws attention here. History, culture and the intimacies (some would say sacraments) of the Afrikaner family are all weaved, explored and exploited in *Triomf* and *Agaat* – and even, to some extent, in *Memorandum*. So-called high culture and the (often faux) gravity of the bible and classical music are undermined, reshaped, and juxtaposed against popular culture, again

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<sup>76</sup> Some further English translations of Van Niekerk’s poetry have appeared on the websites Poetry International Web (<https://www.poetryinternationalweb.net>), SLiP ([www.slipnet.co.za](http://www.slipnet.co.za)), as well as in the anthologies *Letter to South Africa. Poets Calling the State to Order* (2011), *In the Heat of Shadows: South African Poetry 1996-2013* (2014), *Afrikaans Poems with English Translations* (2018), *The New Century of South African Poetry* (2018, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition).

<sup>77</sup> Importantly, all poets included can be considered contemporary poets, “whose work is a good reflection of the current trends evident in Afrikaans literature” (Joubert, 2014:13).

especially so in Van Niekerk's first two novels, which offer explorations of philosophy and politics that, to re-use Brink's phrasing, burn "with pyromanic intensity."<sup>78</sup>

### 3.6.1. Marlene van Niekerk as a postcolonial English poet

Considering the especially engaged nature of *Triomf* and *Agaat* in particular,<sup>79</sup> I argue that the oversight of Van Niekerk's poetry, both residing in the dearth of translation of her poetry and in the critical blind spot writ large in studies of her work in English, comes as a result of what Emma Bird calls poetry's "distinctly peripheral position" in postcolonial literary studies (Bird, 2018:125) – a critical lens that has in various ways informed readings of Van Niekerk's English work. Surely partial translation of an author's oeuvre does not undermine the potential importance of their other, untranslated works. *Triomf* and *Agaat* certainly engage in what Elleke Boehmer identifies as postcolonial literature's imperative to "critically or subversively [scrutinize] the colonial relationship" as they "[set] out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives," which requires a "symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings" by "undercut[ting] thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization – the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination" (2005:3).

There is of course then the question of whether Van Niekerk's poetry can be considered to fall within the ambit of postcolonial poetry. Beyond the thematic concerns identified by Boehmer that could be utilised to typify a considerable number of Afrikaans literary texts as postcolonial, brief attention should be paid to the case of Afrikaans literature overall and how it stands in relation to postcolonial concerns. As I show at the beginning of this chapter, Viljoen (1996b) argues that Afrikaans literature presents an unusual case in terms of how it can be situated within discourses of colonial and postcolonial literature. The complexity of the political history of the language and its speakers is a factor in these considerations, as are the historical positionings (and self-positionings) of texts produced in the language. Viljoen contends that Afrikaans literature can be read as what Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge refer to as "fused

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<sup>78</sup> Brink made the final selections of the poems included in *In a Burning Sea*, a continuation of his influential role as anthologist of Afrikaans poetry. He also edited the two most recent editions of the important Afrikaans poetry anthology, *Groot verseboek* (2000 and 2008).

<sup>79</sup> By this I refer to the notion of *littérature engagée*, as *Triomf* and *Agaat* both engage with the socio-politics of South Africa's colonial history.

postcolonialism,” by which they mean a kind of postcolonialism wherein both the oppositional (striving towards autonomy and independence from the colonial power) and the complicit (the constant drive towards subversion implicit in any literature that has been subject to a process of cultural imperialism) are imbricated (Mishra & Hodge, 1993:284-290 in Viljoen, 1996b:4). Viljoen observes that Afrikaans as a language has a long history in both furthering colonialism in South Africa (most obviously, but not exclusively, during formal apartheid) and opposing it (both during formal Apartheid, but also prior to that, when Afrikaner communities felt themselves colonised and oppressed by the British). Similarly, its diverse literature has been both complicit in the designs of the oppression of the majority of the country’s population by a minority, while at the same time, it became a medium of opposition to these oppressive forces. Considering the extent to which Van Niekerk’s prose engages with past and present aspects of South Africa as a former colonised country, I argue that it would not be unjustified to consider her a postcolonial author, a point made by a number of scholars cited above (Viljoen, 1996a; Carvalho & Van Vuuren, 2009; Fourie, 2011, 2016; Olausson, 2017).

Though no detailed analysis of Van Niekerk’s English-language poetry has to my knowledge yet been conducted, an overview of the concerns addressed in at least some of her poems indicate an awareness of and engagement with current affairs in post-apartheid South Africa. If Van Niekerk’s poetry, like her prose, can then be considered to be engaged with postcolonial concerns, why is it an aspect of her English oeuvre that has received so little attention?

To understand why poetry, and postcolonial poetry specifically, receives far less critical consideration than works of prose, Bird (2018) refers to the considerable commercial success of prose authors – a level of achievement usually not met by poets. She mentions, for instance, the popularity of authors such as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, whose international acclaim and sales are unmatched by any poet who likewise writes from or about India (Bird, 2018:126). In similar fashion, South African English literature boasts many names that have received both international critical acclaim and enjoyed global commercial success: Zakes Mda, Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, Imraan Coovadia, André Brink, Sindiwe Magona, Antjie Krog, and of course, Marlene van Niekerk. Though these authors have not all published only prose, they are mostly known for their prose, even though Mda and Brink have also penned dramas, Krog has a large poetic output (in both Afrikaans and English), while Van Niekerk has produced poetry and drama. To lay the critical prose-poetry disparity at the feet of postcolonialism as a predominant critical and discursive lens through which these authors’

works are often read would not be entirely accurate, however. The unequal popularity and sales of the genres of poetry (and drama texts) as opposed to those of prose are far more complex and are influenced by many other factors beyond the analytical discourses wielded by critics and scholars. What I would like to explore here, then, is more focused: What are some of the possible reasons for the critical neglect of Van Niekerk's English poetry? If critics and scholars do act as key role players in the reception of an author's work, how does this impact Van Niekerk's oeuvre and status as an author in English, and particularly, how is this connected to her position within both the Afrikaans literary system and the system of world literature? I will refer to Van Niekerk's poems "Mud school" (2013) and "Fallist art (in memory of Bongani Mayosi)" (2018) and the limited critical discussions of these poems to account for the gap in scholarship on Van Niekerk's poetic output overall.

Similar to the way in which De Kock imagined the translation of Afrikaans texts to enrich and transcode "registers of an ever so slightly *transformed* English" (2012: 751; my emphasis), Jahan Ramazani draws our attention to how English-language poetry has been transformed by its increasing production in Britain's former colonies. Using the evocative image of the mythical muses, Ramazani gestures towards how the Western canon of English literature is being reshaped by postcolonial authors wielding the English language: "[A] rich and vibrant poetry has issued from the hybridization of the English muse with the long-resident muses of Africa, India, the Caribbean, and other decolonizing territories of the British empire" (2001:1). He sees this as a process of expansion of English-language poetry, now infused "with indigenous metaphors and rhythms, creoles and genres" (ibid.). Like Heyns, who describes translation as a tense process that oscillates between domesticating and foreignising a text (2009:127), Ramazani views this postcolonial poetry in English as a "remaking" of literary language. Through the metaphor of travel, while showing an awareness of the processes and power structures imposed by colonialism, he notes that "postcolonial poets indigenize the Western and anglicize the native to create exciting new possibilities for English-language poetry" (Ramazani, 2001:2). One could view this process of travel – or cultural journey – as a kind of entanglement between the so-called Western and native, as Ramazani calls them, which highlights the ways in which the native registers transform those of English.

Ramazani acknowledges that critical interest in the genre of poetry has been on the decline in recent decades and views this as a problem that is compounded, rather than alleviated, by the advancement of postcolonial studies, due to the field being founded on what he calls "mimetic

presuppositions about literature” (2001:4) However, the very nature of poetry as a form of expression challenges this view:

[S]ince poetry mediates experience through a language of exceptional figural and formal density, it is a less transparent medium by which to recuperate the history, politics, and sociology of postcolonial societies; it is less favorable [sic] than other genres for curricular expeditions into the social history of the Third World; and, consequently, it is harder to annex as textual synecdoche for the social world of [former British colonies].

— Ramazani (2001:4)

Ramazani therefore strongly advocates for the study of postcolonial poetry through the critical approaches of poetics, as this can “reveal the literary energies of these texts, which aesthetically embody the postcolonial condition in particular linguistic and formal structures” (ibid.). Bird shows the possible limitations of such an approach when she writes that simply examining poetry “insofar as it engages with certain themes is to perpetuate a narrow and limiting focus on the text” (2018:126). Therefore, she argues, we need to consider “how the poem can exceed the very terms and vocabularies of postcolonial analysis” – in other words, how literary texts are not read only for how they illustrate or explore certain thematic concerns, but also for how they can inform and broaden our very theoretical approaches.

Perhaps the dearth of scholarship on Van Niekerk’s English poetry is a reflection of how the dominant position of theory in the humanities has come to dictate strongly the kinds of texts we analyse in literary studies, and the ways in which we analyse them. What Ramazani refers to as the “mimetic presuppositions” of postcolonial studies is indicative of approaches shared more broadly with other critical theories that have their roots (or were reinvigorated) during the ethical turn in the humanities that began during the latter part of the 1980s and early years of the 1990s: queer and gender theory, feminism, ecocriticism, etc.<sup>80</sup> To a large extent, the previous section of this chapter bears this out: Van Niekerk’s prose texts are read insofar as they reflect, explore, undermine, question and challenge South African society, cultures, histories, and practices.

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<sup>80</sup> Robert Doran explores this extensively in *The Ethics of Theory* (2017).

### 3.6.2. “Mud school” (2013) and “Fallist art” (2018)

As with my consideration of Van Niekerk’s prose in the previous section, I will not be analysing the poems “Mud school” (2013) or “Fallist art (in memory of Bongani Mayosi)” (2018) in and of themselves. Rather, I want to consider how we might situate these poems within the broader South African English literary system. Under the title “Motshekga’s name is mud”, the first poem appeared as part of a letter which Van Niekerk addresses directly to the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga (2013c) in the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper.<sup>81</sup> In what could be considered an unusual move, the poet contextualises the poem for the reader in her letter that precedes the poem:

Minister Angie Motshekga, two weeks ago writer Njabulo Ndebele told me that some of the members of a delegation to the Eastern Cape wept when confronted with conditions in some of the mud schools there.

In the *Sunday Independent* of May 12, the Archbishop of the Anglican Church, Thabo Makgoba, who was part of this delegation, urged members of the public to keep up the pressure on you and your squad in the department of education, who seem to have lost the plot. The archbishop said: “Let us bombard her with letters, pleas, prayers, even poems. Hold the government to account. Demand urgent action.”

So here is my poem. Maybe, as a result of some miracle, it might also reach some children in schools without proper infrastructure, books or decent teachers. They might have some fun with it. It includes instructions. I will see to it that it gets translated into isiXhosa.<sup>82</sup>

— Van Niekerk (2013c)

The opening lines of the poem are indicative of the poem’s overall satirical tone:

Minister Motshekga, your name is mud. Let’s see  
what we can do with you. We can fire you and make

<sup>81</sup> The full poem appears in the addendum to the dissertation.

<sup>82</sup> At a march led by Equal Education, “Mud school” was read, with the permission of the poet, in both English and isiXhosa (Equal Education, 2013).

of you a brick, and add you to our school, maybe  
as the corner stone. In rain you'll turn into a turd.

— Van Niekerk (2013c)

The South African government reacted swiftly to the criticism levelled against it.<sup>83</sup> David Hlabane of the Department of Basic Education's Communications Unit responded directly to Van Niekerk's poem, calling it a "cynical rant" (2013). He further describes Van Niekerk's poem as condescending, contemptuous, and arrogant, with "a self-righteous tone not unlike that of the erstwhile colonial writers." This follows on an introduction in which Hlabane's response seems to imply that the poem is an utterance of racism that "masquerades as poetry". As his letter also makes clear, he reads the poem more as a letter, to be understood in a most basic, literal sense, rather than as a far more layered piece of literary satire, and so it is read as a personal attack on Angie Motshekga and the then president, Jacob Zuma.

What one could read into "Mud school" and the swift and angry response to the poem from the Department of Basic Education is a level of intolerance with a democratic process wherein all citizens, including creative writers, can engage with and criticise government's actions (or lack thereof). Interesting to note is how the vehement contempt a government department directs at criticism that is articulated in a certain form – here, a satirical poem – betrays an unwillingness to admit any fault or failure. This is especially so considering that only two years prior, Van Niekerk was awarded the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver by President Zuma "[f]or her outstanding intellectual contribution to the literary arts and culture field through poetry, literature and philosophical works" (Presidency, 2011:31). The commendatio presented at the award ceremony further reads:

In particular the novel, *Triomf*, translated by Leon de Kock, reflects on the post-colonial [sic] South Africa, showing how apartheid failed to benefit even those it was also designed to serve, namely the white population [...] We are proud to honour Ms

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<sup>83</sup> These responses were to criticism from amongst others Thabo Makgoba, Njabulo S. Ndebele and the non-governmental organisation Equal Education, who had led the expedition of "academics, authors and activists" to inspect the mud schools in Mthatha, Libode and Dutywa in the Eastern Cape (Ntshobane, 2013:4). The response of the premier of the province, Nxolo Kiviet, to the statements made by these parties was that the ANC-led government did not build the schools in question. Kiviet rather focused on explaining that, broadly viewed, "the life of residents in the province had changed for the better according to recent StatsSA results" (ibid.), thereby failing to respond to the concerns about the clear and present issues at the schools in question.

Marlene van Niekerk with the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver for her outstanding contribution to the development of South Africa's inclusive literary culture.

— Presidency (2011:31)

In addition to this, President Jacob Zuma's cabinet on 15 April 2015 extended its congratulations to Van Niekerk "for becoming the first South African to be shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize," again reiterating her "outstanding lifetime achievements in fiction, including works like *Triomf* and *Agaat*" (GCIS, 2015).

To suggest that an author receiving honours and congratulations from her government would make her future utterances and writings immune to criticism is not what I am arguing here. Rather, it is telling that Van Niekerk's critical authorial gaze and its reflections on a postcolonial South Africa are formally welcomed and honoured in one instance and officially abjured and rejected in another – with the discourse of the latter wholly undercutting that of the former. Of course, it would be overly simplistic to suggest that there was a sort of absolute centralisation in the South African government in the period spanning from 2011 (the awarding of the Order of Ikhamanga to Van Niekerk) to 2013 (the publication of "Mud school" and the Department of Basic Education's response to the poem), and I certainly do not wish to assert that my readings of these two instances show a unified response to Van Niekerk by the South African government. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the differing discourses surrounding a sense of national pride (the awarding of national honours to artists) on the one hand, and, simultaneously, if not necessarily directly related, a problematic and scathing response to the critical work of an author by agents of the state on the other hand. While literature is in one instance being celebrated for its very political engagement, it is in another criticised for further attempts at such engagement. What is happening here, then, to slightly rephrase what has been said by Bird (2018:136), is that poetry is being separated from politics, thereby denying "the complex relationship between aesthetics and politics," negating the myriad ways in which texts can operate. In a sense, then, even the utterances and actions of the state have played a role in shaping Van Niekerk in the English literary system, as a poet whose (English) work should apparently be read literally, shorn of the literariness that readings of the genre demand.

At the time, Van Niekerk did not respond directly to the criticism levelled at her by government. Two years later, in an interview with Rosie Goldsmith, she did address the issue when answering a question relating both to what South African authors write about and to an author's

participation in public debates (Van Niekerk in Goldsmith, 2015). Goldsmith refers to Van Niekerk as “one of a quite small group of South African writers who are [...] very public, very prominent, who chart the changes of this very changing and complicated country,” whereafter she explicitly asks the author why she “choose[s] to go public.” Van Niekerk responds with humour, but also reveals something about a distinction between an author’s writing (read: their creative texts) and their opinions (read: to be directly ascribed to the author):

It’s, it’s always a difficult thing for me to decide whether to take part, and to what extent, in public debates. [...] I recently wrote a poem about the question of education in the Eastern Cape [...] and I got a vehement reaction from government, in which I was called, um, the worst of a certain type of patronising colonialist writer. This, after the president had given me the national order a few years ago. So, what I’m saying is if one chooses to go public with one’s writing and one’s opinions, one must have quite a thick skin, and even the fact of participating [...] is contested in South African letters at the moment (ibid.).

— Van Niekerk (in Goldsmith, 2015)

This contested participation in public debates by academics and authors is something that Van Niekerk also addressed in a long essay on the Fees Must Fall and #OpenStellenbosch protests that occurred in 2015 and 2016 (Van Niekerk, 2016). In this piece, the author openly admits to avoiding participating in the debates of the time out of a fear “of being misunderstood or wilfully misconstrued.” Referring to David Hlabane calling her an “arrogant colonialist writer” for writing “Mud school,” she says that

[i]t takes a lot of courage for even mildly experimental or oppositional writers to remain steadfast in a country where racist nationalist regimes seem to succeed each other ad infinitum and where everything from free-wheeling exploration to engaged literature to political critique elicits contestation by some or other offended party.

— Van Niekerk (2016)

Again, I do not want to enter the debates about what Van Niekerk’s position on the state of either basic or higher education in South Africa might be. I am more interested in locating how the author, in this case also an academic, positions her English poetry. While other agents in the field are already acting in this regard, through the inclusion of her poetry in English in

anthologies – Van Niekerk’s position as active agent is again, as has been discussed above in relation to the translation of her prose, an important point of analysis. It serves to ask what this positioning is, and what it might mean within the dynamic landscape of the broader South African literary system.

Following the suicide of renowned South African medical academic and Dean of the Medical Faculty of the University of Cape Town, Professor Bongani Mayosi, Van Niekerk penned a poem in memory of him for the literature and arts website LitNet.<sup>84</sup> Its opening lines show that the poem, titled “Fallist art (in memory of Bongani Mayosi),” responds to the death of the academic, but it also engages other debates that surrounded or were reignited in the wake of his passing:

Bongani’s soul, his sister said,  
 was vandalised, the insults  
 (sell-out, coconut)  
 cut him to the core, he changed,  
 withdrew, spoke less and less  
 and killed himself. He suffered  
 from depression, known  
 locally as punctured heart.

Helen Moffet, a former academic, now literary editor and poet, wrote a response to the poem, based on what she understood to be an attack on the academics Achille Mbembe and Premesh Lalu, who are named in the poem (Moffet, 2018). To briefly contextualise: Van Niekerk’s poem reads the death of Mayosi within the broader crisis of higher education in South Africa. It draws on various urgent issues: the Fees Must Fall movement and protests, debates about the medium of instruction at South African universities (which key into much larger debates about language rights in the country), freedom of speech, as well as conversations and processes regarding the decolonising of university syllabi and academic spaces. The mention of Mbembe and Lalu is a direct reference to a speaking engagement on 26 May 2016 in which these scholars

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<sup>84</sup> The full poem appears in the addendum to the dissertation.

participated, along with Judith Butler, Wendy Brown and David Theo Goldberg. The event had been disrupted by protesting students.<sup>85</sup>

Moffet frames her criticism as a defence of Mbembe and Lalu, expressing herself as being “dismayed” to read that in the poem they are “associate[d] [...] with the more extreme and problematic elements of the Fallist movement” (2018). The lines in question read:

Is that why you can gaily hack  
the Heines, Bachs and Becketts from  
curricula – wait for the Mbembes,  
Butlers, Lalus – as though they are  
makwerekwere, best to be macheted  
out of town? Not that the parallel  
will strike you as significant in your  
fully junked up state of gown.

Not only does Moffet interpret the poem to portray Mbembe and Lalu as “waiting to crowd forward and replace the colonial syllabus, [...] their work seized upon to replace elements of the Western canon” but also that it implies both of them to be “beneficiaries of the ‘hack[ing]’ and the ‘machete[s]’” (ibid.). For Moffet, this becomes “taint by proximity,” which she calls “deeply unfair and distasteful.” In the conclusion of her piece, she quotes two academics from UWC, who laid the responsibility for Mayosi’s death before “[h]is colleagues, the Fallists, the University of Cape Town, even those of us at other South African universities,” and then refers to the poem as a “lash[ing] out” with “[w]ords [that] hurt” that she views as contrary to a “kindness” that should accompany expressions of “our feelings and our intellects.” Though Moffet’s response to “Fallist art (in memory of Bongani Mayosi)” is not as vehement as was the response to “Mud school” by the Department of Basic Education, what is similar in these respective responses to these very socio-politically engaged poems is the way in which they are viewed primarily as the opinions of the author, to be read literally, in many respects discounting (or denying) the layered complexities of the issues with which they are concerned – nuances of meaning a deeper analysis may reveal.

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<sup>85</sup> A video of the event is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s07xFdD-ivQ>.

Within a day of Moffet’s opinion piece appearing on LitNet, Van Niekerk penned a response in the comments section of the article (Van Niekerk in Moffet, 2018). Therein, she reiterates her respect for Mbembe, Lalu, and Judith Butler. Van Niekerk further explains that the reference to them was inspired by the (abovementioned) event during the Fees Must Fall protests where a panel discussion between these three eminent figures was cut short due to a protest by students. In what can be considered an unusual move, the poet then proceeds to contextualise the events that inspired her poem, indicating that Moffet must have misread the poem to have interpreted it as she had. Van Niekerk writes:

Maybe the syntax in the poem is not clear at this point. The poem suggests that the subtle, complex and penetrating thought of the intellectuals mentioned [...] might one day suffer the same fate as the subtle, complex and penetrating work of many Western authors and composers who are likely to be cut/have already been cut from curricula in the course of the decolonisation of the curriculum. At the protest at UWC referred to in the links above the complaint of the students apparently was that the speakers on the panel were “elitist”.<sup>86</sup>

— Van Niekerk (in Moffet, 2018)

Van Niekerk expresses her disapproval not just of the cost of higher education in South Africa, but also the commodification of education. At the same time, she then speaks out directly against “the labelling, the name calling and the violence and destruction that characterised the protests,” stating that she “also find[s] deplorable the polarisation and suspicion in academic circles that in some cases ensued.” I do not want to dwell on further details of her argument here, but what is clear is that she is aware that she is now interpreting the poem for the reader, as she ends the piece with “This is the point of the poem. Time will tell.”

If we consider a postcolonial poem to be, as Bird (2018:133) describes it, “a palimpsest, shaped by the simultaneous accumulation of regional, colonial and world histories,” would these two

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<sup>86</sup> The poet’s guess, that the origin of the misunderstanding perhaps resides in the different interpretations of the syntax, is revealing. The cadence of both of the poems that feature in my discussion is such that one could see why they might be more suited to a performative mode of delivery, rather than the way they have been read in the contexts discussed here. This consideration can also be taken into account when speculating about the reasons for Van Niekerk’s original English poetry not receiving the type of attention her novels have. In other words, in addition to the problematic reading approaches surrounding the two poems discussed here, it is the very practices of text selection by critics and scholars – that is, *written over spoken* word – that might drive literal interpretations. Interpretations might have been very different had the poems been heard at so-called poetry slams, rather than read as printed texts.

poems by Van Niekerk not be considered such, both in content and in the responses that they elicited (and continue to elicit)? After all, they draw on not only the concerns of South Africa's long colonial history, but also on the lingering oppression and failures this history has wrought on the country: an overlap of the political (failures of government and governance, the democratic and constitutional rights of citizens), the socio-economic (access to education, the inequalities on the basis of race and gender) and the cultural (language). This, then, places a particular onus on readers, critics and scholars to read these poems within the context of the postcolonial nation, and not to separate the poems from the politics. The postcolonial poem is, to quote Bird, "a formal manifestation of the historical forces and effects of colonialism, decolonization and globalization [sic]" and "in its themes, language and form [...] thus provides insight into the changes occurring in the wider social, economic and political sphere" (2018:134). Van Niekerk's poetry in English evidently offers fertile soil for further study and interrogation, despite the failure of readings to date that have neglected to interpret these poems as multi-faceted texts that deserve engagement beyond literal and superficial levels of meaning.

### 3.7. Van Niekerk beyond English literary studies

A handful of studies have appeared that either focus on or make significant references to Van Niekerk's novels, but which cannot be placed within the sections set out above. This is because these studies fall outside the general areas encompassed by literary studies. The first is a Masters thesis in fine arts by Paul Adolphsen (2015). His study investigates "the interconnections between theory and practice by presenting both the adaptation itself and a prolonged engagement with theories of adaptation and dramaturgy," which is followed by his own reflections on adapting *Agaat* into a drama (the text of which appears at the end of his thesis) (2015:vi). Adolphsen concludes with the two-fold goal of adaptation for the stage: Firstly, one should "interpret the source material with a sense of responsibility and exploration," and secondly, one should "craft a work that stands alone and expresses the adapter's subjective interpretations through the strengths of their chosen mode of engagement" (2015:128).

An additional text that stands adjacent to Van Niekerk's literary oeuvre is director Michael Raeburn's film adaptation of *Triomf* (2008). As noted in an earlier footnote, my study will not engage with the film adaptation of Van Niekerk's novel, since it stands, as a film, adjacent to

but outside the literary work it has been adapted from. To limit the scope of my study, my delineation of Van Niekerk's oeuvre is limited to literary works, while the surrounding epitexts will not include a consideration of texts that are express adaptations of Van Niekerk's work into another medium. While South African filmic texts can be considered as part of a polysystem that will undoubtedly show connections with the literary polysystem, paying attention to such an overlap falls outside of the ambit of this study. Some research has been conducted on the film, most notably that of Nel (2013) (discussed above) and a Masters study by Adean van Dyk (2016). Van Dyk is concerned with aspects of the adaptation of the literary text to the medium of film, and he ultimately finds that the film can be considered a new narrative that operates independently of the novel (2016:ii).

Two articles have appeared that offer legal readings of *Agaat*. Melodie Slabbert views *Agaat* (in Afrikaans) as an important post-apartheid, postcolonial text, because it “provides a powerful understanding of the legal and socio-political landscape of the last fifty years in South Africa” (2006:237). The novel is read as a literary text that contains themes of a legal nature – i.e. “law as literature” (ibid.; original emphasis) – as it “depict[s] on a metaphorical level man's struggle with the concept of justice.” The researcher concludes that the novel “is far more capable of questioning its own pretensions than is [sic] the legal discourse (by virtue of the latter's insistence on its own indisputable authority)” (Slabbert, 2009:250). In a reading that is echoed by Van Vuuren (2010a), Stobie (2009), and Rossman and Stobie (2012), Slabbert finds themes of reconciliation in the novel: “[The novel] insists that the reader tries to understand the injustice and pain suffered on both sides; that it be acknowledged, felt and shared,” turning the reader into a sort of judge who needs to “make [their] own pronouncement on the justifiability of the protagonists' justifications.” Johan van der Walt takes a similar approach in his 2009 article, but he does so through a Marxist lens. Like Slabbert and Van der Walt, Becky L. Jacobs uses a Van Niekerk text – in this case *Triomf* (English translation) – as departure point for a discussion of South Africa's dispensation under its current Constitution, and particularly how current injustices relating to landownership contrast with those committed during apartheid (Jacobs, 2006).

Broadening both the philosophical ideas of Martin Heidegger and the interpretative possibilities of *Triomf* (English translation), Catherine Botha (2011) reads Heidegger's *Der Ister* lectures (1942) alongside some elements in Van Niekerk's novel. In an attempt to better understand the theme of homecoming, Botha argues that her reading can “supplement” existing

textual analyses of the novel “in a meaningful way” (2011:20). She concludes that “despite the Benades not succeeding in finding a true home in their homelessness, Van Niekerk’s use of language in the novel indicates that such a homecoming can indeed be possible” (2011:34).

While these studies fall outside the field of literary studies and so are of little relevance for my project, they are interesting insofar as they show how far Van Niekerk’s work has managed to reach beyond those fields within which it would usually be studied. This does speak to the significant stature of Van Niekerk as South African author.

### 3.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to provide a detailed overview and discussion of Marlene van Niekerk’s work within the English literary system, in South Africa, primarily, but also beyond into Anglo-American and world literature in English. The discussion has mainly focused on how Van Niekerk’s work has been received and situated within literary critical and scholarly spheres, and so I provide a considerable summary of existing criticism and research in English on her work. Preceding this, however, is a discussion of, firstly, the translation of her work into English by Leon de Kock and Michiel Heyns, and secondly, how the positioning of her translations within the English literary system can be read within the larger South African literary system, a broader system of Anglo-American literature, and also the more visible system of world literature.

The influence of Van Niekerk’s translators in both the situating and reception of her work is considerable. This is an obvious statement on the level of the technical translation; it is after all the translator’s choices that shape so much of the text as it takes form in English. One can also see the influence from the publishers: In the case of *Triomf*, there was a requirement for a so-called international version of the translation, while the UK publisher required *Agaat*’s title to be changed to *The Way of the Women*. Moreover, and almost far more importantly, for my project, at least, the influence of the translators extends beyond the level of the text towards how it becomes imbricated in a greater whole of literary systems. The views and efforts of the translators both influence and overlap with how their translations of Van Niekerk’s texts (and by extension, Van Niekerk as South African author) are received and approached within the English literary system in South Africa – and abroad. One sees in their own discussions of their

translations and in their expressed views on the broader notion of South African literature – the latter in the case of De Kock especially – an acknowledgement of the difficulties of finding a balance between domesticating and foreignising the texts in their respective translations. In different fashions, Van Niekerk’s translators have attempted to keep in her translated works a sense of the origins of the texts, embedded as they are in the literary-historical and socio-cultural traditions of Afrikaans literature, and by extension, South African literature.

In the section of my discussion following the consideration of the role of translators in influencing how Van Niekerk’s work is engaged with in the English literary system, I refer to Even-Zohar’s idea of interference, or the ways in which one literary system “may become a source of direct or indirect loans” for another (Even-Zohar, 1990c:54). Within this frame, Even-Zohar sketches the borrowing that can happen between literary systems due to some being independent (established) and others dependent (non-established). Importantly, Even-Zohar refers to literary systems that are guided along the lines of the historical development of European states (German and Austrian literature, Dutch and Flemish literature, etc.) and the states that came into existence as a result of the colonial campaigns of many of these European states (British and North American literature). I referred to Even-Zohar’s idea of interference as part of my discussion about the relationship of the South African English literary system to the larger Anglo-American literary system, which J.M. Coetzee, for one, during the 1980s still held as an independent system that the former system was part of – and dependent on (1981:16).

In my consideration of the research on Van Niekerk’s work that has been conducted to date, it can tentatively be argued that what seems to be at work here is a kind of refinement or evolution of Even-Zohar’s process of interference. In other words, rather than the dependent relationship between literary systems being guided by (either or both) geographic proximity or a primarily shared language, we are seeing a similar system that in some ways reflects less so the geopolitical realities and cultural histories that still hearken back to the idea of nation states that are closely bound to a particular language, and more the postcolonial realities and cultural histories that have been entangled and continue to be entangled within a more complex, multilingual, modern nascent state. The vast array of sources discussed in the rest of the chapter can collectively be read as a response to Coetzee: South African English literature undeniably does exist on its own terms, and scholarship on Van Niekerk has contributed to it in various ways, not least along the often overlapping key thematic nodes that I identify as an interest in nationalism, history, allegory; the *plaasroman*; race, gender, and sexuality; corporeality/the

body; animals; nature; the relationship between writing, music and visual art; and urbanity and space. Before rushing to conclusions, however, of what this means for the Afrikaans and English literary systems, but also for the larger South African literary system and our conceptions of world literature, the Afrikaans literary system and its role in the multifaceted entanglements must also be considered in similar depth.

This chapter offers an extensive perspective on Van Niekerk as an author in English. In their various discussions of the translations of her texts, both De Kock and Heyns have made clear that they consider her work to be significant – on the South African stage, but also in the arena of world literature. Heyns mentions *Agaat*'s “worldwide appeal” (Heyns in De Kock, 2009b:138), while De Kock views *Triomf* as a “[book] that [speaks] to the world, speaking across cultures” (De Kock in Osborne, 2016). While one could be fooled by the lack of proper discussion (or even mention) of Van Niekerk's work in literary histories such as Michael Chapman's *Southern African Literatures* (1996 and 2003) and Christopher Heywood's *A History of South African Literature* (2004), the sentiments of De Kock and Heyns are borne out in instances such as the awarding of *The Sunday Times* Literary Award – a considerable achievement for a translated work – to the translation of *Agaat*, as well as in the critical and scholarly reception of Van Niekerk's texts. Her work has been compared in various ways directly to, most notably, the work of J.M. Coetzee (Wheelwright, 1999 and Buikema, 2009), and at times, her novels have been recognised as more successful within a particular literary frame, that being, the tragic-comic work (Nixon, 2004), or even set apart from Coetzee's work because of its style (Hill, 2007) and its rootedness in Afrikaans. In some cases cited, Van Niekerk's work has not been directly compared to that of Coetzee, but has nonetheless frequently featured in studies or discussions that include works by both these authors (Woodward, 2001; Fuhler, 2006; Jacobs, 2012; and Medalie, 2012). My overview of existing research in English on Van Niekerk's work shows that she is furthermore often placed in the same ambit as other canonically important South African authors such as Alan Paton (De Kock in Osborne, 2016), Athol Fugard (Molefe, 1999), Zakes Mda (Samin, 2005 and Fuhler, 2006), and Antjie Krog (West, 2009a; Hunter, 2009 and Hunter, 2012). Elements influencing Van Niekerk's work has resulted in identified overlaps with the work of authors further afield, such as Derek Walcott, Gabriel García Márquez and Toni Morrison (Gaylard, 2008) as well as Kate Clanchy and Jamaica Kincaid (DeCaires Narain, 2013).

It is in this specific focus of the reception of Van Niekerk's work that we can see the clearest reflection of her standing as an author in English. Due greatly to the English translations of *Triomf* and *Agaat* and the broadened reception of her work that these texts have allowed, Van Niekerk is considered to be one of South Africa's foremost novelists.<sup>87</sup> Within the South African English literary system, her name has become one of prominence. As seen in both the popular and scholarly reception of her work, however, this prominence extends beyond the mentioned system, into, firstly, the Anglo-American literary system, and secondly, the system of world literature in English. These three systems are not clearly distinct, but rather overlap and entangle in dynamic ways. The argument can therefore be made that through Van Niekerk's entry into the South African English literary system via translation, the visibility, influence and reach of the Afrikaans literary system has naturally been extended.

In this chapter, I have explored only the one side of the entanglement between two literary systems in South Africa, although I have been able to make some gestures to what might follow in my analysis of Van Niekerk's work in the Afrikaans literary system. It has become clearer that, indeed, South African English literature depends to an extent on translations of authors such as Van Niekerk to grow its corpus. Relatedly, the corpuses of Anglo-American literature and world literature in English is similarly dependent on translation to increase its size. In the case of Van Niekerk's work – and, one could argue, other works of Afrikaans literature translated into English – the diversity of these corpuses has increased. However, the problematic resultant characteristics that flow forward from this through the growing global dominance of English remain ever-present. Thus it can be concluded that although the availability of an author's work in English translation catapults them into the global arena, this drive towards so-called global accessibility can become shorthand for a kind of ignorance that the speaker/reader of the "global" lingua franca, like English, is allowed. Translation thereby becomes an act of erasure – to the detriment of the minor language and its culture. The next two chapters will offer further clarity on this and other points, including some deductions on how the rise of an author in the various interrelated English systems reciprocally reflects back on and influences the minor language system of Afrikaans.

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<sup>87</sup> This does of course not exclude the translation of her work into other languages besides English – especially Dutch.

## Chapter 4: Van Niekerk in Afrikaans

### 4. Introduction

As an Afrikaans author, Marlene van Niekerk enjoys considerable respect. Her Afrikaans oeuvre spans a period of over forty years, and includes poetry, both shorter and longer prose, as well as drama. In this chapter, I look at Van Niekerk's oeuvre in Afrikaans, and I focus particularly on how her work has been received and discussed within the realm of Afrikaans literary studies and the broader sphere of Afrikaans literary reception. As is the case with my discussion of Van Niekerk in the English literary system in the previous chapter, I shall here seek to distinguish the different approaches to Van Niekerk's various works within the Afrikaans literary system, in order to see how she functions as an author writing in Afrikaans.

#### 4.1. Van Niekerk as an Afrikaans author

The majority of Marlene van Niekerk's autonomous<sup>88</sup> creative works have appeared in Afrikaans before appearing in English (if they have indeed yet appeared in English). This is the case for *Sprokkelster* (1977), *Groenstaar* (1983), *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* (1992), *Triomf* (1994), *Agaat* (2004), *Memorandum* (2006), *Die sneeuslaper* (2009), *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.* (2010), *Kaar* (2013), *Gesant van die mispels* (2017) and *In die stille agterkamer* (2017). Though many of her works have now been translated into a number of other languages, Van Niekerk still sees herself as primarily an Afrikaans author, and, at a point in the past, even viewed her work as unlikely to be of interest to anyone outside of the realm of Afrikaans literature. In an interview in 1999, for example, she remarks in relation to the translation of *Triomf* that it is a novel that has as its subject the historical experiences of the Afrikaner, something that is of close interest to the Afrikaner, and as such, she expresses her uncertainty about how much the events featured in the novel will therefore interest English speakers (Van Niekerk in Nieuwoudt, 1999:6). One can expect such a tentative statement from an author whose work was, at that time, for the first time being translated from

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<sup>88</sup> By this I mean every individual work that was published as a single physical unit, and not as part of an anthology or collection.

a minor language into a major language like English. And as I showed in the preceding chapter, it is now clear that *Triomf* did indeed interest an English-reading public, both locally and abroad.

Years later, and likely based on the success of *Triomf* and *Agaat* in both Afrikaans and English, the author appears to have refined her position on translation and what it might mean for a readership other than that of the language the text originally appeared in. In an interview with Murray La Vita, Van Niekerk responds to a question regarding whether she would like a piece of land (that is, a farm) of her own, and she uses the question as a point of departure to elaborate on her now changed view of the role of translation in relation to her position as an Afrikaans author:

Naturally one has such a little dream in the back of your head, but it remains a dream. Home, tree, pet. Then rather a sailboat and a flat in Kalk Bay – and of course the chance to write full time. In Afrikaans, because after having given up halfway through trying to write a book in English, I know that language is seated far more *in* one than you can imagine.<sup>89</sup>

— Van Niekerk (in La Vita, 2007, quoted in Terblanche, 2015; original emphasis)

This comment chimes with what Van Niekerk later says in three other interviews. To Stephanie Nieuwoudt, Van Niekerk admits in 2012 that she will never be able to write in another language than Afrikaans (Van Niekerk in Nieuwoudt, 2012:10), while to Willie Burger she similarly admits that there is only one language in which she can write – that is, Afrikaans (Van Niekerk in Burger, 2004b:16). In a 2015 interview with Rosie Goldsmith, she provides more detail in this regard, noting that she can only write “in Afrikaans because it’s the only language that I feel I have enough of a command of in order to mess in it. When I write English, I can’t mess in it, because I’m not so comfortable in it” (Van Niekerk in Goldsmith, 2015). The author acknowledges that translation is exciting, represents the most intense form of commentary, allows a text to develop its associative reach (Van Niekerk in La Vita, 2007) and can help her as an author reach a broader audience (Van Niekerk in Goldsmith, 2015). At the same time,

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<sup>89</sup> Orig.: “Natuurlik het ’n mens so ’n droompie in jou kop, maar dit is maar ’n droompie. Huisje, boompje, beestje. Dan eerder ’n seilbootjie en ’n woonstel in Kalkbaai – en natuurlik die kans om voltyds te skryf. In Afrikaans, want nadat ek ’n boek wat ek in Engels probeer skryf het, halfpad laat vaar het, weet ek taal sit veel meer in jou as wat jy jou kan verbeel.”

she clearly feels herself to be an Afrikaans author who has been fortunate enough to have her work translated and thereby have that (Afrikaans) work shared with a broader (non-Afrikaans) audience.<sup>90</sup> The author's own view on her position within the South African literary system is therefore distinct. She views herself as an Afrikaans author whose work also has something to say when it is translated, which might be both similar and different from the original text. In the end, though, she remains, at least insofar as she situates *herself*, principally an Afrikaans author. And it is this dynamic positioning that I explore in this chapter.

The following section mirrors the section in Chapter 3 that discusses the critical reception and scholarship on Van Niekerk's work in English. I show in the previous chapter that Van Niekerk's entry into the (major) English literary system (both the South African, but also the larger Anglo-American) and the arena of world literature (in English) comes by way of the translation of some of her work into English. Her position in the Afrikaans literary system is different, however. The Afrikaans literary system serves as the proverbial first port of call for her work. In this chapter, I want to tease out how the popular reception of and scholarly engagement with Van Niekerk's work operates: firstly, in the (minor) Afrikaans literary system; secondly, how this system seems to position her work within the larger South African literary system; and lastly, the level of reciprocity shown by agents in the minor system in their engagement with English scholarship on the author. I seek to identify the latter to some extent here in order to begin to draw a clearer comparison, in the following chapter, of Van Niekerk's position in the Afrikaans and English literary systems to ultimately gauge the nature of the entanglements in question.

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<sup>90</sup> The author mimics her one translator, Michiel Heyns (2009), when she states in the same interview with *La Vita* that in translation one loses something, but one also gains a lot (“[m]ens verloor iets, maar jy wen ook baie”) (Van Niekerk in *La Vita*, 2007). Similarly, in an interview with poet Danie Marais, and in her acceptance speech for the Helgaard Steyn-prys, Van Niekerk shows that even in using Afrikaans in her writing, she seeks to “foreignize” the language:

If, however, you try to write in such a way that every single word and sentence is made strange, chosen and designed within the plan of the book, even on the level of sounds and images, while you simultaneously try to preserve its clarity on the surface, then you are perverse (Van Niekerk in Marais, 2007:4). (“As jy egter so probeer skryf dat elke enkele word en sin doelbewus vreemd gemaak, gekies en ontwerp is binne die plan van die boek, tot op die vlak van klanke en beelde, terwyl jy terselfdertyd die hele ding glashelder probeer hou op die oppervlak, dan is jy pervers.”)

That is the wonder of one's mother tongue – it has the capacity to be made strange (Van Niekerk, quoted in Liebenberg, 2008:9). (“Dis die wonder van 'n mens se moedertaal – dit het die kapasiteit om vreemd gemaak te kan word.”)

The structure of this chapter is ordered slightly differently to its counterpart on Van Niekerk as an author in English. In the discussion of Van Niekerk as an author in English, I focused firstly on her prose, its translation into English, and its respective popular and scholarly reception. This was followed by a discussion of the popular and scholarly reception of her drama. Thereafter I considered the position of Van Niekerk's poetry in the South African English literary system (or, indeed, I addressed the neglected state of criticism surrounding her as a poet writing in English). In a final section before my concluding remarks, I looked at the reception of her work beyond the field of literary studies. In my focus on Van Niekerk as an Afrikaans author, I shall discuss, firstly, important markers of literary canonisation that have centred her within the Afrikaans literary system. Subsequent to this, I approach Van Niekerk's Afrikaans works and their reception. As Van Niekerk debuted as a poet in the Afrikaans literary system, I begin with a discussion of her poetry, separated into overviews of its respective popular and scholarly reception – though still paying attention to the links between these. The treatment of the popular reception is ordered chronologically according to the publication of texts, while the scholarly reception is approached through a set of research themes guided by the saliency of certain tropes in research. The succeeding discussion of Van Niekerk's Afrikaans prose takes on a similar arrangement. As with Chapter 3, I consider Van Niekerk as playwright and her work read beyond (Afrikaans) literary studies, just before my concluding remarks.

#### **4.2. Canonisation and Van Niekerk within the Afrikaans literary system**

The broader discussion of Van Niekerk's work offered in this chapter touches throughout on a variety of elements that have contributed in different ways to her position within the Afrikaans literary canon. However, it is important to pay separate, focused attention to a few texts wherein Van Niekerk as an author features and which can be viewed as playing an important role in canon formation. Some of these texts demonstrate a stronger focus on Van Niekerk's literary works themselves. This study is not concerned with the content of Van Niekerk's creative output per se, but rather with the literary systems within which it operates and how surrounding texts in these systems (particularly of a scholarly nature) function in relation to Van Niekerk's work and exercise a notable influence on the position of her work in this system. Here, I will pay attention to how Van Niekerk is framed in and by the Afrikaans literary history of J.C.

Kannemeyer, the literary history *Perspektief en profiel*, the ATKV|LitNet-skrywersalbum, and several notable poetry anthologies.

#### 4.2.1. Kannemeyer's *Die Afrikaanse literatuur, 1652-2004* (2005)

Literary historiographer J.C. Kannemeyer is renowned for his biographies of Afrikaans authors. During his lifetime, he authored several posthumous biographical texts on Afrikaans writers and poets, including D.J. Opperman, Jan Rabie, and Peter Blum, while he also wrote an official biography<sup>91</sup> of J.M. Coetzee.<sup>92</sup> In addition, Kannemeyer is also famous for his histories of Afrikaans literature. The last version of his history to be published before his death in 2011 was the 2005 edition, titled simply *Die Afrikaanse literatuur, 1652-2004*. Kannemeyer's literary history offers a sweeping tour through Afrikaans literature, much of it presented as the literary historiographer's views, interpretations and judgements of an extraordinarily vast number of texts. His literary history enjoys a prominent position within the Afrikaans literary system and often speaks to whether an author can be considered as having been inducted into the literary canon.<sup>93</sup>

*Die Afrikaanse literatuur, 1652-2004* represents a focused version of Kannemeyer's earlier, more expansive dual volume *Geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse literatuur* (1978 and 1983), duly updated to around 2005. In his discussion of Van Niekerk's literary output in the 2005 edition, which spans from the publication of *Sprokkelster* (1977) to the publication of *Agaat* (2004), Kannemeyer offers a discussion of the content, techniques and themes of Van Niekerk's Afrikaans works (2005:630-636) – holding true to the historiographer's statement in his introduction to the book that he focuses mainly on “bellettrie” (belle-lettres) while literary

<sup>91</sup> This was written with Coetzee's consent and blessing, providing the biographer with unprecedented access to the author's documents (much of it hitherto unavailable to any other researchers).

<sup>92</sup> These texts are *D.J. Opperman: 'n Biografie* (1986), *Jan Rabie: Prosapionier en politieke padwyser* (2004), *Wat het geword van Peter Blum? Die soeke na die steppewolf* (1992), and *J.M. Coetzee: 'n Geskryfde lewe* (2012). The latter was also translated into English by Michiel Heyns and published as *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* (2012).

<sup>93</sup> Ampie Coetzee sets out the effects that a literary history has as follows: “A literary history is a summary, analysis, interpretation and evaluation – based on the consensus of literary scholars – that will canonise an author's work” (“'n Literatuurgeskiedenis is 'n samevatting, ontleding, interpretasie en evaluasie – gegrond op konsensus van letterkundiges – wat 'n skrywer se werk gaan kanoniseer” (2006:4)). For an enlightening discussion on the different approaches to and merits of literary histories, see Kleyn (2013:160-174). Kleyn focuses on the various editions of Kannemeyer's histories as well as *Perspektief en profiel*. She offers a very detailed summary of the different points of criticism from a number of perspectives on both Kannemeyer and *Perspektief en profiel*. See in addition Van Coller (2016:xii), who offers a strong criticism of single-authored histories such as those by Kannemeyer and Christopher Heywood (2004).

criticism (by other critics and scholars) is mentioned only peripherally (2005:17). The historiographer records a number of the techniques Van Niekerk employs in her work, in addition to some of the features that have become characteristic of her work (its lyricism, satirical incisiveness, etc.) and situates Van Niekerk's work in relation to other authors and their works in the Afrikaans canon, ranging from Elisabeth Eybers, G.A. Watermeyer, Lina Spies, to Etienne Leroux, Jochem van Bruggen, P.G. du Plessis, Jean Goossen and Karel Schoeman (2005:630-636). Van Niekerk is described by Kannemeyer as an author who deals calculatedly with literary traditions, with the urban novel ("stadsroman") in *Triomf* and with the *plaasroman* in *Agaat* (2005:635). Kannemeyer's inclusion of Van Niekerk in his book and the detail of his considerable discussion of each of her texts signify the importance with which her work was being regarded by many an Afrikaans literary scholar by the early 2000s.

#### **4.2.2. *Perspektief en profiel* (1999 and 2016)**

Another important history of Afrikaans literature is *Perspektief en profiel*. This text, in its two most recent multi-volume editions under the editorship of H.P. van Coller, represents a broad series of perspectives on both Afrikaans literature and a varied group of Afrikaans authors. As is the case with being included in Kannemeyer, the inclusion of a profile of an author in a literary history of such prestige as *Perspektief en profiel* is considered illustrative of the author's canonised position within Afrikaans literature (Van Coller, 2016a:xii).

A profile of Marlene van Niekerk by Helize van Vuuren has been included in *Perspektief en profiel* since the second volume of the previous edition (1999). The latest, updated version of this profile appears in the third volume of the most recent edition (Van Vuuren, 2016:919-953). It is considerably longer than the one published in 1999, which is understandable, considering the number of publications by the author in the years between the two editions of *Perspektief en profiel*. Unlike the overview of Van Niekerk's work offered by Kannemeyer (2005), Van Vuuren does not simply present a discussion of the content, literary techniques and themes utilised in the author's work – though these are discussed in considerable depth as well – she also integrates into her discussion the research of other scholars to supplement her own overview and reading of Van Niekerk's oeuvre. Overall, Van Vuuren's piece is her specific understanding of Van Niekerk's oeuvre. In the case of each of the author's texts, she (Van Vuuren) considers certain thematic focuses of the text and some of its reception by literary

critics (in the cases of *Triomf* and works thereafter, references are also made to the international reception), while simultaneously referring selectively to scholarly attention paid to the literary works in order to further her own reading of Van Niekerk. Ultimately, Van Vuuren views the author's oeuvre as formidable and intimately woven ("formidabele en intiem-verweefde oeuvre"), claiming that Van Niekerk takes up a central position in both Afrikaans literature and South African literature, in addition to her place in the international arena (2016:950). What Van Vuuren's profile on Van Niekerk offers, therefore, is a far more comprehensive consideration of the author's work. Though therefore illustrative of Van Vuuren's perspective, it presents a useful overview for both students and scholars who want to become acquainted with some of the major aspects of Van Niekerk's work without having to read multiple different sources – as is the aim of profiles in *Perspektief en profiel*, according to its editor (Van Coller, 2016a:viii).

The profile is of course not above criticism. One could level at it the accusation that it sets itself apart from an overview such as that of Kannemeyer's in that it not only includes but also recognises a series of perspectives on Van Niekerk's work, yet within those terms, it still offers only a very selective recognition. To be fair, the profiles in *Perspektief en profiel* are not intended to offer utterly comprehensive or encyclopaedic citations of existing research on an author's work. In that sense, then, it is also not expected to have any supposed encyclopaedic objectivity as a record that offers no subjective selection and line of argument or inquiry. As the editor states in his foreword, the perspectives offered in *Perspektief en profiel* are but those of a single literary history and every reader is free to seek out other sources (Van Coller, 2016a:xii).

To some extent, I do agree with Van Coller's emphasis on the open nature of scholarship in literary histories being seen as both comprehensive, but still subjective and limited – and always open to disagreement and reconsideration. However, in a considerably minor literary system such as that of Afrikaans, the role of literary histories in the canonisation of authors can go well beyond simply that. In fact, considering the prestige and authority attached to a publication such as *Perspektief en profiel*, contributions to this publication also affect the field of literary studies in the way in which it selects and/or favours certain scholarly works over others. This point is clearly not limited to literary histories. Any scholarly work will require a subjective selection of scholarship with which it chooses to engage, and as such, certain trends and focuses will enjoy attention, while others will not be included in the discussion. While this

is the case with the profiles in *Perspektief en profiel*, it remains notable that Van Niekerk appears prominently therein.

#### 4.2.3. Notable poetry anthologies

Soon after the appearance of her first volumes of poetry, some of Van Niekerk's poems were included in what was then and is still now considered a very important poetry anthology in Afrikaans: *Groot verseboek*. With its early editions under editorship of D.J. Opperman and its most recent two under André P. Brink, it has been for many decades both a tool and measure of canonisation (Van Coller, 2009:246). The ninth edition of *Groot verseboek* (1983) features seven poems from *Sprokkelster*.<sup>94</sup> In the next edition, published in 2000 and entirely re-anthologised by Brink, ten poems from both *Sprokkelster* and *Groenstaar* are included. What is interesting is that the 2000 edition of the anthology appears almost two decades after (at that point) the publication of Van Niekerk's last volume of poetry.

While the passing of time might often lead to authors being dropped from updated anthologies, as their work is reconsidered, the number of Van Niekerk's poems included in Brink's *Groot verseboek* increased from the previous edition, despite her long poetic silence. This number would yet again increase in the next, more expansive three-part edition of *Groot verseboek* (2008), with twelve poems by Van Niekerk now included (taken from both of her early volumes of poetry and the small anthology *Versindaba 2005*, edited by Louis Esterhuizen).

I am aware of the problematic nature of placing a poetry anthology and its contents on a figurative pedestal – even in the case of one as voluminous and inclusive as the latest iteration of *Groot verseboek* (2008). Indeed, in his introduction to the text, Brink ominously states that the danger of subjectivity (here in terms of one's selection of poems) can never be underestimated (2008:vi).

As Van Coller (2009:46) shows, though, a literary-historical anthology such as *Groot verseboek* has a markedly larger impact on canonisation in Afrikaans literature simply because of the relatively small size of the literary system in question, on the one hand, and the

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<sup>94</sup> In a foreword to this edition of *Groot verseboek*, André P. Brink notes that most of the selections for the anthology had been completed by D.J. Opperman from poetry volumes that appeared up until 1980. Hereafter, Brink made a few minor inclusions, but only of work published after 1980.

considerable rarity of such publications on the other. He summarises this well when he writes that

for many Afrikaans readers the *Groot verseboek* of D.J. Opperman actually *was* Afrikaans poetry [and so] it will also most likely be in the case of the current edition of André P. Brink, which will be for most people identical to *the* Afrikaans poetry canon.<sup>95</sup>

— Van Coller (2009:46; original emphasis)

Of course, a number of Van Niekerk’s poems have over the years appeared in other notable anthologies too, and my observations regarding *Groot verseboek* can be applied to these as well. They include: *Poskaarte: Beelde van die Afrikaanse poësie sedert 1960* (1997), compiled by Ronel Foster and Louise Viljoen, *Die mooiste Afrikaanse liefdesgedigte* (first published in 1986; updated editions published in 1992, 2001, 2006, 2010, 2016), compiled by Fanie Oliver, as well as *Die gewildste Afrikaanse gedigte* (2013), compiled by Leserskring.

#### 4.2.4. Entry in the ATKV|LitNet-skrywersalbum

In collaboration with the Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging (ATKV) and the Nasionale Afrikaanse Letterkundige Museum (NALN), the arts and culture website LitNet has since 2010 been creating and publishing a “skrywersalbum” (album of authors) (see LitNet, 2019). The articles that form part of the album, compiled by Erika Terblanche, former librarian of NALN, offer readers a kind of biographical and literary overview of its subject, generally presenting a section on biographical details, followed by an overview of the author’s studies and career, and ending with a list of publications by the author, which features bibliographical details and a list of some reviews, interviews and other related miscellanea, mostly available online.

The entry on Van Niekerk that features in the album is updated up until the publication of *Kaar* (Terblanche, 2015). Terblanche focuses on biographical details of Van Niekerk’s early life, while she discusses Van Niekerk’s life after studying (both in South Africa and abroad) against the backdrop of the development of the author’s writing career. The discussion of her publications includes an overview of some reviews of her work, as well as relevant snippets

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<sup>95</sup> Orig.: “vir baie Afrikaanse lesers was *Groot verseboek* van D.J. Opperman eintlik dié Afrikaanse poësie [en so] sal dit ook na alle waarskynlikheid die geval wees met die huidige uitgawe van André P. Brink wat vir die meeste mense identies gaan wees aan dié Afrikaanse poësiekanon.”

from other articles and interviews with the author that have been published over the years, predominantly in the Afrikaans press media. Overall, Terblanche does not engage in her own analysis of Van Niekerk's work. The entry seems to rather offer the non-specialist reader an overview of the life of the author in tandem with an overview of her literary output.

Though the quality of the articles in the ATKV|LitNet-skrywersalbum is often erratic, as is the case with its article on Van Niekerk, the prominence of LitNet and its content in the Afrikaans literary system means that Terblanche's profile on Van Niekerk holds a certain power insofar as it circulates a particular status for the author amongst a broader network of Afrikaans readers outside of the academe. While the profile is in no way attempting to rival the one that appears in *Perspektief en profiel*, its level of autobiographical detail against the backdrop of the author's writing career does give it an informative character that distinguishes it from the pieces by Kannemeyer and Van Vuuren. In addition, the articles in the ATKV|LitNet-skrywersalbum can be updated with a level of ease and speed not possible for more traditional resources such as books, and so it maintains a currency and relevance that has a significant impact on practices of canon formation.

### **4.3. Van Niekerk's poetry in Afrikaans**

#### **4.3.1. The popular reception of Van Niekerk's poetry in Afrikaans**

This first section deals with the popular reception of Van Niekerk's Afrikaans poetry. I focus particularly on the critical reception of her texts as evident from reviews that appeared both in print and online, while I also make references to a number of important interviews with the author.

##### **4.3.1.1. *Sprokkelster***

Van Niekerk's debut volume of poetry, *Sprokkelster*, appeared in 1977 and was generally well-received by Afrikaans critics. André P. Brink (1977:7), at the time a prolific book reviewer for the Sunday newspaper *Rapport*, praises the collection as a multivocal and perpetually alternating hymn. Hilda Grobler (1977:13) places *Sprokkelster* above many other

contemporary debut volumes of poetry and ranks Van Niekerk above what she refers to as quasi-poets, remarking sardonically that there were at that time more poets making their debut than there were actual poets. Beyond her ability to write *poetry* rather than just *rhymes*, Grobler claims, Van Niekerk offers a certain novelty and freshness of image, which suggests that the critic values the poet's ability to defamiliarise through her work. The finely-honed technique of the poet that is hinted at by Grobler when she contrasts those debuts that contain *poetry* with those that simply contain *rhymes* is also identified by Johann Johl (1977:16) in his review of *Sprokkelster*. He singles out the poet's sensitivity regarding word and sound and sees an accompanying structural skill that holds great promise (*ibid.*). The reviewers identify as a strong feature a certain lyricism in *Sprokkelster* that underscores its themes of the landscape, nature, satire (Grobler, 1977:16 and Johl:1977:16) and the political (Johl:1977:16).

For Brink, there is a certain kind of musicality (1977:7) to the volume, while Grobler observes very strong elements of atmospheric poetry that transform into nature songs (1977:13), and Johl quotes at length from a few poems to illustrate their sonorousness and rhythm (1977:16). On a negative note, Grobler points out a tendency of the poet to utilise clichéd phrases (177:13), which resonates with criticism by Brink (1977:7) that the poet at times composes, with awareness, pretty images. For Johl, the poems too often repeat certain strong words or phrases, robbing them of their impact as they are repeatedly used, while he also takes issue with a certain level of unnecessary hyperbole (1977:16).

What is already interesting in the reception of Van Niekerk's first volume are the details of both the praise and criticism. Thematically, the poet's work shows a keen concern with the land (nature and landscape), while the chosen approaches range from satirical to humorous to political, all tied together within a lyrical, and according to the critics, almost prolix, profusion. This positive reception is affirmed by *Sprokkelster* having been awarded both the Eugène Marais Prize and Ingrid Jonker Prize.

#### **4.3.1.2. *Groenstaar***

It is striking that in the abovementioned reviews by Grobler (1977) and Johl (1977) there is an expressed sense of Van Niekerk's work almost coming as a surprisingly competent publication when compared to the general quality of poetry debut collections appearing at the time. This

sentiment is also evident in the reviews of Van Niekerk's second volume of poetry, *Groenstaar* (1983), that are offered by T.T. Cloete (1983) and Sheila Cussons. In this volume, according to Cussons, the broad field of reference of the poet, as well as her immense imagination and control of figurative language, makes much of the other contemporaneous Afrikaans poetry volumes appear rather anaemic (1983:12). Cloete praises the volume, highlighting both its sensitivity to sound and musicality on the level of both content and form (1983:4). Cussons (1983:12), Brink (1983:12) and Jorda Louw (1984:7) also comment on how *Groenstaar* can be seen as not only building on Van Niekerk's debut in both theme and technique, but also as outdoing it. Some of the criticism of *Groenstaar* also mirrors that directed towards Van Niekerk's debut volume. For instance, Cussons expresses her displeasure with the long full sentences and remarks that the poet's free rein of a flutteringly rich imagination could have benefitted from more control (1983:12). However, the critic does seem to be willing to overlook this, as she notes that the poet's technical control and (poetic) craftsmanship is above criticism (ibid.).

Overall, *Groenstaar* is praised as setting new beacons for Afrikaans poetry (Brink, 1983:12), being full-blooded (Cussons, 1983:12) and a pleasure to read (Louw, 1984:7). In a discussion of both *Sprokkelster* and *Groenstaar* in *Zuid-Afrika*, Hans Ester describes Van Niekerk's first two volumes as extraordinarily gripping and beautiful (1984:12). *Groenstaar* was shortlisted for the then still young (and now extinct) Louis Luyt Literary Prize.

#### 4.3.1.3. *Kaar*

Van Niekerk's poetry volume *Kaar* (2013) was her first volume-length return to poetry since the publication of *Groenstaar* in 1983.<sup>96</sup> Marius Crous draws the reader's attention to this fact in his review, remarking that as with *Agaat* and the novel genre, *Kaar* will become, in his view, the poetry volume according to which all subsequent poetry will be measured (Crous, 2013b:8). Charl-Pierre Naudé (2013) likewise views it as the most impactful volume of poetry to appear in decades. Many of the reviews of the poetry collection highlight both the intellectual and lyrical characteristics of the volume, and, amongst other themes, point out that nature features

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<sup>96</sup> Two poems, titled "nagpsalm" and "vir waterplas en sterre," had been included in the anthology *My ousie is 'n blom* (2006) before being included in *Kaar*.

strongly in many of the poems (Crous, 2013b; Van Vuuren, 2013:11; Bezuidenhout, 2013; and Snyman, 2013).

In the satirical poems that are included in the volume, Crous sees a continuation of the stark criticism central to Van Niekerk's previous major work, *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.* (2013b:8). *Kaar*'s similarity to and difference from *Sprokkelster* and *Groenstaar* are also mentioned. While *Kaar* represents in both technique and theme a return to the sometimes pastoral lyricism of the former volumes, Crous remarks, it speaks also with an engagedness towards current day issues, like Van Niekerk's novels and play.<sup>97</sup> It is the combination of these things that makes the volume for Crous the poetic highlight of 2013 (2013b:8).

Van Vuuren (2013:11) views the volume's thematic concerns similarly, drawing from both Van Niekerk's earlier "infant's" phase (1977 to 1992), as well as her "adult" phase (1994 to 2004), to present a work set firmly in a "late" phase (2006 and beyond). Snyman (2013) echoes this reading when he points out that elements of Van Niekerk as narrator were present in her early poetry, while elements of her as a poet were present in her prose. In *Kaar*, he contends, there is again this interplay: the author of the novel is present in *Kaar*. While the collection harkens back to the satire of Van Niekerk's early work, Snyman in *Kaar* also sees humanity, compassion, and anger regarding injustice.

Bezuidenhout (2013) identifies many elements of the volume that mirror Van Niekerk's first two collections, particularly the sensitive way it plays with language. It is clear from her review, however, that she also appreciates the experimental way in which Van Niekerk further develops this technique in *Kaar*, thereby offering something new. The intellectual and philosophically oriented material of the text is described as balanced through the way in which it finds expression in daily experiences. This, the reviewer feels, results in flexible verses, which allows the philosophical poet to escape from falling into despondent and sombre reflections (ibid.). Reflecting the high praise of critics, *Kaar* received three major literary prizes: the Hertzog Prize for poetry (2014; the second time this prize was awarded to Van Niekerk), the Elisabeth Eybers Prize for Poetry (2014) and, for the third time in her career, the University of Johannesburg Prize (Afrikaans) (2014).

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<sup>97</sup> As is also mentioned in the review by Willie Burger (2014).

#### 4.3.1.4. *Gesant van die mispels and In die stille agterkamer*

In 2018, Van Niekerk simultaneously released two volumes of ekphrastic poetry,<sup>98</sup> the text of which acts as a type of bridge to the images (Bezuidenhout, 2018). The first of these is titled *Gesant van die mispels: Gedigte by skilderye van Adriaen Coorte ca. 1659-1707*, while the other is titled *In die stille agterkamer: Gedigte by skilderye van Jan Mankes 1889-1920*. As she had in her review of *Kaar*, Zandra Bezuidenhout (2018) draws the reader's attention to the philosophical approach evident in both these collections. The role of the artist (both referring to the painters whose work feature in the collections, but also, of course, to the poet) is identified as a central theme in these collections – particularly the way in which the artist disregards the expectations of society – i.e. that contemporary affairs and issues must be the subject of art (Bezuidenhout, 2018).

For Joan Hambidge (2018), this theme extends further, commenting on the artist who stands outside of the canon. For Bezuidenhout (2018), another theme that features prominently is the complex historical and cultural relationship between Afrikaans and Dutch, which is reflected through the choice of the painters whose work features in the collections, as well as the choice to offer both an Afrikaans and a Dutch version of every poem (the latter written by Van Niekerk with the assistance of Henda Strydom) (Hambidge, 2018).

The Dutch translations add further nuance to the meaning of the poems as relational to Coorte's and Mankes's paintings, according to Henning Pieterse (2018:195), and, in his view, the complexity of these translations, read against the Afrikaans versions, deserves dedicated study. Pieterse makes a number of mentions of lyrical aspects of both the paintings and poems, concluding that these two volumes confirm Van Niekerk's stature as subtle observer and brilliant interpreter of intimate images (2018:195).

Amanda Lourens (2018) finds the texts enriching and a pleasure to read, though she does indicate that, as has become a marker of the poet's work, Van Niekerk does at times reveal a tendency towards “n té veel” (a too much) that risks damaging what the reviewer calls a phenomenal oeuvre.

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<sup>98</sup> A poem that is a description of a visual work of art (painting, photo, etc.).

### 4.3.2. Major themes in the scholarly reception of Van Niekerk's poetic works

In this section, I provide an overview of the thematic focus areas that predominate Afrikaans research into Van Niekerk's poetry. I open my discussion by considering the few early research forays into her poetry, followed by a dissection of how Van Niekerk seems to be positioned as a poet in the Afrikaans literary system since her return to poetry in 2013, and how she contributes directly to this positioning. I thereafter pay attention to the salient trends in the research on her more recent poetry, namely *Kaar*, and *Gesant van die mispels* and *In die stille agterkamer*. The discussion is ordered according to a number of central themes in scholarship on Van Niekerk's poetry.

Marlene van Niekerk's early poetry received fairly little scholarly attention in the years immediately after its publication. The earliest articles with a scholarly approach to appear on Van Niekerk's initial poetry are two discussions in *Klasgids*, a scholarly resource for Afrikaans school teachers. The first is by Henning Pieterse (1984), in which he considers the artist as secondary creator based on an analysis of Van Niekerk's poem "by toccata en fuga in d mineur" (*Sprokkelster*, 1977:25).<sup>99</sup> In the second discussion, a number of poems are examined by Chrisna Beuke, who points out the musicality and ironic undertone of some of the poems in both *Sprokkelster* and *Groenstaar* (1988:30). She draws attention to certain descriptions in some poems that border on the absurd and present a contrast between the divine and the banal, contributing to the sharp satire evident in both poetry collections (1988:32-33). Just over a decade later, a more expansive study by Anna Maria Engelbrecht (1996) appeared, focusing on what the researcher argues is the oppositional relationship of "befriending and surprise" established by the poet between contrasting ideas in *Sprokkelster* and *Groenstaar* (1996:137). Engelbrecht identifies many of the elements and themes that also appear elsewhere in Van Niekerk's oeuvre, such as nature and notions surrounding art and artistry, as well as, interestingly, a certain engaged stance towards the political situation in South Africa around the time of the publication of the respective collections (Engelbrecht: 1996:38).

Since Engelbrecht's study in 1996, there followed no research engaging with Van Niekerk's poetry until after the publication of *Kaar* almost two decades later. At first glance, the reasons

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<sup>99</sup> This is not the same Henning (H.J.) Pieterse who is quoted elsewhere in this dissertation (2017, 2018), but another person with the same name who was at the time an Afrikaans teacher at the Hoërskool Overkruin in Pretoria.

for this might appear to be self evident: Van Niekerk's first two poetic works were fairly short and no publication is guaranteed to become the object of intense literary research, no matter how well it was received by critics in the popular press. What is more, Van Niekerk's foray into prose, which began with *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*, as well as the author's output and the reception of that output – specifically in the cases of *Triomf* and *Agaat* – would naturally refocus the gaze of critics and scholars on her far more popular (and obviously more recent) work.

In the preceding chapter, I referred in my discussion of Van Niekerk as a poet writing in English to some of her own comments relating to the case of the reception of her poetry. While I emphasised the limited attention that Van Niekerk has received for her English poetry, I also briefly referred to her own observations regarding the reception of *Kaar* in Afrikaans literary circles. I would like to momentarily return to this by quoting Van Niekerk at more length from her interview with Jan Steyn (2016). In the interview, Steyn pulses Van Niekerk on her thoughts on being shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2015:

[T]he committee and press particularly emphasised your two full-length novels: *Triomf* (1994) and *Agaat* (2004). But I couldn't help but feel at the time that it would be impossible for the judges to get an accurate sense of your value as a poet and a writer of shorter fiction, simply because they do not read (nor could they be expected to read) Afrikaans. [...] What did you make of the Man Booker International experience? Did it hold up a mirror to your work in any way?

— Steyn (2016)

Van Niekerk's response is informative in terms of what it reveals of her own views of the entanglements between the respective Afrikaans and English literary systems (the latter in the sense of the broader Anglo-American system), but also of her view of the Afrikaans literary system and how she features therein:

It is not for me to say whether my poetry and the short stories, if translated into English, would add to or detract from the appreciation of the novels. *Kaar* had a strange reception in South Africa: quite dazzling reviews initially and strong confirmation from the prize committees that awarded the collection three big poetry prizes, but subsequently the whole affair was met with a huge critical silence from the literary

establishment. Almost two years after publication not a single article in which an integrative reading of the collection is attempted has been published. It is almost as if nothing had happened and it will simply be forgotten. I heard through the grapevine that some influential Afrikaans fellow poets think the collection is rubbish for various reasons.<sup>100</sup>

— Van Niekerk (in Steyn, 2016)

The “dazzling reviews” and “strong confirmation” by way of awarding “three big poetry prizes” is indeed correct, as is born out by my discussion of the critical reception of *Kaar* in the previous section. Since the interview with Steyn (2016), however, half a dozen articles with *Kaar* as focus have appeared, as have articles concerned with *Gesant van die mispels* and *In die stille agterkamer*, which I discuss hereafter.

#### 4.3.2.1. Care and conservation

Marius Crous (2017) looks into care (and its many forms, which include “taking care of,” “caring for” and “concern(ed about)”) as a theme in *Kaar*.<sup>101</sup> Crous situates the collection in a long tradition of poetry concerned with care in its various forms, mentioning the work of D.J. Opperman, Antjie Krog, Sheila Cussons, T.T. Cloete and Susan Smith. With the exception perhaps of Smith, whose own debut appeared fairly recently (2012), all of these poets can be considered central figures in the Afrikaans poetry canon, firstly, and the Afrikaans literary system, secondly. They have all to varying degrees influenced (or are still influencing) the Afrikaans literary system beyond their role as canonised poets through their roles as critics, anthologists, mentors to younger authors, manuscript reviewers for publishers, and, particularly in the case of Cloete, and here also Smith, as literary scholars.

The notion of “caring about,” probably more effectively summed up as “concern,” is linked to the environment (Crous, 2017), which is central to a slightly earlier study of *Kaar* by Crous (2016b), where he focuses on the hadeda ibis as liminal animal in the poem “Postmoderne hadeda”. The liminal animal is neither suburban nor wild, but exists as an animal with urban

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<sup>100</sup> In a conversation at a reading of some of her work from *Gesant van die mispels* and *In die stille agterkamer*, just before the publication of these volumes, Van Niekerk made a similar remark to me about the reception of *Kaar* and the subsequent dearth of research in Afrikaans on the volume (Van Niekerk & Fourie, 2017).

<sup>101</sup> These appear in the original Afrikaans as “sorg,” “versorging,” and “besorgheid” (Crous, 2017:63)

areas as its only known habitat. In the poem, it becomes illustrative of a “post-anthropocentric perspective” that undermines “binary oppositions such as the dualism between humans and animals,” which includes the subject-object relationship between the observer and the hadeda, with the hadeda observing the poet as much as the other way around (Crous, 2016b:211).

There is also a distinct focus on animals in *Kaar* in Anelda Marx’s Masters thesis (Marx, 2018). Identifying those poems from the volume that are concerned with animals, Marx frames her study within human-animal studies, and she reads these poems as undermining ideas regarding the traditional notion of humans as the pinnacle of the hierarchy of (Christian) creation myths that inform modern discourses of the relationship between humans and non-human animals, extending this to the question of “what it means to be human” (2018:2).

#### 4.3.2.2. Art and writing

Somewhat related to Crous (2016b) is Louise Viljoen’s reading of the poem “Aan die swaan op die IJ in Februarie” from *Kaar* (Viljoen, 2017b). As is the case in Crous’s study, there is a focus on the animal that features in the poem – a swan – and its courtship displays. The excesses of these displays are read as a frame through which the reader can explore also the excesses of artistic activities and the origins of art, thereby revealing the poem (here read as a love poem) to be a kind of mating dance (Viljoen, 2017b:251-252). Viljoen and Crous’s respective studies show some critical overlapping with the English research on Van Niekerk’s work, which I discuss in more depth in the following chapter.

Whereas both Viljoen (2017b) and Crous (2016b) make some overtures towards how *Kaar* situates Van Niekerk in Afrikaans literature (and even how Van Niekerk situates herself as an author through *Kaar*), four articles on this volume are more illuminating for the focus of my study, and are sorted into a number of the research themes discussed in this section: Wolfaardt-Gräbe (2013), De Vries (2015), Pieterse (2017) and Viljoen (2017c). In addition, the study by Janien Linde (2018) is also included for her slightly different perspective utilising the concept of metamodernism.

Firstly, Ina Wolfaardt-Gräbe reads T.T. Cloete’s volume *Die ander een is ek* (2013) for its expression of the notion that “man’s ability to create words and poetry constitutes an exemplary

activity of the mind” (2013:558). She expands on this insight by Cloete to show how it could be utilised to “reveal the relevance of literary studies in general and of poetic language in particular,” combining this with a reading of Marlene van Niekerk’s *Kaar*, focusing especially on the ekphrasis in the latter volume. Through this, Wolfaardt-Gräbe in effect uses Cloete’s insights as a lens through which Van Niekerk’s poetry can be seen to show how “unusual experience and non-routine language” is concretised in both poems with a personal theme (such as those about the speaker’s frail father) as well as those that are engaged with political issues (poems about corruption, poverty, etc.).<sup>102</sup>

In her analysis of selected poems from *Kaar*, Wolfaardt-Gräbe sees elements of wonderment in the more lyrical poems, poetry as feeling (“poësie as gevoel”), a (return of) Van Niekerk’s fine skill of observation (“fyn waarnemingsvermoë”), and poetry as conscience (“poësie as die gewete”), where her poetry can be both sensitive barometer and scathing instrument (2013:571, 574, 577). One can perceive links in Wolfaardt-Gräbe’s reading to the poet’s early work, with the themes, techniques and accompanying criticism I discuss above, as well as the engagement with real-world socio-political issues that characterise Van Niekerk’s prose in *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*, *Triomf* and *Agaat*, as well as *Die kortstondige rakkewe van Anastasia W.*

#### 4.3.2.3. Afrikaans and the politics of language

The second article investigating *Kaar* is by Anastasia de Vries (2015), who explores the use of the Kaaps variety of Afrikaans in two poems from *Kaar*.<sup>103</sup> De Vries situates her study within existing and long-running critical debates surrounding the utilisation of Kaaps in poetry. Particularly, this relates to which authors have the “right” to use Kaaps in their poetry. De Vries’s argumentative point of departure is based on a statement by sociolinguist Frank

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<sup>102</sup> At the time of the publication of Wolfaardt-Gräbe’s article, *Kaar*, though complete, had not yet been released to the general public. In a footnote in the article, the researcher thanks Van Niekerk for allowing her (Wolfaardt-Gräbe) early access to the collection and permission to quote from it in her article (Wolfaardt-Gräbe, 2013:560). On the one hand, this is indicative of the noticeably intimate nature of the Afrikaans literary field; scholars are often acquainted well enough with poets and authors (in this case, a poet and fellow scholar) to enable such exchanges, whereas on the other hand, it also reveals something of the excitement in the Afrikaans literary establishment for another volume of poetry by Van Niekerk – three decades after the publication of her last full collection (*Groenstaar*, 1983).

<sup>103</sup> Though the publication year of this article is 2015, suggesting that the article was published before Van Niekerk’s interview with Steyn (Steyn & Van Niekerk, 2016), as subscriber to the journal *Stilet*, I recall that the publication of the 2015 editions were delayed, and De Vries’s article only became available in late 2016.

Hendricks that no variety of Afrikaans can belong to a certain group of Afrikaans speakers only, whether this be colloquial forms of the language, or the so-called standard variety (Hendricks, 2014:6 in De Vries, 2015:1). Through a sociolinguistic and dialectological analysis of two of Van Niekerk's poems from *Kaar* that are written in Kaaps, De Vries concludes that these instances of the poet using Kaaps represent neither her perception of this variety of Afrikaans, nor an "imagining of the other". Rather, Van Niekerk becomes a reliable chronicler ("dokumenteerder") of Kaaps (and its sub-varieties), as well as its importance and functional validity as varied source of sustenance for the Afrikaans language (De Vries, 2015:14).

De Vries's conclusions are obviously significant for the debate surrounding the use of the different forms of Afrikaans in literature. For my study, however, it is also noteworthy in terms of how Van Niekerk both functions and is viewed in the literary system. Other critics and scholars such as Visagie (2005) and Bezuidenhout (2013 and 2018) have commented on how Van Niekerk serves, through her literary work, as a type of cultural and linguistic chronicler. In both these cases, this relates most specifically to the *Dietse* (pan-Dutch) cultural and linguistic heritage of Afrikaans. De Vries's article broadens this notion, showing how in her poems in Kaaps, Van Niekerk's role of chronicler includes not only the European heritage of Afrikaans, but also the heritage of its varieties, particularly those spoken by predominantly coloured communities, which have for many decades been ignored or marginalised in relation to those forms of the language more closely associated with white communities. Indeed, De Vries claims that Van Niekerk acts as a medium through which the stigmatised and marginalised varieties of Afrikaans are placed convincingly and authentically on equal footing with the variety known as Standard Afrikaans.

While De Vries restricts her analysis to only two poems from *Kaar*, Henning Pieterse (2017) undertakes a far more extensive reading in his exploration of the appearance and function of language varieties in the collection as a whole. Pieterse argues, as is also noted in less specificity by Bezuidenhout (2013), that *Kaar* utilises words often marked in dictionary and language reference guides as archaic, historic, dignified, uncommon, etc., or as provincial, colloquial, quotidian, etc., in combination with loan words from other languages related to Afrikaans in order to comment on the heritage of the Afrikaans language as within the Germanic and Indo-European language family, and not within the language families of African languages (2017:373-374). This comment is, in Pieterse's view, part of the theme of defamiliarisation and strange-making ("vreemdmaking") in Africa that the collection explores

(2017:374).<sup>104</sup> These notions are connected to notions of major and minor languages, and Pieterse contends that in *Kaar* (as well as in *Die kortstondige rակեwe van Anastasia W.* and *Die sneuslaper*) Afrikaans is remade as a defamiliarising language, thereby coming across as innovative, experimental and dynamic (ibid.). The researcher concludes that the poet's drawing upon the broader Indo-European languages in *Kaar* does not necessarily imply a dislike of South Africa, Afrikaans or the current multilingual South African society, nor does it suggest a preference for European society and languages. It might rather represent a point of view relating to current debates about the decline of Afrikaans (Pieterse, 2017:377). It could be understood that *Kaar* then draws upon the European heritage of Afrikaans to indeed proclaim the vivacity of the language, in a comparable way to which it draws upon the different varieties of the language to achieve a similar effect.

#### 4.3.2.4. Transnationalism and metamodernism

Briefly mentioned by Pieterse (2017) but investigated in far more depth by Louise Viljoen (2017c) is *Kaar* within the framework of transnational poetics. Central to Viljoen's article is the question "whether one can speak of a transnational poetics in the case of poets who write in a local and minor language such as Afrikaans" (2017c:134). Reading Viljoen's study, it is interesting that it enters into a conversation – likely unknowingly at the time of writing – with Pieterse (2017). Viljoen expands on some points made by Pieterse, particularly in terms of how *Kaar* is revealing of Van Niekerk's views on poetry, art more broadly, as well as the role of the artist in society. Through the author's utterances in a number of interviews, Viljoen supports the assertion (also expressed by Pieterse) that Van Niekerk is an author strongly influenced by European approaches to literature, such as formalism (especially Russian Formalism) and modernism (Viljoen, 2017c:140). However, in an overview of the content of the collection, Viljoen shows that a transnational poetics is reflected in the shifts between different spaces (South Africa and the Netherlands), references to local details (notably plants and animals, historical, political and other details), references to other parts of the world (Europe, America and New Zealand), references to authors and other artists (both local and

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<sup>104</sup> Compare also the following statement by Van Niekerk in an interview with Madri Victor about *Memorandum*: "I wanted with my story to 'answer' to the paintings in such a way as to leave the paintings entirely within their own persistence, and that would in no way 'domesticate' their strangeness and direness for the reader." ("Ek wou met my verhaal 'antwoord' op die skilderye op 'n manier wat die skilderye volledig in hulle eiesinnige waarde sou laat en wat verder op geen manier hulle vreemdheid en verskriklikheid vir die leser sou wou 'domestiseer' nie.") (Van Niekerk in Victor, 2006)

from elsewhere), and the use of different theoretical discourses from all over the world (in both local and global forms) (2017c:142).

What Viljoen further argues is that *Kaar* is concerned with the notion of the Anthropocene on a global scale, but still harmonises with the rest of Van Niekerk's oeuvre in the way in which it questions the role that poetry (or literature, more broadly) has to play in addressing issues of political, social and environmental natures (2017c:143). In her analysis of four poems from the volume, Viljoen ultimately finds that Van Niekerk plays out the tension between the national and transnational within a postcolonial context by using a minor language like Afrikaans as a poetic instrument (Viljoen, 2017c:160). And it is Viljoen's concluding remark that is most significant for my study:

As South African, and more specifically Afrikaans, poet, Marlene van Niekerk is exceptionally aware of the complex entanglements she finds herself in: descendant of a colonising group, formed by a European tradition, with complex feelings of solidarity *and* abhorrence for the country of her birth, ever more aware of humanity's unavoidable imbrication in a biosemiotic sphere and an historically determined environment – in her case, a “postcolonial Umweltkas” – and the responsibility that accompanies this.<sup>105</sup>

— Viljoen (2017c:160-161; original emphasis)

I will return to these remarks, but before I do so, I think it is important to connect it firstly with Viljoen's own extension of some of these notions in a subsequent article on *Gesant van die mispels* and *In die stille agterkamer* (Viljoen, 2018).<sup>106</sup> While the emphasis is again placed on the relationship between Afrikaans and Dutch, and not specifically Afrikaans and English, there is in my view much to draw on in Viljoen's expanded understanding of both Van Niekerk's views on the role of the author and how she (Van Niekerk) effects this in her work that incorporates both Afrikaans and Dutch. Briefly, though, I want to pay attention to the

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<sup>105</sup> Orig.:“Van Niekerk [is as] Suid-Afrikaanse, meer spesifiek Afrikaanse, digter uitsonderlik bewus [...] van die komplekse verstrengeling waarin sy haar bevind: afstammeling van 'n koloniseerdersgroep, gevorm deur 'n Eurosentriese tradisie, met komplekse gevoelens van solidariteit met én afsku vir haar geboorteland, steeds meer bewus van die mens se onvermydelike inbedding in 'n biosemiotiese sfeer en 'n histories-bepaalde omgewing – in haar geval 'n 'postkoloniale Umweltkas' – en die verantwoordelikheid wat daarmee saamgaan.”

<sup>106</sup> This article is written in English and appeared in the journal *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies*. As I show in my discussion, however, though the article is written in English, it is part of Viljoen's research on Van Niekerk's recent Afrikaans poetry to the extent that I do not judge it to be sensible to include this under the English research on Van Niekerk's work.

perspective of Linde (2018), who sees Van Niekerk's transnationalism as intricately connected with elements of metamodernism in her work.

In her 2018 doctoral study, Linde approaches Marlene van Niekerk's recent work – that is, *Memorandum* (2006), *Die sneeulaper* (2009), *Kaar* (2013), *Gesant van die mispels* (2017) and *In die stille agterkamer* (2017) – through the lens of metamodernism. These literary texts seek to “describe the contemporary moment,” an approach she claims has come to the fore due to “the perceived expiration of postmodernism” (2018:v).<sup>107</sup> Linde refers to this phase of Van Niekerk's work as “transnational” and it follows on two other phases. The first is what Linde calls Van Niekerk's “early phase,” which she views as comprised of the texts *Sprokkelster* (1977), *Groenstaar* (1983) en *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* (1992). Linde calls the second periodisation Van Niekerk's “South African phase,” encompassing *Triomf* (1994), *Agaat* (2004) and *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.* (2010). The researcher mentions that these phases are not primarily focused on the chronology of their publication or on their subject or theme, but rather on the development of Van Niekerk's views on writing and art in general that are evident in the respective texts (2018:19). Linde's project as a whole shows this position to hold true, though mentioned points of development in terms of the author's writerly concerns do ultimately correspond to the chronology of her various works. Linde also identifies points of overlap between the different phases: *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* is shown to signal the end of the first phase, but also flows over to signify the beginning of the second, while *Memorandum* is placed both at the end of the second phase and as part of the advent of the third phase (ibid.).

Linde qualitatively covers what she refers to broadly as the reception of Van Niekerk's works that are situated in the phases she (Linde) describes. There is a dual purpose to this. On the one hand, the researcher seeks to show how the reception of and research focused on Van Niekerk's work has changed over time, and on the other hand, she wishes to highlight the turns, changes and focal shifts in Van Niekerk's authorial views on art and philosophy (Linde, 2018:18). In this section of her larger project, Linde also makes some provisional comments on traces of metamodernism to be found in Van Niekerk's texts (ibid.). She suggests that these traces have been identified in different ways by other researchers over the years, but had not necessarily

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<sup>107</sup> Linde's study (2018) is included here, since, although her study includes some of Van Niekerk's works from more than one genre, it focuses on the greater part of Van Niekerk's poetry publications.

been called *metamodernist* by any of these scholars. These so-called metamodernist impulses (2018:52) reach a climax in Van Niekerk's later work and forms the central emphasis of Linde's study. Notably, Linde includes in her dissertation both studies that appeared in English and Afrikaans, and studies that utilise Van Niekerk's texts in both the original Afrikaans or the English translations without engaging with the distinctions that might be drawn between the original texts and their translated counterparts. The researcher seems to implicitly consider original text and translation to function as the same text.<sup>108</sup> Linde finds that Van Niekerk's work crosses literary boundaries on the level of language, content, theme and space (2018:257). Ultimately, her study strongly underscores the transnational characteristics of Van Niekerk's later poetry, discussed above and below.

Focusing on the ekphrastic nature of *Gesant van die mispels* and *In die stille agterkamer*, Viljoen (2018) considers how the poems in these volumes can be read as a type of translation of the artworks they are based on (i.e. the respective visual and verbal semiotic systems). The impetus for the approach of Viljoen's article comes from the same interview with Steyn (2016) that I quoted from above, wherein Van Niekerk explains that she views the writing of ekphrastic poetry as a process not dissimilar to the translation of a text from one language into another:

I experience my own admiration of a text I want to translate, as a need to seduce it, to win it over and to "possess" it in my own language; it is a need to equal the author, if not to seduce and conquer his/her issue. One likes to wield one's s/word, especially when the challenge is substantial. Translation, especially of poetry, can elicit extreme forms of patience and dedication [...] There is no copying or "rendering" without a form of "power struggle" or "strategic waiting". Of course this is more the case with complex texts – ones that play "hard to get" – than with manuals for making marmite sandwiches. And, of course, as a translator one feels much more alive when a text "resists" one's advances. In fact the more tight or complex or "licentious" (ambiguous, playful) the text is, the greater the likelihood that the translator would succumb to poetic license [sic].

— Van Niekerk (in Steyn, 2016)

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<sup>108</sup> As argued in the previous chapter, this perspective is also evident in the research of other scholars: my own work (Fourie, 2016) as well as that of Carvalho and Van Vuuren (2009).

From this, Viljoen draws particular conclusions regarding the poet's approach to writing an ekphrastic poem, as well as the inherent reflection on the original visual artwork imbedded in the poet's artistry, resulting in a type of contest between the poet and the painter (2018:3).<sup>109</sup> A further link is drawn by the researcher between the translation of the visual into the textual, and then again from the textual (Afrikaans) to another form of the textual (Dutch). There is a kind of "coexistence" of these two languages in the volume, according to the researcher, highlighted by the utilisation of the work of two Dutch painters, Van Niekerk's own position as established author in the Low Countries, and the historical relationship between the two languages. By implication, this draws on the intertwined colonial histories of both languages, whereby "discourses of the global south [are introduced] into the global north" (Viljoen, 2018:4). This is, as Viljoen quotes Van Niekerk again, a fertilization and undermining of Dutch, but it goes beyond this to address the entanglements of socio-political and socio-cultural issues:

Boundaries are there to be crossed and perforated and to smuggle impermissible and forbidden things in opposite directions. In a time of aggressive cultural essentialisation by academic identity theorists, the decision to also include the Dutch in the South African edition was amongst others meant to illustrate the unavoidable operation of entanglements and reciprocal "contamination" of cultures via translation (including intermedial translation).<sup>110</sup>

— Van Niekerk (in Esterhuizen, 2016)

This process, Van Niekerk explains, is the (intermedial) translation of old-European paintings to poems in a minor language in Africa, translated back into the European source language, followed by adjustments to the Afrikaans text, based on the Dutch translation (Esterhuizen & Van Niekerk, 2016). This leads to both indigenisation and defamiliarisation; a mixture that, in Van Niekerk's view, is impossible to disentangle or purify (ibid.). It is subsequently from two perspectives that I want to approach both the arguments of Viljoen and the points of view expressed by Van Niekerk.

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<sup>109</sup> See in this regard also Wolfaardt-Gräbe (2013:564-565) concerning Van Niekerk's ekphrastic poem on Marlene Dumas's artwork "The painter".

<sup>110</sup> Orig.: "[G]rens is daar om oorskry en geperforeer te word en om ontoelaatbare en verbode dinge oorheen te smokkel in teenoorgestelde rigtings. In 'n tyd van aggressiewe kulturele essensialisering deur akademiese identiteitsteoretici is die besluit om die Nederlands ook in die Suid-Afrikaanse uitgawe in te sluit onder andere bedoel om die onvermydelike werking van verstrengelings en wedersydse "besmetting" van kulture via (ook intermediale) vertaling te illustreer."

Firstly, Viljoen (2017c and 2018) uses some relevant utterances by Van Niekerk made in interviews for her reading of the poet's own notions of her role (as I have also done in this dissertation), and it is clear that Van Niekerk situates *herself* beyond (or even between) the borders of national (or local) concern. This is not to say that the author assumes a patronising position of any kind. Rather, she views her work (which, for instance, she has relativized self-deprecatingly as a clown's hat, a clapper, and wilful farts)<sup>111</sup> as part of a very complex corpus of artistic output that is, as Viljoen shows, multifaceted and wrought through the socio-political, socio-economic, socio-cultural, ethical and artistic tensions of an increasingly globalised-yet-unequal world. In what Van Niekerk reveals about her ideas regarding translation – here meant in a broader sense to include the translation of the textual into another language, the visual into language as well as the associations of these artworks into the cultural domains of different languages by way of both wilful and unintentional entanglements on the part of the author/poet/artist – one recalls the metaphors utilised by Leon de Kock and Michiel Heyns regarding the intricacies and the implications of the translation of Van Niekerk's work. One comes here, then, to an explanation as to how Van Niekerk sees her own Afrikaans authorship as an entanglement of different cultural contexts and histories, and it is important to stress that she uses this very metaphor of entanglement – “the unavoidable operation of entanglements and reciprocal ‘contamination’ of cultures” (Van Niekerk in Esterhuizen, 2016). This is, then, the perspective of the author herself. In Viljoen's view, this is effected clearly in the transnational and translational aspects of *Kaar*, *Gesant van die mispels* and *In die stille agterkamer*. In another article, Viljoen (2014) also shows how Van Niekerk (in addition to André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Etienne van Heerden and Antjie Krog) is part of what she refers to as a “minor transnationalism” between Afrikaans and Dutch, as exposure through translation of Afrikaans works to the Netherlands gives these works access to a world beyond the borders of a small language such as Afrikaans – even if Dutch is today one of the minor languages of the European literary centre (2014:21).

Secondly follows the critical placement of Van Niekerk by critics like Viljoen (2017c & 2018), Pieterse (2017), De Vries (2015), Wolfaardt-Gräbe (2013) and Linde (2018). In each of these cases, there is a positioning of the author in relation to both her own preceding work, other works in the Afrikaans literary system (something a number of reviewers of *Kaar* also allude to), and, increasingly, her entry into a transnational poetical arena. Here, Viljoen again offers

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<sup>111</sup> Orig.: “jou harlekynhoedjie, jou ratelaar en jou aspris poepe” (Esterhuizen & Van Niekerk, 2014:24).

clarity on how this can be seen in the tensions between the major languages (with their cultural predominance) and minor languages (with their existence constantly threatened by the major languages) (2017c:145). For Viljoen, the very way in which Afrikaans is used in *Kaar, Gesant van die mispels* and *In die stille agterkamer* involves the empowerment of a minor language and the indigenisation of transnational influences like modernism – something that is indeed confirmed by Van Niekerk, as set out above. On this point, Linde argues that this transnational movement between Afrikaans and Dutch can correspondingly be read as a comment by the author on the homogenising influence that English has internationally (2018:257). Transnational literary movements and their relation to entanglement is something I return to later in this chapter.

#### **4.4. Van Niekerk's prose in Afrikaans**

##### **4.4.1. The popular reception of Van Niekerk's prose in Afrikaans**

This section is concerned with the popular reception of Van Niekerk's Afrikaans prose. I refer to the critical reception of her texts as evident from reviews and discussions that appeared both in print and online.

###### **4.4.1.1. *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het***

Since the publication of *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* in 1992, the critical reception of her work shows that Van Niekerk had begun registering in a particular way within Afrikaans literature as both an author and as a literary and philosophical scholar in her own right. In an Afrikaans review published in the English *Weekly Mail*, Maleen Young writes that with her debut volume of short stories, Van Niekerk slaughters many a holy cow – and extends her acerbic gaze to the New South Africa (1992:iv). What Young refers to as the collection's black humour is what makes it for Tom Gouws (1992:14) a puckishly playful paean against texts and authors taking themselves too seriously. Furthermore, Gouws reads *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* as a merciless demythologising of the Afrikaners. In a similar vein, Hans Pienaar (1992) reads the volume as closely aligned to Van Niekerk's purported reputation (at the time) as a literary fighter:

In writer's circles Mad Marlene is known as a hothead of conscience, the Correct amongst the Politically Correct, the Will amongst the Melville Sisters.<sup>112</sup> Where other writers say back to the *volk*, Van Niekerk says back to the church – that being the church of the revolution. Viva Calvin!<sup>113</sup>

— Pienaar (1992:21)

Though the reviewer is clearly humorously playing on a particular conception of Van Niekerk as an author and public intellectual who opposes the traditionalist and conservative values of Afrikanerdom, it is interesting that he links a perceived persona of the author with an element of her work that other reviewers had also identified in both *Sprokkelster* and *Groenstaar*: satire.<sup>114</sup> For Pienaar, the collection has much to express about the notion of the so-called Grand Projects that he views as inherently part of the then political turmoil that still reigned in the lead-up to South Africa's elections in 1994. In so-doing, Pienaar reasons, Van Niekerk's short stories reflect the *Zeitgeist* of the time in a way that few other South African authors manage to do (ibid.). Though the reviewer therefore identifies in the author's work what seems to be a growing engagement with political and societal issues of the day, he does feel that this is undermined by elements of outdated "Marx-dogma" or Messianic moments where characters are able to recognise each other across boundaries of race and class (ibid.). Pienaar criticises what he views as the author in some way becoming too imbricated as a character in her own story, imbuing it too directly with her own beliefs (ibid.).

It is this same confluence of different aspects of the author in the literary work – i.e. Van Niekerk as cultural and political philosopher on the one hand and as creative writer on the other – that Hennie Aucamp (1992:42) expresses reservations about in his review of *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*. Though he praises the collection as a great achievement of satirical writing in Afrikaans, viewing it as equal to Jan Lion Cachet's *Sewe duiwels en wat hulle gedoen het* (1907) and Etienne Leroux's *Sewe dae by die Silbersteins* (1964), Aucamp feels that the voice of the academic – that is, the cultural and political philosopher – quells the voice of the

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<sup>112</sup> The homophonic effect of the reference to Van Niekerk as the "Wil onder die Melville Susters" ("Will amongst the Melville Sisters") is lost in translation.

<sup>113</sup> Orig.: "In skrywerskringe is Dolle Marlientjie bekend as 'n willewragtig van die gewete, die Korrekte onder die Politieke Korrektes, die Wil onder die Melville Susters. Waar ander skrywers sê terug na die volk, sê Van Niekerk terug na die kerk, synde die kerk van die revolusie. Viva Calvyn!"

<sup>114</sup> These strong satirical elements are also highlighted in reviews of the short story collection by Johann Johl (1993), Ernst Lindenberg (1993), Christi van der Westhuizen (1993) and Ia van Zyl (1993).

narrator, resulting in a clumsy, rhetorical or shrill style (ibid.).<sup>115</sup> Jeanette Ferreira (1992) in her review expresses her displeasure, similar to Aucamp's, with the short stories' too direct philosophical nature: "There are numerous undigested pieces of philosophy in the stories. One could ask: Why does Van Niekerk not stick to her fascinating stories, why this brutally direct philosophising that is so often forced upon the reader?" (Ferreira, 1992:139).<sup>116</sup> Ferreira feels that this is mitigated slightly by the fact that, she assumes, most of the readers of *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* will be Afrikaans-speaking intellectuals, and so the collection confronts these readers with an image of themselves and the uselessness of their supposed intellectual solution to the country's ills (ibid.). While Johl (1993) is impressed with the volume overall, and, like Aucamp (1992), likens Van Niekerk's satire to that of Etienne Leroux, for him the ideology of the text contradicts a smug attitude in the text through the satire being too obviously in service of a reckoning with a social and societal subconscious (1993:8). Overall, the various strong intellectual characteristics of the text seem to have been received mostly negatively by reviewers in the Afrikaans press.

Resonating with some of the criticism of *Sprokkelster* and *Groenstaar*, several reviewers take issue with the way in which the author has employed language in the text – that is, too lyrically and profusely. In addition to finding too much detail in the stories in *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*, Pienaar describes the prose as overwritten, accompanied by a "bureaucracy" of images, tropes in triplicate and leaden-heavy long sentences. This is echoed by Ferreira (1992), Van der Westhuizen (1993) and Lindenberg (1993), who respectively find many descriptions in the stories to be inhibitive to the narrative style (Ferreira, 1993:139), verbose (Van der Westhuizen, 1993:27), as well as baroque and extravagant (Lindenberg, 1993:83). Van Zyl (1993:5) also identifies these aspects of the text, referring to the short stories as writerly ("skryfbaar") rather than readerly ("leesbaar"), but viewing their wordiness in a slightly more positive light as a possible response to the denuded quality of other prose publications of the time.

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<sup>115</sup> He calls Van Niekerk the "spelbederwer" (spoilspoor or killjoy) of her own stories (1992:42). Interestingly, in an interview with Theunis Engelbrecht, published about a month before the appearance of Aucamp's review, Van Niekerk acknowledges that her stories are "spelbederwers," but argues that she utilises this quality as part of her very attempt to undermine some of the supposed certainties of the reader (Van Niekerk in Engelbrecht, 1992:2).

<sup>116</sup> Orig.: "Daar is verskeie onverteerde stukke filosofie in die verhale. 'n Mens kan vra: Hoekom hou Van Niekerk nie by haar fassinerende stories nie, hoekom hierdie brutaal direkte wysbegeerdheid wat so dikwels aan die leser opgedwing word?"

*Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* marks an important moment in Van Niekerk's oeuvre, as she moves from poetry to prose. As short story collection, the volume can be considered a generic crossover text between the author's early poetry and her novels *Triomf* and *Agaat*, according to Linde (2018:28). As commented upon by many of the reviewers, there is both a thematic and technical link between her first poetry collections and her short story debut, though both theme and technique are also criticised as being overwrought at times. Yet, as becomes clear in my discussion of the reception of *Triomf* and *Agaat* below, Van Niekerk did not, despite the criticism, move away from thematic concerns engaged with real-world and current issues, and neither did her prose become less verbose.

#### 4.4.1.2. *Triomf*

Van Niekerk's debut short story collection would be followed two years later by the publication of *Triomf*. Some of the earliest criticism on the novel to appear was in the newspaper column "Op my literêre sofa" ("On my literary sofa") by poet and academic, Joan Hambidge. Hambidge expresses apprehension towards the marketing strategy employed by Queillierie, the publisher of *Triomf*. According to her, the marketing was particularly aggressive in its strong-armed attempt to influence the critical reception of the novel by announcing the book to be the "Great Afrikaans Novel" ("Groot Afrikaanse Roman") even before it had been released to the general public (1994:3). Specifically, Hambidge was concerned by how the critical reviews for the publisher had reportedly been circulated amongst critics even before the novel's publication.

The critic acknowledges *Triomf* as a good novel, but mentions that the "look-how-clever-I-am attitude" of the narrator annoys her: As was the case with her preceding short story collection, Van Niekerk's narrator still employs, according to Hambidge, gimmicks, such as the phrase "poetic licence", that seem poorly suited to the simple characters featured in the novel (Hambidge, 1994:3). Hambidge is furthermore of the opinion that the narrator patronises the characters, and she does not feel that *Triomf* quite deserves an "over the top" reception – especially, she writes, in comparison to the (implied great) texts by other authors that appeared the year before (ibid.). Hambidge's points of criticism are further accentuated by a sardonic exclamation in her conclusion: "Long live the overestimated book!" (1994:3). To be fair to the critic, her main concern here is not with *Triomf* as a text (though she nevertheless makes known

her view in that regard), but instead with the marketing of the novel and how it encroaches upon the objectivity and authority of literary critics. Additionally, she quite prophetically reminds her reader that a critic's first impression can always be wrong, and can later be corrected (Hambidge, 1994:3).

Hambidge also objected, in a short piece in *Die Burger* in 1995, to the opaque workings of the committee responsible for awarding the Noma Prize for Publishing in Africa to *Triomf* (1995:4). Amongst other claims, Hambidge accuses the committee of awarding the prize to Van Niekerk's text not because of its literary merit, but because of the novel being a politically correct choice (ibid.). Hans M. Zell, at the time secretary of the committee, responded to these accusations, giving some explanation as to the decision-making process for the awarding of the prize, and rejecting Hambidge's claims (Zell, 1995:6). These discourses fall within debates that had raged for a number of years in broader South African literary scholarship and critical reception regarding the tension between the aesthetic and the political, and how this tension plays out in literary works and the larger literary system. In some respects, though, this binary was always a false opposition, as the aesthetic and the political are not necessarily as easily separated from each other as this easy bifurcation would suggest – nor had it ever been as obviously separate from one another at any point in history.

Early reviews by Fanie Olivier (1994), Barry Hough (1994) and Tom Gouws (1994) depart from the nature of Hambidge's judgements. Gouws (1994:6) sees the novel as an even more intense razor-sharp dissection of Afrikanerdom than *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* had already been, while Olivier boldly situates *Triomf* with Jeanne Goosen's *Ons is nie almal so nie* (1990), Mark Behr's *Die reuk van appels* (1993) and John Miles's *Kroniek uit die doofpot* (1991) – all according to him key Afrikaans texts that explore the psyche of South Africa (Olivier, 1994:10). For Olivier, *Triomf* is a comprehensive text in which a part of the Afrikaans-speaking community (and their language) takes shape in a unique way. He lauds the novel, but does gesture towards what critics previously remarked about Van Niekerk's short stories as well – that is, that the narrative at times loses focus. He furthermore hints at Van Niekerk as a kind of chronicler, with the novel as a kind of rescue mission, aiming to ensure that the lives of the community depicted, like the one of erstwhile Sophiatown, are not just erased by a new dispensation (ibid).

Hough (1994) correspondingly praises the honesty and authenticity of the author's attempt at narrating the lives of the characters in *Triomf*, through which, he argues, the author resists – contrary to what Hambidge (1994:3) claims – looking down on the characters (Hough, 1994:3). The imaginative power of the novel leads Hough to place Van Niekerk amongst the foremost authors of Afrikaans prose. Not only does he credit the novel for its intertextual conversations with Jochem van Bruggen's *Ampie* (1924) and the work of Eugene O'Neill, but he emphasises that the novel succeeds in providing an amusing and entertaining story. While Hambidge (1994:3) criticised the novel for imbuing its characters with a level of intellect and field of reference that seemed unconvincing, Hough sees the character Treppie as an ordering consciousness that successfully resides within the character, and not within the author (Hough, 1994:3). Hough's observation here suggests a development in the work of the author insofar as her authorial voice has become, seemingly, better disguised.<sup>117</sup>

A review that is far less positive is that of Gawie Botma (1994). While he acknowledges Van Niekerk as a talented artist whose novel sometimes includes outstanding poetic descriptions, striking images, and features a liberating use of language, he finds the novel boring, and disqualifies it as contender for the title of "Great Afrikaans Novel" (Botma, 1994:5). He negatively compares *Triomf* to Goosen's *Ons is nie almal so nie*, describing the latter as shorter, subtler, more affecting and funnier (ibid.).<sup>118</sup> He scathingly criticises the author for not being able to resist the temptation of purple prose, while he views the novel's political content as superficial and the characterisation as falling flat (ibid.). In a curious conclusion, Botma seems to undermine his own analysis of the novel, and opines that time may tell that *Triomf* is a masterpiece, mentioning that some "learned individuals" ("geleerdes") have already done so, but he does not seem to care, as long as, he writes, he never has to read the novel again (Botma, 1994:5).

Like Hough (1994), Louise Viljoen's (1994) early newspaper review of the novel draws attention to the possible symbolic and allegorical readings of the novel. She further highlights

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<sup>117</sup> Phil van Schalkwyk (2003:356) criticises the perspectives of reviewers and journalists who assumed that the characters in the novel "think like" Van Niekerk. In expecting that the characters would be unable of being as clever and informed as they are depicted to be in the novel, being of their socio-economic status and background, Van Schalkwyk points out that the reviewers are thus revealing their own stereotypical assumptions of so-called backwards Afrikaners, thereby perpetuating the very distanced and patronising view of class that the novel so powerfully undermines.

<sup>118</sup> In a letter to the newspaper, Goosen (1994) distanced herself from Botma's review, calling it a poor review. She furthermore expresses in the letter the high regard in which she holds Van Niekerk, and describes *Triomf* as one of the most important works in South African literature (1994:12).

aspects of the novel that engage both with political issues and debates of the time, as well as social, cultural and political histories that remain relevant to these debates (1994:53).<sup>119</sup> What Viljoen identifies here would turn out to be many of the themes and elements of the text that would come to dominate subsequent scholarly reception of the work. Establishing a link to Van Niekerk's earlier work, the reviewer notes the shift in the utilisation of language between Van Niekerk's short stories two years earlier and *Triomf*. The Afrikaans of *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*, which excels in its utilisation of baroque language, is replaced in the author's debut novel with a sustained Triomf-Afrikaans that at times reaches a breath-taking crudeness (Viljoen, 1994:53). Viljoen ultimately finds, in contrast to criticism by some other reviewers, that the novel is a remarkable example of the liberating potential of the imagination (ibid.).

Both Viljoen (1994) and Tom Gouws (1994) comment on what they view as some postmodernist elements in the novel. The former refers specifically to the blurring of boundaries between so-called high and low literature (Viljoen, 1994:53), while the latter identifies a number of intertextual references to other Afrikaans texts as well as to the work of Anglo-American writers such as John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell and the Belgian writer Hugo Claus (Gouws, 1994:6). These references are well disguised in the novel, Gouws feels, as the narrative point of view enables the narrator to make the characters say "such clever words," without it clashing with the characterisation (ibid.).

This fine sensibility with words is also what impresses Martie Muller (1994a). Muller's book review takes the perspective of *Triomf* as an exploratory lens of the Oedipus myth – an aspect that is also mentioned by other scholars – which, according to her, is utilised to explore the human condition (1994a:27). She singles out the language of the novel as a highlight:

The natural originality and inexhaustibility of the language; the individuality of the expression; the sharp conciseness; the *tours de force* of the rhythmic mobility; the wealth of strong meaningful words; simplified sentence constructions; the ebullition of

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<sup>119</sup> A similar English review of the novel, also by Viljoen, appears in the journal *Ariel* in 1995 (Viljoen, 1995). Since its content is very similar to Viljoen (1994), I do not discuss it in any more depth.

the colloquial language of the personas in their own idiom, can be described as the text's own music.<sup>120</sup>

— Muller (1994a:27)

Rykie van Reenen (1994:3) calls the language used in the novel a copulative-scatological sociolect (“kopulatief-skatologies[e] [sosiolak]”) that might be inaccessible for “decent” readers. Van Reenen’s piece comes across pensive, which, after the controversy the novel had elicited, was written on the invitation of the books editor of *Beeld*. It is clear that Van Reenen sees the novel’s clever humorous appeal; she refers to it as a depiction of certain aspects of the Afrikaner roaringly out of control – a sort of Boer surrealism in exaggerated colour (ibid.). Though she again detects the author’s tendency to write in too much detail (as was also pointed out in relation to *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*), she views the cleverness of the character Treppie not as the author speaking too directly through the characters, but as a necessary sardonic accent that saves the novel from sentimentality (Van Reenen, 1994:3).

Not only was there controversy amongst critics, as discussed here, but the reading public also expressed some outrage about the content (or imagined content) of the novel. As an example, in two letters, one by A. du Preez to *Die Volksblad* (1994) and another by J.H. le Roux to *Die Burger* (1994), Van Niekerk’s novel is described as no triumph for the Afrikaans language or its literature (Du Preez, 1994:6) and not suitable reading material for family or friends – a conclusion that is come to despite the author of the latter letter admitting to not having read the book (Le Roux, 1994:14). The language of the novel is referred to by Du Preez (1994:6) as abhorrent and it is implied that Van Niekerk (as well as Koos Prinsloo, Mark Behr and Marita van der Vyver) are traitors to Afrikaans. In the conservative publication *Die Afrikaner*, Koos Venter sees the novel as a weapon of the Afrikaner’s “enemies” to use as reflection of the “typical” Afrikaner (Venter, 1999:8).

The Afrikaans text of *Triomf* was ultimately awarded two national and one international prize: It received the local M-Net Prize and the CNA Prize, while it was also awarded the prestigious Noma Prize for Publishing in Africa. Around the turn of the century, Leon de Kock’s English

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<sup>120</sup> “Die natuurlike oorspronklikheid en onuitputlikheid van die taal; die individualiteit van uitdrukking; die skerp bondigheid; die kragtoere van ritmiese beweeglikheid; die rykdom van sterk betekenisvolle woorde; vereenvoudigde sinskonstruksies; die opborreling van die personasies se geselstaal in eie idioom, kan as die teks se eie musiek beskryf word.”

translation of the novel appeared, and a positive review by Jo Nel (1999) of the translation appeared in Afrikaans in *Beeld*, which indicates something of the significance with which translation into English was regarded at the time within the Afrikaans literary system. Nel comments on the authenticity of the translation, which was, according to the reviewer, probably greatly improved through the assistance of the author in the translation process (1999:6). Indeed, the use of certain Afrikaans words and phrases throughout the translation are in the reviewer's view particularly successful: the reviewer feels that this situates the novel strongly within the South African context (and it is implied that the international translation, which does not use Afrikaans words and phrases in this way, will be poorer for it) (ibid.). The overtly positive reception of the translation in Britain and in the United States of America, as discussed in depth in the previous chapter, was also reported on in *Beeld* (Pretorius, 2004) and *Rapport* (Engelbrecht, 2004).

Literary critic and academic Chris van der Merwe includes the novel on his list of contenders for the title of "Great Afrikaans Novel of the 1990s" (Van der Merwe, 2000:68), explaining his choice in more detail in an essay on the novel that appeared on LitNet (Van der Merwe, 2014:26-31).<sup>121</sup> Van der Merwe's reasoning for the novel not reaching the top half of his list somewhat reflects the conflicting reception of the novel that I have discussed. He writes that the novel is in his view too long, and subsequently, through the course of the text, the narrative loses its ability to surprise and shock, resulting in the emittance a kind of monotonous drone and ending in a predictable anti-climax (Van der Merwe, 2014:31).

#### **4.4.1.3. *Agaat***

One of the earliest reviews of *Agaat* to appear is that of Annemarie van Niekerk (2004). The reviewer calls the novel a second triumph, clearly playing on the title of Van Niekerk's first novel and referencing the phenomenal success and controversial reception it received a decade before the publication of *Agaat* (2004:11). Van Niekerk identifies the novel's interweaving of the personal and the public histories, its exploration of the notion of the other, its interrogation of gender relations, and its allegorical interpretative possibilities in relation to the political and cultural history of the Afrikaners (a reading also validated by Chris van der Merwe, 2004). The

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<sup>121</sup> This essay, though originally published in 2000, is included in Van der Merwe (2014) and therefore referenced as such.

reviewer notes that it is astounding that a single author managed to so successfully utilise such a wide-ranging repertoire (ibid.). In his review for *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, Neil Cochrane (2004:216) seems to anticipate what would become one of the major research interests in the text, and that is its examination of South Africa's colonial and postcolonial histories.

Similarly positive are Joan Hambidge (2004) and Deborah Steinmair (2004). Hambidge in her review again refers to the marketing campaign launched by the publisher for the novel. According to her, *Agaat* is being positioned in the campaign as world literature. She also mentions both the novel's intertextual relationship with Karel Schoeman's *Hierdie lewe* (1993) – a relationship also identified by Willie Burger (2004a) and Ampie Coetzee (2004) – and the work of J.M. Coetzee and W.G. Sebald (Hambidge, 2004:6). Steinmair equally views *Agaat* as a novel that places Van Niekerk amongst international authors such as Jonathan Franzen and Margaret Atwood. Coetzee is far more explicit in how he situates Van Niekerk as an *Afrikaans* author based on what she has achieved with *Agaat* (2004). He writes that the novel is magisterially the last Afrikaans *plaasroman*, implying that Van Niekerk closes off a predominant and decades-old subgenre in Afrikaans literature with a novel that shows both similarities and stark differences in relation to the older novels in this grouping (2004:58). Taking a slightly broader view are Chris van der Merwe (2004) and L.S. Venter (2004:11). The former likens elements in *Agaat* to Etienne van Heerden's *Toorberg* (1986) and sees similarities to Adam Small's *Kanna hy kê hystoe* (1973), but goes beyond Afrikaans literature and also sees connections between *Agaat* and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999). For the latter critic, *Agaat* features references to Leroux's *Sewe dae by die Silbersteins*, Anna M. Louw's *Kroniek van Perdepoort* (1975) and *Toorberg* (1986), thereby both being a *plaasroman* and squaring up with the subgenre itself. Comparing Van Niekerk's novel to works of literature beyond South Africa, Venter writes that he experiences in *Agaat*, as he did with James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Dutch author Louis Couperus's *Van oude mense, de dingen die voorbijgaan*, a feeling of permanence (Venter, 2004:11).

As is the case in the reviews by Burger (2004a) and Cochrane (2004), the language, characterisation, spatial descriptions and extensive metaphors of the novel receive praise from critics (Steinmair, 2004:6). For Hambidge, identity, race and class feature most prominently in this *plaasroman*, which she also views as a woman author's foray into the domain of the male (ibid.). Not only does Van Niekerk unravel the subgenre, Hambidge claims, but the author does even more: through meticulous research, the novel offers a detailed account of farming in a

way no farm novel has done since the works of C.M. van den Heever (ibid.). As was her criticism of *Triomf*, the reviewer again finds aspects of the novel hard to believe, particularly Aagaat's encyclopaedic knowledge of Afrikaans folksongs, for instance (ibid.). Jakkie's bequeathing of the farm to Aagaat is also viewed as a weak point, lessening for the critic the impact of the novel. In Steinmair's review in *Die Kerkbode*, she refers to *Aagaat* as a jewel, a *tour de force* and a beacon in Afrikaans literature (2004:13). Cochrane too expresses his view surrounding the novel's import within the Afrikaans literary canon (2004:217). For him, the greatness of the novel is illustrated in its dauntless and merciless depiction of the process of dying and death itself – as is also pointed out by Van der Merwe (2004).

In their respective reviews of the novel, Burger (2004a:4) and Hein Viljoen (2005:177-178) refer to the novel being both a *plaasroman* and a response to the *plaasroman*. Burger highlights a number of the themes, narrative techniques and structuring elements evident in the novel and pays some attention to how the novel is both similar to and different from *Triomf* (2004:4). In addition to Burger, the so-called complicated but gripping nature of these elements is also discussed by Coetzee (2004:58) and Van der Merwe (2004), with the latter calling the four-part narrative structure both gripping and never boring, while he also praises the deployment of tension in the narrative, seemingly implying that Van Niekerk has succeeded with *Aagaat* where she failed (at least in the reviewer's view) with *Triomf*. For Viljoen, this "feminist novel" is at times expansive to the point where it undermines the progression of the story (2005:177). Based on the impressive technical narrative achievement of the text, Burger states that the novel will in future be discussed at length by readers, even as he levels some criticism, stating that, at times, the wordiness and diffusiveness of the novel was overwhelming for him, but, he writes, this too is partially saved by the novel's deployment of humour (ibid.). Coetzee makes a similar remark, calling it Van Niekerk's "old trick" ("ou laai") (2004:58). Like Burger, however, Coetzee seems to express a bittersweet attitude towards this aspect of Van Niekerk's work. On the one hand he calls some of the descriptions in the novel far too long (especially a scene involving the character Milla defecating, which he describes as horrible), but on the other, he implies the very long description of the scene in which Milla gives birth to be something significant, despite its length (ibid.). Van der Merwe acknowledges that different readers might have varied views regarding the wordiness of the novel, but he writes that upon closer analysis, he feels it was necessary and justified (2004).

L.S. Venter believes that too much is told in the novel, taking particular exception to the detailed descriptions of things that he views simply as mentioning things for the sake of it or attempts to send biblical and feminist shockwaves through the reader with a “virtuose” book that sometimes falls prey to its own virtuosity (2004:11). This criticism echoes to an extent that of Hambidge of both *Triomf* and *Agaat* (1994 and 2004), as well as those of, for instance, Aucamp (1992) and Ferreira (1992) in relation to *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*. Another point of critique briefly mentioned by Van der Merwe (2004), but more extensively discussed by Venter (2004) in his review of the novel, relates to the characterisation of Jak: he is called a caricature by both Van der Merwe and Venter, with the latter noting that in everything Jak does, he is doomed to represent the old Afrikaner order, a choice that he views as to the detriment of the depth of the novel (2004:11).

Abroad, an English review by Nicole Devarenne of the Afrikaans edition of *Agaat* appeared in the *London Review of Books*, along with reviews of Antjie Krog’s *A Change of Tongue* (2003) and E.K.M. Dido’s *Die onsigbares* (2003). Devarenne’s review mostly offers a contextual reading of the novel, focusing on the themes and structure of the text (including its engagements with gender, race, land, the *plaasroman* and colonial and postcolonial issues), though the critic does also venture to note that in the novel, “Van Niekerk manipulates Afrikaans prosody in inventive and ingenious ways” (2005:37). Unsurprisingly, given its publication in a British magazine, the reviewer also observes that Van Niekerk is indebted to J.M. Coetzee’s English-language novels *Foe* (1986) and *Age of Iron* (1990), while connections with the work of C.M. van den Heever and Karel Schoeman are also mentioned (*ibid.*). Again, Van Niekerk’s habit of very long prose is mentioned; for Devarenne the “self-consciously lyrical prose” makes the novel both easier and harder to read than was the case with *Triomf* (*ibid.*). What stands out is the reviewer’s statement that Van Niekerk forms part of a “growing prominence of Afrikaans women writers” who “far more explicitly [engage] ... connections between a certain kind of land ownership and the physical and sexual abuse of women” (Devarenne, 2005:37). Most notable about Devarenne’s review is that the texts by Van Niekerk and Dido were only available in Afrikaans at the time of the review’s publication. The inclusion of these three texts is understandable within what seems to be Devarenne’s overarching point – that is, that the work of women authors has risen in stature in South Africa and is offering interesting new perspectives on the country and its issues. However, even though the *London Review of Books* can certainly be considered a publication that is widely and internationally read, one would be hard pressed to argue that a great section of its overall readership would be able to read and

understand Afrikaans. That Van Niekerk's novel in Afrikaans was viewed as so significant that a comparatively inaccessible text would merit such a literary earmark by the reviewer, even before Heyns's 2006 translation, suggests that, for Devarenne at least, the limitation of a text's language (and this limitation is one that is of an arguable nature) should not hamper the way in which it is considered critically in the international arena.

Following the literary reviews of *Agaat*, four important essays were published on the novel on LitNet. The first is by Johann Rossouw (2005), with responses to his essay by Andries Visagie (2005), Anton van Niekerk (2005), and Willie Burger (2005). Rossouw (2005) offers a political reading of the novel that relies on a number of essentialisms regarding Afrikaner identity and the place of Afrikaners, Afrikaans and Afrikaner culture in a democratic South Africa. Visagie (2005) disagrees with Rossouw regarding the latter's pessimistic interpretation of *Agaat*, and stresses that the novel is a kind of living monument for Afrikaans. Van Niekerk (2005) takes issue with the way in which Rossouw deploys the identity of "Afrikaner" to include those who have, like Van Niekerk himself, given up the label "Afrikaner," without sacrificing aspects of the Afrikaans language and its culture. Burger (2005), in turn, notes that reading the novel from a limited perspective to debate other political matters would be an injustice to the literary text. He therefore presents a discussion of a number of themes in the novel to illustrate how any historical and political reading of the novel can be far more nuanced when focusing on aspects of the text beyond just the basic events of the plot (Burger, 2005). I have previously given an overview of the arguments and responses put forward by these pieces (see Fourie, 2011:8-9), and so I do not do so in detail again here to avoid repetition. What is important, however, is that these four texts have often been cited in studies concerning *Agaat*, and so, they have become critically important argumentative touchstones for researchers, both in Afrikaans and English.

As Annemarie van Niekerk (2004) predicted in her review of *Agaat*, the novel was awarded numerous literary awards, including the University of Johannesburg Prize (Afrikaans), the W.A. Hofmeyr Prize, the M-Net Literary Award, the Hertzog Prize for prose, and the C.L. Engelbrecht Prize. While these awards evidence the novel's so-called literariness, it is significant that the novel also received the Helgaardt Steyn Prize (shared with Herman Giliomee for his historical text, *Die Afrikaners: 'n Biografie*, 2004) and was shortlisted for the South African Booksellers Choice Awards in 2005. The fact that the Helgaardt Steyn Prize was shared with Herman Giliomee for his extensive history of the Afrikaners also illustrates

something interesting about how *Agaat* can be considered. Like *Die Afrikaners: 'n Biografie*, Van Niekerk's text is recognised for offering a detailed history of an important period in the history of the Afrikaners, albeit – unlike Giliomee's text – in the form of a literary chronicle. The shortlisting for the Booksellers Choice Awards speaks to the popular appeal the work also commands.

#### 4.4.1.4. *Memorandum*

Whereas a decade had passed between the publication of Van Niekerk's debut and second novel, her third novel, *Memorandum: 'n verhaal met skilderye*, appeared two years after *Agaat*. It was written in collaboration with the artist Adriaan van Zyl. In the earliest Afrikaans review of this text, Hennie Aucamp returns indirectly to some observations he had made in his review of *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*. He refers to Van Niekerk as a “geniale” (brilliant) author and cultural philosopher, and views the text and paintings in *Memorandum* as mutually illuminating (Aucamp, 2006:11). The reviewer presents a very positive piece on the novel, praising Van Niekerk's ability to improvise and utilise reference texts in the novel (ibid.). He concludes that the novel's (gallows) humour succeeds in saving it from despondency, and, in his view, the novel should immediately be recognised as a classic (ibid.). It seems that in Aucamp's view, Van Niekerk's work had (finally) reached a distinct quality that her first collection of short stories could only gesture towards. Johan Myburg (2006:17) expresses a similar opinion when he refers to the novel as a matured (“beleë”) Van Niekerk text for a reader to feast on.<sup>122</sup> While some reviews of her early poetry, first short story collection, and to a lesser extent *Triomf* and *Agaat* criticised the almost too obvious insertion of intellectualism and cultural artefacts (that for some reviewers, at least, challenged the readers' suspension of disbelief), Myburgh views *Memorandum* as a clever weaving of fine language, philosophical concepts, J.S. Bach's *Passacaglia*, and seemingly unimportant observations (ibid.).

Johann Rossouw's review of *Memorandum* is also positive, noting that the novel explores the notions of community and transcendence in great and gripping fashion (2006:4). Though he makes little reference to Van Niekerk's authorship or other works, Rossouw does take issue with what he seems to suggest is a kind of intellectual goading in the novel, which he calls ill-

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<sup>122</sup> Myburg evidently also views *Memorandum* as a kind of progression in Van Niekerk's writing, noting that while *Agaat* could be considered a richly embroidered text, *Memorandum* can be compared to the intricate construction of a weaver's nest (2006:17).

judged and on-purpose, as a character (and apparently, therefore, the author, the argument appears to be) attacks new forms of Afrikaner nationalism (ibid.). In a brief review for *Insig*, Etienne Britz (2007) mentions the anti-nationalist character that Rossouw refers to, but he does not mention it as being to the detriment of the text. Indeed, for Britz too, the novel is a masterpiece that explores bodily disintegration that is paired with spiritual progress (2007:38).

Though overall the critical response to *Memorandum* was positive, it is perhaps due to the novel's combined textual and visual presentation that it received a more limited response when compared to Van Niekerk's previous two novels. Those reviews that did appear, however, do mostly show a particular awareness of both Van Niekerk's greater oeuvre, as well as her position as an Afrikaans author. While the author's earlier work had been criticised for its overt references to complex ideas and intellectual debates, the richness of this text is lauded, and none of the reviewers view the complexity and density of the novel's text (which, one should keep in mind, includes tables and footnotes) in a negative light. While *Memorandum* did not win any awards, it was nominated for the University of Johannesburg Prize (Afrikaans).

#### 4.4.1.5. *Die sneeuslaper*

*Die sneeuslaper* (2009), Van Niekerk's return to short stories, is hailed as a beautiful Afrikaans book by Cilliers van den Berg in his review (2010). The reviewer finds that the collection's central motif is a certain meta-awareness of the value of the meaning of writing and the role of narrative, which he feels is successfully interwoven into beautiful prose, without disturbing the entertaining stories (Van den Berg, 2010:9). In reviews by Andries Visagie (2010) and Marius Crous (2010), Van Niekerk's stature as noteworthy South African author is emphasised. Not only can she be considered an international author, writes Crous, but, in the case of *Die sneeuslaper*, the meta-awareness of the text is an expression of the author's own views on writing – her ars poetica (2010:13). Crous, Visagie and Thys Human (2010) identify in the speaker of the text – who is a reflecting philosopher – an affinity with J.M. Coetzee's 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello* in that the author of the fiction makes an appearance in some form in the work of fiction. These mentions of similarities with an English author presupposes a conception of an imagined Afrikaans reader who is also very familiar with South African English literature, a kind of expectation not found amongst the English-language reviewers of Van Niekerk's writing. Indeed, the point of departure for Afrikaans scholars and critics

frequently seems to be that their imagined reader is familiar with the work of canonised authors in at least two languages (i.e. Afrikaans and English), and sometimes even that their readers are well read in three (i.e. Afrikaans, English and Dutch).

Crous also identifies a number of links with Van Niekerk's earlier work: the detailed observation of birds, like in *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*, the incisive criticism of current South African politics, as in *Memorandum*, as well as an argumentative approach that at times reminds him of the so-called backstreet philosopher ("agterstraatfilosoof") Treppie in *Triomf* (ibid.). Much like Myburg's (2006) and Aucamp's (2006) observations about *Memorandum*, Visagie (2010:9) and Human (2010) note that *Die sneeuslaper* does not compromise on its (intellectual) exploration of the nature of art and artistry. Visagie additionally identifies a lyricism in the language of the text that effectively serves as a counter to the unimaginativeness of everyday language (ibid.). That being said, the reviewer expresses criticism of a pretentiousness that is identifiable in the text, particularly in what he views as the excessive use of Dutch words to help conjure up the environment of Amsterdam, as well as in the romanticising of art. As he puts it, even the beggars in the narrative are exhibits for aesthetic amazement, and not first of all socio-economically marginalised individuals (Visagie, 2010:9).

At the same time, Visagie makes two almost prophetically important points in relation to Van Niekerk's work: firstly, he senses in *Die sneeuslaper* that the author is preparing to return to the genre of poetry, and secondly, in tandem with his criticism of the depiction of certain groups and individuals, he notes a challenging call by the author to shake art loose (here Afrikaans literature) from its socio-politically engaged straightjacket (ibid.).

In a longer discussion for LitNet, Joan Hambidge (2010) calls *Die sneeuslaper* challenging due to its long and dense narratives – a critique that has by now become a familiar enough refrain in the reception of Van Niekerk's work. Hambidge reads some of these writerly peculiarities ("hebbelikhede") of the author as part of the meta-awareness of the text, however, and the reviewer notes that these peculiarities are consciously inserted by the author into this text.

Though Hambidge further acknowledges that the self-indulgent and overdrawn aspects of the text, particularly such as those identified by Visagie (2010) in his review, are for her both the power and ruin of the text, she views *Die sneeuslaper*'s meditation on artistry as of enough importance to show that Van Niekerk as an author can continue to produce new and creative

texts after her success with *Agaat*. This is reflected, in a way, in the collection of short stories having been awarded the University of Johannesburg Prize (Afrikaans) in 2011, becoming the second time that the author received this particular accolade.

#### 4.4.2. Major themes in the scholarly reception of Van Niekerk's prose works

What follows below is an overview and discussion of the predominant subjects in research on Van Niekerk's prose works. Where relevant, I also identify overlaps between the insights of these studies and those focusing on Van Niekerk's poetry that I have discussed in the section above.

##### 4.4.2.1. Apartheid and the history of Afrikaner nationalism

Despite Van Niekerk's earliest prose publication being *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* (1992), it is her second prose work and first novel, *Triomf* (1994), that marks the advent of research on her prose in Afrikaans literary studies. Echoing her own review and a number of contemporaneous commentaries on the novel (Muller, 1994a), Martie Muller (1994b) conducts a reading of mythical elements in *Triomf* that bring attention to the possible political allegories of the text.<sup>123</sup> Muller's interpretation is mostly undertaken through reading the novel as allegorical, viewing the situation of the Benade family through the rubric of the Oedipus myth, with Lambert signifying the tragic figure who murders his father (Pop) and has an incestuous relationship with his mother (Mol) (1994b:179). In what contemporarily might be deemed a controversial view, Muller sees the state of the Benade family's life as close to a "natural state" of human existence (informed by the work of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss); this she argues is only possible because of the novel depicting the lives of so-called low-class human beings ("die lae-klas mens"), living, as she refers to it, naturally and as their instincts dictate (1994b:180). What can be isolated as important from Muller's study is what she identifies about the novel – particularly the possibilities of socio-political and historical allegoric interpretations of the text – since what she identifies returns in later discussions of *Triomf*.

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<sup>123</sup> In addition to the details provided in the bibliography, this same piece by Muller was also published in *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, 35(1/2): 1-10.

Muller's reception of the novel (1994a & 1994b) is praised by Phil van Schalkwyk (2003), who contends that amongst the early reviewers of Van Niekerk's text, Muller was one of the few to very quickly identify the philosophical depth of the novel. In his doctoral dissertation, Van Schalkwyk reads *Triomf* along with a large number of contemporary South African and Dutch texts, exploring "myths of the possible" (2003:n.p). He notes that *Triomf* was, along with a number of other texts, illustrative of a shift in South African novels, in that, rather than being trapped in the depiction of the extraordinary circumstances of apartheid South Africa (as was the case with South African prose from the 1970s to early 1990s), it shows a gradual introduction to normalising the mundane and everyday (2003:315). His argument therefore serves to underscore the view that *Triomf* not only signifies an important moment in the development of Afrikaans prose, but in broader South African writing as well. As such, *Triomf* can be viewed as a meaningful text in the development of a broadly conceptualised South African literature, and as a powerful node in both the Afrikaans and South African literary systems (and of course subsequent to its Afrikaans publication, also in the South African English literary system, as discussed in the previous chapter).

Drawing on the many possibilities of discursive interrogation that *Triomf* invites, Sherrilyn Hoogbaard reads the novel as it "links patriarchy, incest and apartheid with the discourse of poverty," utilising a Foucauldian approach (1996:n.p). The researcher grounds her study by arguing that Van Niekerk's novel sets itself apart from older Afrikaans prose concerned with so-called poor whites (like that of Jochem van Bruggen) by not being didactic and moralising, but rather by offering a kind of close-up of the loss of dignity that poverty leads to (Hoogbaard, 1996:6). It is contended that *Triomf* offers extensive depictions of the life of the proletariat and offers a sharp response to a society characterised by the domination of one group by another (Hoogbaard, 1996:95). In the broader system of research in Afrikaans on the work of Marlene van Niekerk, Hoogbaard's study represents one of the earliest to attend specifically to the engaged nature of her work, as it concludes that everything is complex and there are no easy solutions or escapes. In other words, human beings are trapped in a network of relationships (social, economic, religious, sexual, etc.) and can at best harbour illusions of solutions (1996:96).

Willie Burger (2000) views the character of Treppie in *Triomf* as a kind of Zarathustran figure who sees religion and politics (amongst other things) as generalisations that deny the individuality of the Benade family. In a reading that closely relates the possible political

allegories of the novel to the history of South Africa, Burger analyses a number of passages and events to show how Treppie tears down the neat and tidy, idyllic metaphorical wallpaper to expose behind it the reality that is the barrenness and chaos that hides beneath (2000:3). Not only is this an undermining of powerful socio-cultural and political discourses, but the metaphor is further explored as Burger shows that Treppie is also a kind of creator of wallpaper (2000:14). As such, Treppie both denies the wallpaper created by others (the church, the state, etc.) and relies on creating it (in his poetry and wordplay) to deal with reality (Burger, 2000:3). In this way, Treppie as a character serves as a musing on the (literary) arts and its role making the world a better place for us (*ibid.*). Burger's perspectives here are significant, as they rely on the political and historical issues addressed by Van Niekerk's novel, while simultaneously interrogating the exploration of the role of art and the artist in turbulent times – a research theme that appears throughout in scholarship on Van Niekerk's work.

The line of argument that humans use “wallpaper” to disguise reality is explored further in another article by Burger (2002), wherein he undertakes a comparative reading of two theoretical approaches, utilising two novels: André P. Brink's *Duiwelskloof* (1998) is read in relation to the notion that we can only understand ourselves and the world through narratives (stated otherwise: we construct reality through narratives). *Triomf*, in turn, is read in terms of the idea that “there is an insurmountable gap between narrative and reality and that narratives merely disguise reality” (2002:100). To summarise, Burger finds problematic elements in both of these approaches, and therefore suggests Paul Ricoeur's ideas of mimesis and muthos – reflection and the act of composition – as a way of understanding the dynamic relationship between the text, the reader, and the reader's world (2002:111). It is this dynamicity, as evident in the two texts discussed, that allows constant new perspectives on the past that can open possibilities for the future (Burger, 2002:114).

In a reading that considers historical ideas of self and other in the history of the Afrikaners, Marius Crous (2016c) utilises the notion of *xenia* (the guest relationship) to read *Triomf*. He looks specifically at the interaction of the Benade family with those who visit the family in some way: the volunteers canvassing for the National Party in the run-up to the first democratic elections, the Jehovah's witnesses, the men from the Afrikanerweerstandsbeweging (AWB) who try to recruit Lambert for their cause, etc. Though the concept that is central to his analysis is drawn from a certain social value of ancient Hellenistic societies – evident in texts from classical literature, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* – Crous connects the literary depiction

and meaning of *xenia* to *Triomf* and especially to the symbolic potential that it adds to readings of the socio-political elements of the novel, notably in the idea of the Other and interactions with such an other.

The relationship between Afrikaner history and apartheid in *Agaat* has also received considerable attention. Keying into a section of the debate surrounding Afrikaner identity as it is depicted in Van Niekerk's second novel (discussed above in the reception; particularly Rossouw, 2005 and Visagie, 2005), Philip John asserts that the transition of the character Jakkie (to Canada) and Milla's death represent a loss of Afrikaans identity (2008:88). However, there is also a sense of reparation, he opines, as the ownership of the farm in the novel is transferred to Agaat. John reads this – a coloured Afrikaans identity (“bruin Afrikaanse identiteit”) – as suggestive of the only possibility of a continued existence envisioned by Van Niekerk for an Afrikaans identity in South Africa. John's references to *Agaat* is part of a larger study, and here I focus only on the sections relevant to my project, but it should be mentioned that he reads Jakkie/Milla and Agaat as representatives of particular population groups, suggesting for him, at least, that the identity in question has a collective side, and is nuanced – therefore suggesting identity as an ongoing process, rather than an identifiable set of static elements (John, 2008:89).

Van Niekerk's novels have also been read by scholars as receptacles of historical and cultural artefacts. The notion of the family saga and its relation to Afrikaner nationalism is what informs Irma du Plessis's reading of the relationship between “novel” and “nation” in *Agaat* (Du Plessis, 2010). Du Plessis is interested in the “ethical positions and moral horizons” offered by political readings of the novel (2010:152). She argues that “*Agaat* enables a conversation concerning the articulation between textual, biological and cultural reproduction that both extends and deepens our understanding of the terrain of the ‘political’,” which brings an interesting sociological reading to the novel.<sup>124</sup>

Sonja Loots (2011) uses *Agaat* along with *Horrelpoot* (2006) by Eben Venter, *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* (2006) by Ingrid Winterbach and *30 Nagte in Amsterdam* (2008) by Etienne van Heerden to read the novel as a museum or archive. In each of these novels, Loots investigates characters who act as literal or figurative archivists or curators of both a personal,

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<sup>124</sup> Important to note about this article is that the author had originally written it in English before it was translated into Afrikaans by Zandra Bezuidenhout.

individual past and of a collective Afrikaans language and cultural heritage that is aware of its own imbrication in a painful history (2011:77). About *Agaat*, Loots concludes that

the novel is a brutal depiction of the ties between Afrikaner nationalism and Afrikaans cultural history; and the way in which it led to a loss of power. *Agaat*'s curatorship is undermining and destabilising in nature; and the novel itself is equally ambivalent and critical about the inheritance that it records.<sup>125</sup>

— Loots (2011:95)

Though she does not cite Visagie (2005), it is clear that Loots's argument rests on similar foundations to Visagie's in that the novel is a kind of chronicle of Afrikaans culture and history (good and ill), and this again emphasises Van Niekerk as a literary chronicler of these elements. In her doctoral study, Loots (2016) uses the notion of the novel as museum or archive to discuss the idea of the novel as a kind of encyclopaedia, this time with a particular focus on Van Niekerk's three novels. A character in each of these novels acts as a kind of chronicler: Lambert in *Triomf*, *Agaat* in *Agaat* and Wiid in *Memorandum*. Loots's study offers an extensive consideration of the idea of the novel as encyclopaedia, and she presents a number of interesting perspectives on each of Van Niekerk's novels within this context. Though each of the novels are markedly different, Loots writes, they also show similarities: "All three of the novels express the same aesthetic attitude. Art and creativity require that knowledge be fragmented, reordered, combined into new combinations, rewritten, translated and be modified in many other ways. It is precisely in this way that it acquires new value" (Loots, 2016:270).<sup>126</sup> Loots's study again emphasises Van Niekerk's role as a kind of chronicler of Afrikaans history and culture through her fiction.

#### 4.4.2.2. Language

A few studies have focused on language and/or other structuring elements that are used in the narratives of Van Niekerk's prose. The possibility of knowing the other through language is,

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<sup>125</sup> Orig.: "Die roman is 'n brutale uitbeelding van die band tussen Afrikanernasionalisme en die Afrikaanse kultuurgeskiedenis; en die wyse waarop dit tot magsverlies gelei het. *Agaat* se kuratorskap is ondermynend en destabiliserend van aard; en die roman *Agaat* is ewe ambivalent en krities oor die erfenis wat dit boekstaaf."

<sup>126</sup> Orig.: "[A] drie romans [verwoord] dieselfde estetiese houding [...]. Kuns en kreatiwiteit behels dat kennis gefragmenteer, herorden, in nuwe kombinasies saamgevoeg, herskryf, vertaal en op talle ander maniere gewysig word. Juis hierdeur verkry dit nuwe waarde."

according to Burger (2006), a central theme in *Agaat*. He contends that the novel explores the challenges of knowing death (the great other) and other people through a number of elements present in the text. Noting that both knowledge of death and knowledge of the other is limited by one's need to always translate experiences and observations into one's own subjective language, Burger identifies in this very process also the act of seeing the self, as the other is held up as a mirror (2006:179-180). While *Agaat* is therefore an exploration of making sense through a kind of mimesis, it still remains rooted in the current South African context and is thus concerned with the tradition of the Afrikaans *plaasroman* (Burger, 2006:180). Ultimately, Burger's reading sees the novel as an exploration of the mirror's surface – in other words, the membrane between self and other, and the possibilities of reaching through this membrane to attempt to know the other (or Other).

In his introduction to a special issue of *Journal of Literary Studies* on the work of Marlene van Niekerk, Burger (2009) returns again to the centrality of language in Van Niekerk's three novels. He focuses on the ways in which the “mimetic possibilities of language are investigated” in *Triomf*, *Agaat* and *Memorandum* (2009:1). As everything is mediated through language, it limits knowledge of the self, the other, and the world, Burger posits. However, he views Van Niekerk's prose as an aestheticized attempt by the author to “reach beyond these restrictions,” opening up new ways of thinking (*ibid*):

The aesthetic is ultimately the only way to truly find one another, to see the world differently. Aesthetic language can still not reveal that which exists outside of language, but through the aesthetic experience something of the absent other can be experienced. [...] By moving the boundaries of language [...] Van Niekerk resists existing ways of thinking. She signals a new direction in the exploration of our humanity and of our world by handling language in a different way.<sup>127</sup>

— Burger (2009:14)

While he here offers an important analysis of the functioning of language in Van Niekerk's three novels, Burger also expresses some important sentiments regarding Van Niekerk *as an*

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<sup>127</sup> Orig.: “Die estetiese is uiteindelik die enigste manier om mekaar werklik te vind, om die eie wêreld anders te sien. Die estetiese taal kan uiteraard steeds nie aandui wat buite taal is nie, maar deur die estetiese ervaring kan iets van die afwesige ander tog ervaar word. [...] Deur taal se grense te skuif [...] verset Van Niekerk haar teen die bestaande manier van dink. Sy wys die rigting aan in die verkenning van ons menswees en van ons wêreld, deur op 'n ander manier met taal om te gaan.”

*author* and the way her work engages the context of its content and the context of the time it appeared in.

Language and the creative ways in which it is utilised in *Die sneeuslaper* is the core of Aletta Stander's MA thesis, which investigates the volume of short stories as a minor literature (Stander, 2012). Stander echoes many reviewers who commented on *Die sneeuslaper* as a kind of treatise on the role of art and the artist in society (2012:13). This is combined with an analysis of certain themes in the volume, including language, South African politics, music and birds as symbols in the author's oeuvre (2012:109). Stander finds in her reading of the collection a hesitance to be blatantly political engaged, resulting in a deterritorialising of language and a subtler engagedness – both characteristics of a minor literature (in following Deleuze and Guattari) (ibid.). In a concluding remark, Stander claims that *Die sneeuslaper* deviates from traditional (older) Afrikaans literature as well as modern Afrikaans literature, which often yields to the strong influence of English (2012:109-110). Indeed, while the volume is rich with uses of German, French and, of course, Dutch, Stander notes the absence of English in the text, reading this as taking a position not against the multilingualism of current-day South Africa, but rather against increasing pressure on Afrikaans as a language within a milieu that favours English (2012:110). This situates the short story collection as a deliberate protest against the already existing infiltration of Afrikaans by English (ibid.). The stuttering Afrikaans utilised by Van Niekerk is finally seen by Stander as an attempt of the language to deterritorialise, to vary, to stammer, to stutter and to stumble in order to ensure continued dynamicity (2012:112). These findings chime interestingly with the discussion above on Van Niekerk's most recent three volumes of poetry, and I come back to this in the conclusion.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's idea of the "production of presence" and the ways in which language can function in a literary text to create a "presence effect" is applied to *Die sneeuslaper* by Anneli Groenewald (2014) in her MA thesis. Following Gumbrecht, Groenewald insists that the predominance of hermeneutic approaches "leads to a reductionist view of literature" (2014:5). Using the "presence effect," Groenewald argues that *Die sneeuslaper* can be read "as a contribution to a broader reflection on the way in which art is experienced, and on the role and relevance of literature, art and art criticism" in the current era (ibid.). In Groenewald's research, there are overlaps with some of the previously mentioned studies that are also concerned with language in Van Niekerk's texts, and at the same time, there is also an intersection with the article by Janien Linde and Phil van Schalkwyk (2016), who focus on the

effect *Die sneeuslaper* might have on the reader. I discuss their study further on. Notably, both Groenewald and Linde and Van Schalkwyk seek to discuss Van Niekerk's work outside of the by now familiar frame of socially and politically engaged themes.

#### 4.4.2.3. Narrative form and genre

Whereas Burger has investigated *Triomf* and *Agaat's* interrogations of language as part of their narratives, Louise Viljoen (2009) has undertaken a study of the diary form in the narrative of *Agaat*. Like a number of other research articles discussed in this chapter, Viljoen's article is obviously firstly concerned with the literary text, but also comes to some insights regarding Van Niekerk's craft and artistry. As such, Viljoen discusses how the diary entries in the narrative of the novel results in *Agaat* being a metafictional text (an effect she shows that the author has expressly admitted to), and how the diary form is also used in a way to assist in the characterisation of Milla:

She is a culturally informed middle-class woman [...] who knows from experience that she cannot take her female friends into her confidence. Furthermore, the fragmented structure of the diary fits within the structure of Milla's days as housewife, farmer and educator of Agaat and Jakkie on Grootmoedersdrift.<sup>128</sup>

— Viljoen (2009:73)

The diary also serves, Viljoen states, “as a form of self-reflection, self-expression and image-building by Milla,” while the physical diaries in the narrative, as well as “the immediacy of the diary form and the tension between private and the public implicit” in this form, are discussed, leading to an exploration of how the diaries serve to tie together the other narrative forms employed in the novel (Viljoen, 2009:69).

In two wide-ranging articles on the rise of the short story cycle in Afrikaans, Nina Botes and Neil Cochrane (2011a and 2011b) briefly discuss some aspects of *Die sneeuslaper*. Their argument includes characteristics of the interwoven-yet-autonomous short stories in Van Niekerk's second short story collection as part of a thorough theoretical consideration of the

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<sup>128</sup> Orig.: “Sy is ’n gekultiveerde middelklasvrou [...] wat uit ondervinding weet dat sy nie haar vriendinne in haar vertrou kan neem nie (124-125). Verder pas die gefragmenteerde struktuur van die dagboek binne die struktuur van Milla se dae as huisvrou, boer en opvoeder van Agaat en Jakkie op Grootmoedersdrift.”

notion of the short story cycle and how it manifests in the Afrikaans literary canon (2011a:116, 143-144). While *Die sneeuslaper* can certainly not be considered a focal point of their articles, it offers a useful perspective on how Van Niekerk is part of a number of authors experimenting with the short story form.

Situating her study within narratology, Heilna du Plooy pays attention to time and temporality in *Agaat* to see how “the novel reflects and comments on ideological and social practices in specific historical periods,” using this “as point of departure in order to determine [sic] the meanings generated by the esthetic [sic] representation of time” (2013:50). Describing the novel as “iconic,” Du Plooy finds that it offers a complex and sophisticated way to conceive of and deal with history – that is, something to be uncovered and undermined, but simultaneously also re-collected and weighed as a part of a so-called *Trauerarbeit* (“work of mourning”) (2013:50, 57, 58). Though there are some overlaps here with approaches focusing on apartheid in the novel, Du Plooy is chiefly concerned with aspects of narrative.

A structuring frame through which *Die sneeuslaper* has been viewed is that of religiosity or spirituality. Chris van der Merwe reads these notions as important (albeit secondary) in the volume’s “‘narrative argument’ about the meaning of life and art” (2012:1). He finds “a connection between trauma, mysticism and creativity” within the struggles of a number of characters depicted in the short stories in *Die sneeuslaper*. Van der Merwe sees these figures as alter egos of Van Niekerk as an author and intellectual who is trying to understand the meaning of art and life (2012:9).

#### **4.4.2.4. Authorship**

A few critics have read Van Niekerk’s prose for insights into authorship and the roles fulfilled by authors in modern society. Charl-Pierre Naudé (2016) engages with a number of insights from Roland Barthes’s *WZ* (1967) as a point of departure for a consideration of the significance of autonomy for the modern author. His analysis, which focuses on the respective cases of Van Niekerk’s *Agaat* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, “considers ever more closely the Barthesian argument that the net effect of modern literature should be a force that opens up spaces for psychic, intellectual, cultural and physical liberation,” despite the “potential that liberation discourses themselves have to fail the liberation quest and to provide new shackles

in the service of totalitarian and prescriptive thinking” – evidenced in his discussion of what Naudé calls limited (and limiting) readings of *Agaat* and *Disgrace* (2016:334-335). He consequently identifies how particular readings of these novels, such as those grounded in, for instance, postcolonial and feminist theories – despite the ethical framings of these approaches – are often influenced by the political *Zeitgeist* of the day, which can place severe limits on a text’s potential to produce multifaceted meanings (Naudé, 2016:349). Van Niekerk and her novel feature very briefly in his discussion, but Naudé nonetheless does identify that certain theoretical approaches to Van Niekerk’s work, when applied uncritically, could have a limiting effect on the broad horizon of interpretations the text might invite. Notable is his argument that seeks to speak to both Afrikaans and English literature in South Africa, but also, again like Stander’s argument (2012), speaks to the influence of these literatures on each other.

Van Niekerk has taken the rather unusual step (for an author) to offer a reading of aspects of her own work. In a contribution to the book *My ma se ma se ma se ma: Zuid-Afrikaanse families in verhalen* (Jansen, De Jong-Goossens & Olivier, 2008), Van Niekerk expresses her views on the so-called “child in the backroom” that features in her work (Van Niekerk, 2008). Firstly, the author is very careful to state that her piece is simply another interpretation of the novels and characters in question and should not be privileged over other readings or be seen as a reading with higher authority than the interpretations of other scholars (2008:103). After concisely identifying what can be considered “children of the backroom” in her work (including *Sprokkelster*, *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*, *Triomf* and *Agaat*), Van Niekerk proceeds to analyse the parallels between the lives of Lambert Benade from *Triomf* and Agaat Lourier from *Agaat*. Both are shown to be powerful within their respective families, but their power is limited to the confines of the family and in many ways directed by their parental figures, resulting in a cyclical pattern of violence in the family: Treppie with Lambert and Milla with Agaat. The author asks whether the children of the backroom can break away from their masters using their masters’ instruments. Can they transcend the figures who came before and shaped them to use their power differently than through control, intimidation and dominance (2008:108)? The answer is ultimately, according to Van Niekerk, no. These two figures, the shamans of their family, as Van Niekerk calls them, are defeated in the end (2008:116). In her conclusion, Van Niekerk links this reading of these shamanistic figures to her own artistry:

One reading of the fate of the children in the backroom would be that it is a self-aware critique on the obsolescence of the romantic model of the national artist today. What should replace this model in a tarnishing and diseased society? That is the question. What kind of artist can be effective in a world where the rich north (the masters) helps to maintain the systematic poverty and violence in the south (the children in the backroom)? Self-deluded reconjuring of such a world from family or *volk*-bound optics does not appear in my view to be an option anymore.<sup>129</sup>

— Van Niekerk (2008:116-117)

As a counter to this, Van Niekerk tentatively puts forward the character Jakkie, who is the international anthropologist, the uprooted nomad, expert, documenter, curator and chronicler of (not just his own, but also other) vanishing cultures (2008:117). With the allegory of the character as the author now stretched to the point of being almost entirely transparent, the author muses that Jakkie (the artistic figure) is not sure of his choices, and considering all the ills of the world, he wonders whether his craft is not simply an obscene activity in the midst of so much human need in the world. Of course, Van Niekerk ultimately leaves this point open to discussion. She reminds the reader in her last paragraphs of how Jakkie the expert is still dependent on the shamans to find inspiration for his work (*ibid.*).

Gerrit Olivier (2011) also reads the character of Agaat as a shaman, or as representative of the romantic artist, but challenges Van Niekerk's own, more pessimistic view on this – and by implication, on what this means for an understanding of the role of the author (2008). Olivier mentions that a number of studies (including Carvalho & Van Vuuren, 2009; Devarenne, 2009; and Prinsloo & Visagie, 2007 & 2009 – and many aside) have focused on *Agaat* as a postcolonial rewriting of the *plaasroman* (Olivier, 2011:167). Within this framework, it is the relationship between Milla and Agaat that receives attention for the master/servant dynamic. Olivier claims that within a reading of the psychological dimensions of the novel, the mother/daughter relationship between the two main characters should bear more weight than the master/servant relationship, and he sets out to explore the mother/child relationship – a new

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<sup>129</sup> Orig.: “Een lesing van die eindes van die agterkamerkinders sou wees dat dit ’n selfbewuste kritiek is op die uitgediendheid van die romantiese model van die nasionale kunstenaar vandag. Waardeur dié model vervang moet word in ’n ontluisterende en versiekte maatskappy, is die vraag. Watter soort kunstenaar kan effektief wees in ’n wêreld waarin die ryk noorde (die meesters) die sistematiese armoede en geweld in die suide (die agterkamerkinders) help instandhou? Selfbegogelende hertowering van so ’n wêreld vanuit ’n familie-/volksgebonde optiek lyk vir my nie meer na ’n opsie nie.”

element introduced into the *plaasroman* tradition through *Agaat* – as an unfinished dynamic within the narrative (ibid.). The ruined mother/child relationship is, according to Olivier, the basic trauma that manifests in a multitude of power games between Milla, Agaat, Jak (and perhaps even Jakkie) (2011:179). For Agaat, this relationship is especially complicated, as Milla is both her madam and mother, entailing that the death of both these figures are confluent (ibid.). Olivier claims it is possible to read Agaat’s mourning of the death of her mother, while she cares most intimately for the ill Milla in the months before her death, as more than just revenge for what Milla did to her; it is also an opportunity to create new opportunities for intimacies, to complete the mourning process (2011:180). In all of this, Olivier sees a kind of reconciliation for Milla, and, though not as positive as other critics have been (notably Rossman & Stobie, 2012 and Van Vuuren, 2010a and 2010b), he also sees the strong possibility of reconciliation and a third life for Agaat (the first having been Agaat as child, followed by the second, Agaat as servant) (ibid.).

In his reading, Olivier shows that Agaat is perhaps not as entrapped by her relationship with Milla, if one would like to interpret it as such. In terms of the role of the artist that he seeks to emphasise, therefore, I would argue, the impotence Van Niekerk reads into the shamanistic figure of Agaat is perhaps not entirely valid. Olivier agrees with Van Niekerk on one point: Jakkie as a kind of citizen of the world does offer an alternative, but indeed, he is still dependent on the shaman for his inspiration (Olivier, 2011:183).

To place these thoughts on the role of the author (as mulled over by Van Niekerk herself as an author and intellectual, but also as her oeuvre entices readers to engage with this issue too) within a broader view of the development of Van Niekerk’s artistry, one sees here in her view (Van Niekerk, 2008) and the contesting view of Olivier (2011) a discourse that is – according to the work of Viljoen (2017c & 2018), Pieterse (2017) and De Vries (2015) discussed above – an ongoing concern for the author, and which has become more nuanced as her oeuvre has grown. I return to this observation in the conclusion to this chapter.

#### **4.4.2.5. Space**

Two studies emphasise space in Van Niekerk’s work. The analytical metaphor of wallpaper in *Triomf* that have I discussed above is mentioned by H.P. van Coller (2003) in an article wherein

he considers the conversation between a few modern South African novels and the work of novelist C.M. van den Heever. *Triomf*, which Van Coller singles out as a novel that has reached a kind of cult status in Afrikaans literature, is read as a so-called suburban novel (“voorstadroman”) (2003:58).<sup>130</sup> Van Coller reads the incest that is so central to the narrative as an extended metaphor for the Afrikaner’s apartheid history; not only in terms of how the Afrikaner’s wilful self-isolation resulted in sterile degeneration, but also how an entire cultural history of suburban Afrikaners is explored by the novel and linked back to idyllic fantasies of the farm. Ultimately, Van Coller concludes, *Triomf* pays a kind of homage to the farm novels of Van den Heever, even if Van Niekerk’s novel does so as part of an unmasking of a socio-cultural and political history (2003:66).

Another study focusing on space, which also mentions the work of Marlene van Niekerk within an Afrikaans-English comparative context, and with which my project shows some important resonances, is that of Bibi Burger (2016). Burger undertakes what she calls a geocritical comparative analysis of a number of urban novels in Afrikaans and English. She argues that there is a difference in the ways in which Afrikaans and English literary theorists receive “these novels [that] intertextually refer back to previous depictions of the city” (Burger, 2016:ii). In some ways, Burger’s very important study works through a magnifying approach. By this, I mean that she focuses on a select number of literary texts and their scholarly reception, comparing the representation of urban spaces in these novels as read by scholars in the respective literary systems.<sup>131</sup> My study takes a step back to take in a more systemic perspective by focusing on the whole oeuvre of an author as the nexus of entanglement between the Afrikaans and English literary systems.

Van Niekerk is not the focus of Burger’s expansive project. However, she (Burger) does refer to *Triomf*, one of the most famous South African urban novels of the nineties, noting how Michael Titlestad discusses it in comparison with Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying* (1995) and other South African English novels, rather than grouping it with other Afrikaans novels discussed in his piece (Titlestad in Burger, 2016:31). According to Burger, this is an illustration of how

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<sup>130</sup> Van Coller (2006) also mentions, though briefly, both *Triomf* and *Agaat* in an article on the representation of farm, town and city in selected Afrikaans prose texts. Discussion of Van Niekerk’s work in this article is very brief, however, and therefore I do not include it in greater detail here.

<sup>131</sup> The novels included in Burger’s study are *Room 207* (2006; Kgebetli Moele), *Werfsonde* (2012; Kleinboer), *Thirteen Cents* (2000; K. Sello Duiker), *Siegfried* (2007; Willem Anker), *Nineveh* (2011; Henrietta Rose-Innes) and *Vlakwater* (2015; Ingrid Winterbach).

widely accepted Van Niekerk has become as an author within the South African English canon (Burger, 2016:31-32). In her conclusion, Burger finds that predominant trends can be identified in the Afrikaans and English literary discourses regarding the depiction of cities in literature, and, furthermore, that there is very little cooperation between Afrikaans and English literary scholars in investigating the depiction of cities (2016:224). These insights are both interesting and important. My study, in some respects, expands on this by not just focusing on a single textual characteristic (the depiction of cities, and the complexities that that might entail), but rather on the larger trends that are rendered visible in my comparative analysis of the ways in which Van Niekerk's works have been read by Afrikaans and English critics and scholars. These systemic observations will be accompanied by further nuance by also considering the translational and transnational aspects of Van Niekerk's work, looking at how she features both locally in Afrikaans and English, as well as further abroad within Anglo-American literature and world literature.

#### **4.4.2.6. Engaged work: Postcolonialism, *plaasroman*, current issues**

Postcolonial approaches and the subgenre of the *plaasroman* have frequently been used as interpretative prisms through which Van Niekerk's work has been refracted. Heidi de Villiers (2007) conducts a comparative reading of Kasha Potgieter's *Aan die oorkant* (2004) and Van Niekerk's *Agaat* to comment upon these novels' depictions of gender identity within the genre of the *plaasroman*. With the main focus on the Potgieter text, De Villiers reasons that these farm novels demythologise former socio-political realities as found in the older, traditional farm novel (mainly the novels of C.M. van den Heever and D.F. Malherbe) (2007:133). *Aan die oorkant* is similar to *Agaat*, De Villiers asserts – despite the former being according to her a popular novel (“middelmoottliteratuur”) – particularly in its depiction of female characters, which subverts the patriarchal order that characterises older novels in this subgenre (ibid.). De Villiers's article does not offer an extensive discussion of *Agaat*, but it does serve as one of the earliest scholarly works that engages both the postcolonial and farm novel characteristics of the text.

Two articles that broaden scholarship on *Agaat* as a *plaasroman* and as a postcolonial text are those by Loraine Prinsloo and Andries Visagie (2007 & 2009).<sup>132</sup> In the first of these articles, the researchers indicate that Van Niekerk shows a keen awareness of her privileged position as white author, and this informs her depiction of black and coloured characters in her novels (Prinsloo & Visagie, 2007:43). The eponymous character in *Agaat* furthermore shows Van Niekerk's careful consideration of the compromised position of the white postcolonial author. In an analysis within the frame of the *plaasroman*, Prinsloo and Visagie argue that *Agaat* is given a kind of voice (if only figurative), that the relationship between her and Milla reflects in many ways the relationship of colonised/coloniser, and that *Agaat* represents the mutilating effects of apartheid on those it oppressed (2007:passim). The postcolonial characteristics of the novel are fleshed out further in Prinsloo and Visagie's subsequent article (2009), which focuses more strongly on the relationship between land and landownership as depicted in *Agaat*, and its concurrent power relations and identity constructions. In its utilisation of the land as part of the identity construction of the characters, *Agaat* is similar to the older *plaasroman*, they claim, but it simultaneously also undermines and problematises these very discourses (Prinsloo & Visagie, 2009:87).

What Mary West (2009b) calls "the ambivalence inherent in the legacy of Madamhood" is the core of her study in which she analyses Van Niekerk's short story "Klein vingerroefening rondom die nosie van hibriditeit" (2001), with specific attention paid to the relationships between coloured and black domestic workers and their white employers. In tracing the shifting narrative perspectives in the short story, which shifts from first person to third person, she argues "that it is precisely during instances in which the narrator feels compromised and/or complicit in narratives of suburban Madamhood that she resorts to the third person, as if watching herself from a distance inevitably acting out a part she genuinely does not want to play" (West, 2009b:91). In many ways, one could argue that what West identifies here can be seen as groundwork for what later became Van Niekerk's second novel. Interestingly, much of West's argument here overlaps with her 2009 book, *White Women Writing White* (2009a), which was itself a published version of her doctoral dissertation (West, 2006). In the article, she acknowledges and thanks Helize van Vuuren and Alyssa Carvalho for translating the article into Afrikaans (West, 2009b:90). While a number of scholars have worked with the Afrikaans

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<sup>132</sup> These articles are both adapted from Prinsloo's larger study (see Prinsloo, 2006), which I am not discussing here to avoid repetition.

and English versions of Van Niekerk's texts, and published research in both languages, this is one of only two articles that I am aware of – the other being Du Plessis (2010) – where the article was expressly translated from one language into the other. I comment further on this in the conclusion to this chapter.

Some studies have not utilised postcolonialism or the notion of the *plaasroman* to understand Van Niekerk's work, but have still followed approaches that speak to the politically engaged nature of some of her texts. Adéle Nel (2015) conducts a reading of *Die sneeuslaper* along with Etienne van Heerden's *Klimtol* (2013) and Eben Venter's *Wolf, Wolf* (2013) wherein she investigates the notion of the *homo ludens* (playing human). She claims that playing is an important theme in each of these texts, and she offers a well-considered overview of the notion of playing in literature and how it features in the respective novels by Van Niekerk, Van Heerden and Venter. Amongst other things, Nel discusses the games (“speletjies”) in the text that function on a social, political and psychological level – with the works shown to comment on socio-political actualities and unique problems of current-day South Africa (2015:201).

#### **4.4.2.7. Gender**

Gender features as a secondary concern in a number of articles on Van Niekerk's work discussed in this chapter. However, a study in which gender is pre-eminent and fundamental to the research problem is that of Maryke Henn (2010). In her study, the characters of Milla and Afaat in *Afaat* are investigated as female subjects. In what is an extensive project, Henn discusses the complex narrative structure of the novel and how Milla represents herself in different roles (i.e. her identity as young girl, daughter, wife, mother, mistress and patient) in these different narrations of her past and present (Henn, 2010:273). This is read within the broader socio-political and socio-cultural context of the time the novel is set in and how much of this is ultimately carried over to, repeated, and undermined by *Afaat*. Henn's study shows some overlaps with studies on Van Niekerk's work in English, which is discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

#### 4.4.2.8. Art

A number of articles have appeared over the years that are concerned with the overlaps between Van Niekerk's prose and other forms of art – especially the visual and musical arts – often stretching across genres and linking back to other research themes discussed above. The “metatextual dialogue” between *Memorandum* and a selection of paintings by South African-born painter Marlene Dumas (a 2005 exhibition titled “Marlene Dumas – Selected Works”) is explored by Adèle Nel (2009). An essay by Van Niekerk that accompanies the catalogue of the Dumas exhibition, titled “Seven M-blems for Marlene Dumas,” is read as illustrative not only of Van Niekerk's interpretation of Dumas's work, but of reflections on her own work as well (Nel, 2009:110). Nel's analysis shows a transtextual dialogue between the work of Van Niekerk and Dumas, and it reveals the author's conception of the role of the artist, encompassing both the literary and the visual arts. Another article that partially relies on a work by Dumas to interpret Van Niekerk's work is Nel (2012b). As the connection between the literary and visual is not the main focus of this article, though, it is discussed in another section below.

Alwyn Roux, in his MA thesis, describes *Memorandum* as “an exceptionally multifaceted text in which various patterns overlap” (2009:iii). He attempts to read these overlaps as multiple sites for the generation of meaning, analysing them as operating in concurrence. His consequently varied approach to the text pays attention to its narrative structure, its representation of spaces, its intertextuality and “the textual manifestations of liminality,” with a particular focus on the relationship between text and paintings (ibid.). Roux's study speaks to the density and complexity of *Memorandum*, and for the purposes of my study, it is also worth mentioning that Roux identifies the import of the notion of the Passacaglia in the text – both on the level of content, but also on the level of how this knowledge should lead the reader to approach the novel. The Passacaglia is predominant in Helize van Vuuren's 2014 article on the novel. She reads the novel, for instance, in terms of how it responds to the questioning of the role of the artist that the author has read into her own novel (Van Niekerk, 2008), as discussed above. At the end of *Agaat*, the author moves into a wider world, according to Van Vuuren,

because the world is immutably more nuanced and wider than the limited Afrikaans space of Grootmoedersdrift. [...] This realisation at the foundation of *Memorandum* is

the point of development for the multidimensional complexity of Van Niekerk's later works, like both *Die sneeuslaper* (2010) and *Kaar* (2013).<sup>133</sup>

— Van Vuuren (2014:510)

The complexity of *Memorandum* that is mentioned by Roux (2009) is for Van Vuuren an inter-generic shattering of literary conventions that produces above all a text that reflects on the transience of human existence and offers a song of comfort for this (2014:520, 521). She furthermore views the novel as an attempt by the author to rise to the challenge of producing in Afrikaans a work which is equal in form to a classical masterpiece – likening it to J.S. Bach's *Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor* (BWV 582) and Walter Benjamin's *Das Passagen-Werk* (1983)<sup>134</sup> – that simultaneously also expresses concern about the future of Western culture and humanity (2014:521).

*Die sneeuslaper* is the main focus of Janien Linde and Phil van Schalkwyk's reading of the text from an eudaemonic<sup>135</sup> perspective (2016). Each short story in the collection is read as conversing “with the reader both in relational [...] and eudaimonic [sic] terms [...], with each one of the short stories creating a situation of playful but evocative interpersonal communication” (Linde & Van Schalkwyk, 2016:25). The researchers link this to a kind of socio-political engagedness that is cognisant of questions surrounding the use and purpose of art and the artist in difficult times. Instances of the characters in *Die sneeuslaper* experiencing eudaemonia can lead, the authors contend, to the reader experiencing similar insight (Linde & Van Schalkwyk, 2016:42). This reframes the supposed use of literature in society:

One can argue that Van Niekerk is here asserting that the aesthetic value of art must be entwined with its usefulness: beautiful things (such as a work of visual art or a text with literary value) can also be useful. That is what the author strives towards, that her texts [...] can be an intervention. One way in which such an intervention can occur, is through the eudaemonic potential of art being recognised so that the reader can be

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<sup>133</sup> Orig.: “Want die wêreld is onverbeterbaar geskakeerder en wyer as die beperkte Afrikaanse ruimte van Grootmoedersdrift, [...] Dié bewussyn aan die basis van *Memorandum* is die groeipunt vir die meerdimensionele verwikkeldheid van Van Niekerk se later werke, soos ook *Die sneeuslaper* (2010) en *Kaar* (2013).”

<sup>134</sup> Although Van Vuuren in the article once refers to the Bach piece as “in D Minor” (2014:506), it is in fact in C minor, as she correctly cites it in her list of references. The incorrect reference is possibly a typing error due to momentary confusion with Van Niekerk's poem “by toccata en fuga in d mineur” (*Sprokkelster*, 1977:25). Van Vuuren also notes the number of the piece as “BMW 582,” though this is assumed to be an error, and should be BWV 582 (Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis 582).

<sup>135</sup> Meaning “conducive to wellbeing/happiness.”

inspired to think anew and differently, along with the author, about a society riddled with problems.<sup>136</sup>

— Linde & Van Schalkwyk (2016:40)

In a way, then, Linde and Van Schalkwyk read *Die sneuslaper* as part of the continuing development of Van Niekerk's meditations on the role of the artist and art in society, much like she does in her musings on her own work (Van Niekerk, 2008).

#### 4.4.2.9. Music

Musicologist Heinrich van der Mescht has done extensive research into references to music in Van Niekerk's fiction. In a series of four articles, he considers the prominent role of music in *Agaat*. Firstly, through drawing correlations between references to music in the novel and answers to an interview conducted by the researcher with Van Niekerk about her own views on music and musical artists, Van der Mescht indicates that varying types of music enjoy prominence in Van Niekerk's novel, and a reader's understanding of this can assist interpretations of aspects of the novel, and, more broadly, their understanding of Van Niekerk's artistry (2009a:43). In a second article, he identifies numerous references to classical music that appear in *Agaat*. Not only does this show, according to Van der Mescht, that Van Niekerk "possesses a thorough knowledge" of classical music, but also that she "uses these references to paint the characters, their thoughts and their circumstances" (2009b:93). Rather than just being randomly selected insertions that create the illusion of intertextual depth, Van der Mescht finds that Van Niekerk's references to classical music in the novel, as well as hidden, translated lines of poetry set to music from German *Lieder*, can deepen the reader's understanding of the characters and the background of the novel, while also contributing to setting the milieu of the events depicted (2009b:104).

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<sup>136</sup> Orig.: "’n Mens kan argumenteer dat Van Niekerk hier aanvoer dat die estetiese waarde van kuns vervleg moet wees met die handigheid daarvan: skone dinge (soos ’n beeldende kunswerk of ’n teks met literêre waarde) kan ook nuttig wees. Dít is waarna die skrywer streef, dat haar tekste [...] ’n intervensie kan wees. Een manier waarop só ’n intervensie kan plaasvind, is deurdát die eudaimoniese potensiaal van letterkunde raakgesien word sodat die leser moontlik daardeur aangespoor kan word om saam met die skrywer nuut en anders te dink oor ’n samelewing vol probleme."

References to Afrikaans folksongs are employed to emphasise the (Afrikaans) cultural context of the novel, Van der Mescht indicates in his third article on this topic (2010). Van Niekerk has achieved something quite remarkable, in the researcher's view:

Via the continuous references to Afrikaans folksongs through the “coincidental” inclusion thereof in the text, [the author] never lets the reader forget that this is an Afrikaans novel about “normal” Afrikaans-speakers in an Afrikaans milieu. After *Agaat* it is doubtful that any author would be able to again make such extensive use of references to the texts of Afrikaans folksongs.<sup>137</sup>

— Van der Mescht (2010:72)

Having covered the relation between the author's ars poetica and music, as well as her utilisation of references to both classical music and Afrikaans folksongs, Van der Mescht's final article on the references to music in *Agaat* is concerned with the ways in which references to sacred music (psalms, hymns and hallelujah songs) are employed as part of the characterisation in the novel (Van der Mescht, 2011). While the songs again serve an important role in fleshing out the context of the narrative, they also serve to underscore Afrikaner culture's underlying religious background, and they are sometimes employed ironically by the characters to bring levity to the dire emotional and physical circumstances in which they find themselves (Van der Mescht, 2011:58-59). Finally, it needs to be pointed out that in these four articles, the researcher identifies an aspect of these musical references that chimes with research on Van Niekerk's later poetry, as discussed above, in that Milla's appreciation for European musical traditions is out of tune with life on Grootmoedersdrift, particularly within the apartheid context of much of the narrative. Additionally, it is illustrative of how the musical arts have influenced Van Niekerk's work.

#### 4.4.2.10. Van Niekerk's prose in relation to the Low Countries

In this chapter, as well as in the previous chapters of this dissertation, I referred to Van Niekerk's historical relationship with the Netherlands. This extends back to her student days

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<sup>137</sup> Orig.: “Deur die voortdurende verwysing na Afrikaanse volksliedere deur middle van die “toevallige” insluiting daarvan in die teks, laat [die outeur] die leser nooit vergeet nie dat dit hier om 'n Afrikaanse roman oor “gewone” Afrikaanssprekendes in 'n Afrikaanse milieu gaan. Ná *Agaat* is dit te betwyfel of enige skrywer weer so uitgebreid van verwysings na die woordtekste van Afrikaanse volksliedere gebruik sal kan maak.”

in the Netherlands (Terblanche, 2015) as well as her later appointment to the UNESCO Africa Chair at the University of Utrecht in 2007/2008. As part of the latter visiting position, she produced *Die sneeusalper* (2009). In a 2012 article, Adèle Nel explores the relationship between Afrikaans and Dutch in this volume of short stories, with a focus on Amsterdam seen “through windows of fiction” (2012a:89). The notion of the window is here invoked both in terms of the broader view it offers and the reflection of its glass panes that suggest a transparent, yet still visible, view of the self (Jansen, 1996 in Nel, 2012a:90). Nel’s focus falls on the “interaction of spatial relations,” emphasising Amsterdam as narrative space, and drawing attention to the spatial relationality between this city and the town of Stellenbosch (Nel, 2012:89). The idea of mobility becomes an important structuring tool for Nel in that there are elements of *Die sneeusalper* that point to transnationalism in the volume’s conception of human experiences (Nel, 2012a:95). According to Nel, the spatial movement of characters, for instance, is part of the creative energy that drives their writing of narratives (both the character of the literature professor and the creative writing student in the first short story in the volume). This spatial play extends unto the Afrikaans and the Dutch reader. In an analysis that is even more focused on the textual elements of *Die sneeusalper*, Nel also discusses relationality from a poetic perspective (2012b). Here, the ancient narrative of Orpheus and Eurydice is traced through *Die sneeusalper* to show how its themes of loss and dealing with loss is a prerequisite for the creation of art (2012b:70). Again the scholar enters into the debate relating to Van Niekerk’s views on the role and responsibility of the artist, linking these to both the form and content of the relevant short story cycle.

I do not want to linger too long on Nel’s study, as it is concerned with the relationship between Afrikaans and Dutch, something that I have not included in the scope of this study. What is important about Nel’s piece, however, is its observations regarding the ever more visible transnationalism that can be detected in both Van Niekerk’s own explicit views on literature and the role of the author (Van Niekerk, 2008) as well as the ways in which this manifests in her work – and is identified as such by researchers and critics.

Viljoen (2016) looks at the unique case of *Die sneeusalper* in terms of its conception, writing and publication. As I have in the previous chapter already discussed this article by Viljoen, I limit my discussion here simply to her conclusions. *Die sneeusalper* was originally written in Afrikaans and then sent in parts to Dutch translator Riet de Jong-Goossens. De Jong-Goossens would translate the text into Dutch and return it to Van Niekerk, who would subsequently make

changes to both the Afrikaans and Dutch versions, as a kind of rewriting of the manuscript. This collaborative process with the translator continued to and fro a number of times over the course of the text being written (Viljoen, 2016:252). It is therefore obvious, states Viljoen, that the Afrikaans text would show clear infusions of Dutch, as some critics also pointed out (see the discussion of the reviews above) (2016:253). Viljoen convincingly illustrates that Van Niekerk's short story collection can be considered a translational text that exists in different languages and spaces (Afrikaans and Dutch, South Africa and the Netherlands), and the titular character of the snow sleeper represents a particular conception of the artist: a boundary-perforating, non-instrumentalist artistry that Van Niekerk herself favours, as evidenced in her 2013 article, also analysed by Viljoen. The literary text becomes subservient to nothing but itself:

It will not adapt to dominant ideologies, it will resist attempts to instrumentalise it or make it useful or functional, it cannot be tamed or domesticated, it is not interested in a lasting and comforting relationship with the reader, but rather wants to disturb, discompose and confront the reader with the abysmal nature of life and what exists through the grace of an adventurous extraction of language in a way that can accommodate the infiltration, contamination and inspiration of other languages.<sup>138</sup>

— Viljoen (2016:267)

There are palpable links between these observations and those articulated in other studies by Viljoen (2017c, 2018). Clearly, much like her discussions of Van Niekerk's poetry and Van Niekerk as a poet, Viljoen's argument about Van Niekerk as prose author again places her work (Van Niekerk's) within the Afrikaans literary canon in defined ways. Simultaneously, Viljoen's analysis is also revelatory in terms of the author as an agent in the field, as Van Niekerk in some ways places herself and her work in the canon, while also influencing the way in which she is received and placed by scholars.

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<sup>138</sup> Orig.: “wat nie sal aanpas by heersende ideologieë nie, wat weerstand sal bied teen pogings om dit te instrumentaliseer of nuttig en funksioneel te maak, wat nie mak gemaak of gedomestikeer kan word nie, wat wegglip onder uit enige pogings tot 'n sluitende interpretasie, wat nie geïnteresseerd is in 'n blywende en vertroostende verhouding met die leser nie, maar eerder die leser verontrus, ontstem en konfronteer met die afgrondelikheid van die lewe én wat bestaan by grasie van 'n avontuurlike ontginning van taal op 'n manier wat die insypeling, besmetting en inspirasie deur ander tale sou kon tegemoet kom.”

#### 4.5. Van Niekerk as an Afrikaans playwright in the Afrikaans literary system

The play *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.* (2010) was first staged at the Afrikaans cultural festival, Aardklop, which is held annually in Potchefstroom. Deborah Steinmair (2010:6) sees in this densely woven work aspects of a number of authors: Paul Celan, Breyten Breytenbach, Pieter Dirk-Uys, Reza de Wet, Ingrid Jonker, W.B. Yeats and Karel Schoeman. Like many reviewers have over the years, Van Niekerk is again compared to authors both local and international. Unlike *Die sneeuslaper*, which can be considered the major work that precedes *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.*, Van Niekerk in the latter does not position it further away from socio-economic and political themes. Indeed, writes the reviewer, not only does it draw attention to the failures of a democratic dispensation that followed (seamlessly, according to Steinmair) the oppression of apartheid, but it is a letter to South Africa at large, challenging it for its failures to attend to its problems, while also accounting for its disregard for the arts (Steinmair, 2010:6). Jan-Jan Joubert (2011:3), in his review of the staging of the play in Stellenbosch in 2011, calls the play new South African protest theatre, praising how Van Niekerk employs her unequalled ability with language – here in service of drama. Like Steinmair, he observes the play’s utilisation of a broad literary heritage, creating links with not only the heritage of Afrikaans, but also with the German, English and Dutch traditions, thereby creating an effortless and playful, easy inevitability that leaves the viewer thankful that this “great” artist in their midst chooses to work in Afrikaans (ibid.). While Joubert sees a clear connection between Van Niekerk’s work as new protest theatre and the anti-apartheid theatre of the 1970s and 1980s, he views the former as setting itself apart through its use of excess and music. This point is also made by Petrus du Preez (2011) in his review, as well as by Willemien Brümmer in the introduction to an interview with Van Niekerk and Marthinus Basson, director of the piece (Van Niekerk and Basson in Brümmer, 2010). Du Preez’s reading establishes continuity with the rest of Van Niekerk’s oeuvre in the complexity of the play’s content, seeing it as a fleshed-out foil against the “cotton floss” nature of the cultural productions Afrikaans audiences are used to (2011). The reviewer furthermore calls the play a satirical work that sets new boundaries, and expresses a sense of confusion for what he summarises as a mostly negative response to the work by the general theatre-going public (Du Preez, 2010).

As with her previous works, the reception of Van Niekerk’s play was wide-ranging. Though praised by critics, the response of the theatre-going public had resonances to some of the

responses to *Triomf*. During the original production of *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.* at Aardklop, many audience members abruptly left the theatre halfway through the play (ostensibly due to the shocking and violent nature of the drama's content) (Jonker, 2010:12). At the Aardklop festival, the AngloGold Ashanti/Aarkop-Smeltkroes Prize for the best new Afrikaans text to debut at Aardklop was awarded to Van Niekerk, while the *Beeld*-Aartvark Prize for moving boundaries in a debut went to Braam du Toit for his music in Van Niekerk's play (Bouwer, 2010:8).

Despite the impact of Van Niekerk's piece, which is evidenced by the reception discussed above, no scholarly work in Afrikaans on this text has to my knowledge appeared. This could be due to a variety of reasons. According to theatre scholar Lida Krüger, it is likely due to declining scholarly interest in drama as a genre worthy of study within the broader field of literary studies (Krüger, 2016). It could also be related to the poorer availability of the text of *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.*, as it was not published and distributed by a traditional publisher (as is the case with Van Niekerk's other texts). However, for researchers who might be interested, the accessibility of the text is anything but an impossibility, as many copies of the play had been disseminated while it was being staged between 2010 and 2011.

#### **4.6. Van Niekerk beyond Afrikaans literary studies**

A number of the studies discussed above have focused in differing ways on the functioning of language within the narratives of Van Niekerk's texts. Therein, researchers have predominantly situated their work distinctly within the field of literary studies. A study that departs from this is that of Cecilia Erasmus (2013). Erasmus utilises *Agaat* in a study situated within the field of cognitive linguistics. The focus of her study is the changing concept of *marriage* ("huwelik") within the Afrikaner community over the course of a century (Erasmus, 2013:9). The study firstly tracks the broader socio-political development of the concept, with attention also being paid to religious and statutory issues. The idea of marriage is shown to be a dynamic concept, and this is illustrated through an analysis of certain aspects of *Agaat* to show how marriage initially changes as a concept socially, after which changes occur on a linguistic level (ibid.). The selection of Van Niekerk's novel is motivated as follows:

The novel *Agaat* is chosen as example material because of its setting in a pastoral environment before extensive urbanisation took place. The story is also set against the backdrop of the golden era of marriage and the marriage of Milla and Jak de Wet is investigated accordingly.

— Erasmus (2013:10)

Despite Erasmus's study being placed more within the realm of linguistics than in that of literary studies, the very selection of *Agaat* is noteworthy. In her motivation for selecting the novel, Erasmus firstly quotes the view of David Lodge, who views literature as complementary to scientific knowledge because it is a reflection of human consciousness (2002:10 in Erasmus, 2013:139). Secondly, Milla and Jak's marriage in the novel is set against the backdrop of an important period of South African history (Afrikaans history, specifically, Erasmus writes) as it is during the highpoint of Afrikaner nationalism (1948-1994), and subsequently, as the socio-political context of the time was constantly changing, so was Milla and Jak's marriage (ibid.). Acknowledging the novel as a kind of chronicle of a particular period of South African history, Erasmus therefore views it as suitable for her analysis of the changing concept of marriage. This again attests to the recognition of Van Niekerk as a kind of chronicler or documenter of not just cultural history and memory (music, food, language), but also of broader contextualised socio-political and socio-cultural changes in South African society. A unique consideration on one such cultural aspect is the importance of clothing in Van Niekerk's prose, which is investigated by Crous (2018). Focusing on a few items of clothing in *Triomf*, *Agaat*, *Memorandum* and *Die sneeuslaper*, Crous sketches the noteworthiness of these in Van Niekerk's work, and how their depiction speaks to the socio-economic status of certain characters, and serve as markers of identity (2018:1). Clothing in Van Niekerk's prose becomes symbolic of societal issues, such as the oppression of certain groups, while simultaneously creating spaces for the exploration of identity (2018:24). Crous's study combines notions from the study of fashion with a literary reading to offer a novel perspective on the creation of identity through characters' appearances in Van Niekerk's work.

#### 4.7. Conclusion

Marlene van Niekerk's career as an Afrikaans writer spans more than four decades. In this chapter, I have discussed how we can today conceptualise Van Niekerk in this role and how

her position as an Afrikaans author has developed over the course of forty years. I began my analysis with a short examination of how Van Niekerk views herself and her own position as an author in the South African literary system (Van Niekerk in Nieuwoudt, 1999:6; Van Niekerk in La Vita, 2007, quoted in Terblanche, 2015; Van Niekerk in Nieuwoudt, 2012:10; Van Niekerk in Goldsmith, 2015). Though she recognises the attention her work might enjoy through translation beyond Afrikaans, she feels herself to be principally an *Afrikaans* author.

In the next section, I consider a few major mechanisms of canonisation, and how Van Niekerk features therein. While acknowledging the dynamic and subjective nature of the texts that feature in this discussion – for as Altieri reminds us, canons are “essentially strategic constructs by which societies maintain their own interests” (1990:21) – it is meaningful that Van Niekerk has come to feature prominently in the considerably recent major literary histories. Texts such as *Die Afrikaanse literatuur, 1652-2004* (Kannemeyer, 2005) and *Perspektief en profiel* (Van Coller, 1999 and 2016), as well as the more easily accessible ATKV|LitNet-skrywersalbum (2015), can to varying degrees be read as both contributing to and illustrative of Van Niekerk’s position as a canonised author. Speaking to the importance of Van Niekerk’s poetic work within conceptions of her in the Afrikaans literary canon, I also referred to her inclusion in the authoritative *Groot verseboek* (1983, 2000 and 2009), and other notable anthologies. These inclusions gain additional significance when one considers the relative poetic silence in Van Niekerk’s oeuvre between the release of *Groenstaar* (1983) and the more recent *Kaar* (2013).

It is important to again remark here that the literary canon and canonical forces are not equal to, but rather part of the bigger literary system. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the canon and the system are not the same, but canonisation is a complex set of forces within the system. The centrality that Van Niekerk enjoys within the Afrikaans canon is not just evidenced by the reviews I have discussed in this chapter, but also by the litany of awards she has received over the years for her work in every genre. Subsequently, though her stature has consistently grown since the publication of *Sprokkelster* in 1977, it deserves to be noted again that even in her early years as an author, she was already far from the periphery of the canon, as proven by her inclusion in a number of editions of well-know poetry anthologies. In terms of how this places her within the system, it is necessary to not just consider the critical reception of her work in reviews and the awarding of prizes, but also in terms of how Afrikaans literary scholars as agents in the field (Bourdieu, 1993:30) have engaged with her oeuvre and how they actively and passively, through their research, situate Van Niekerk in the literary system.

Subsequently, the sections of this chapter that follow on the reflection on how Van Niekerk stands in relation to powerful literary forces and agents of canonisation have been structured according to the genres featured in Van Niekerk's oeuvre: poetry, prose, and drama. Within this, I further delineated my discussion by, firstly, focusing within each genre on the popular reception of Van Niekerk's work (reviews, discussions, letters to newspapers, opinion pieces, etc.) and, secondly, by dealing with the more in-depth scholarly work on the author's creative output. Finally, I consider those few scholarly articles that approach Van Niekerk's work from fields outside of Afrikaans literary studies. The decision to follow this approach in this chapter is, on the one hand, informed by the need to be able to organise a vast array of texts into a sensible discussion, whereas on the other hand, it is central to the argumentative thread that runs through this chapter. I have shown that not only is Van Niekerk currently considered one of the most prominent and important authors in Afrikaans literature, but this summation has also consistently been informed by my engagement with the different agents – whether reviewers, literary prize committees, interviewers or academic scholars – that have been involved with the author's long career that began with poetry, shifted into prose and drama, and has most recently seen a shift away from the narrative back towards the lyric.

Since the publication of her debut, all the way through until her most recent two volumes, the popular reception of Van Niekerk's texts has been mostly positive, as the overviews above indicate. The quality of her work has been considered by most critics to have been steadily high, from her early days as young poet, when she set herself apart from her peers, all the way through to the publication of her novels, which not only established her as a woman author whose work would become a type of par against which other literary works in Afrikaans would be measured, but also as a world-class author who writes – still – in Afrikaans.

In the reception of her poetry, her prose and the play, *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.*, critics often draw attention to Van Niekerk's well-honed sensitivity to the use of different literary techniques (often experimenting, innovating and defamiliarizing through these), as well as the strong lyricism of her work. This lyricism, which is a marked feature of her poetry, even though it spills over into her prose and drama too, has over the years been both celebrated and criticised. In the scholarly reception of Van Niekerk's later poetry, the lyricism of her work is read not simply as art for art's sake, but as part of a more complex engagedness. The main themes that have emerged in my consideration of existing research on Van Niekerk's poetry includes care and conservation; art and writing (which also encapsulates meditations on the

role and function of the artist and art in society); Afrikaans and the politics of language; and transnationalism and metamodernism. Visible across all of these themes, albeit in differing degrees, is the poet's active negotiation of matters socio-political, socio-cultural, socio-linguistic and historical – resisting the efforts of those who would attempt to position her work in simply aesthetical or political terms. As becomes visible in the critical and scholarly reception, Van Niekerk's different works are thus entangled with one another within the literary system.

The same lyricism of Van Niekerk's work, which at times has also been called a musicality, has seen her imbrication in not just the Afrikaans literary canon, but also as an important (Afrikaans) cultural chronicler whose work takes a strong intellectual approach and at times demands a similar intellectual interrogation by readers. It should be stressed that reviewers and scholars of her poetry can be said to view the author's *experiments* with language as an extension of her role as *chronicler* of and active participant in language politics itself: Van Niekerk utilises Afrikaans words that have fallen out of use, almost as if to revitalise these words and counter the superficialisation of the language. Simultaneously, she violates the traditional conception of language/nation in the transnational tensions between Afrikaans and Dutch – and also Afrikaans and English – that manifest in dynamic entanglements between the global north and global south that are explored in her work, whether linguistic, cultural, or historical. This presents the reader with a set of engaged themes, as well as what can be considered an expanded consideration of many of the tensions also explored in Van Niekerk's texts, effectively interwoven into a related consideration of the role of the author (in the guise of writer, poet and playwright) and the use and purpose of the arts in a complex and confusing world. These threads are represented differently in the different genres that the author writes in, but an approach that takes into account the author's complete oeuvre offers a grander view that makes these threads more visible. The oeuvre-wide approach also brings into view the generic, thematic and aesthetic elements that characterise her circulation within what we call "Afrikaans literature" today.

In the reception of Van Niekerk's prose, one sees parallels to the reception of her poetry. Here the author is seen more clearly as a multifaceted chronicler, since her works are read within the scholarly sphere to engage with apartheid and the history of Afrikaner nationalism, as well as her use of language as both a narrative tool and as form of resistance to the hegemony of a major language such as English. Furthermore, the author's prose is approached on the grounds

of narrative form and genre; impressions of authorship; space; postcolonialism, the *plaasroman* and other current issues; gender; art; music; and in relation to the Low Countries. Importantly, one does not have to look hard to identify the overlaps in these research themes with those themes drawn from research on Van Niekerk's poetry, and almost as if in chorus, these themes are also some of the concerns highlighted by reviewers in the author's drama, *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.* Finally, the analytical trope of the cultural chronicler extends even beyond the author's work as it is read within Afrikaans literary studies, as articles on fashion and sociological concerns such as the meaning of the concept marriage use Van Niekerk's prose as source of cultural and historical artefacts and perceptions.

I have drawn in this chapter a considerable and complex image of Van Niekerk within the Afrikaans literary system, showing the continuity in her development as an author as her work has been read and studied over the course of her career. What this naturally leads to are some of the burning issues that have been unshrouded, so to speak, regarding the operations of the Afrikaans literary system. There are some references to Van Niekerk's relation to other South African writers – most notably fellow Afrikaans authors. Though present, there is less of an emphasis in terms of how her work can be related to South African authors who do not write in Afrikaans. I state this not to discount the importance of comparisons or even associations made with authors such as J.M. Coetzee, but to refract the critical focus to the possible insularities of the Afrikaans literary system. For instance, while Van Niekerk has received many prestigious Afrikaans literary awards, these awards remain mostly known in the Afrikaans cultural sphere and are awarded to originally Afrikaans works – seldom (if ever) are they given to texts that have been translated into Afrikaans (from English).

The Afrikaans research on Van Niekerk's oeuvre further shows a varying degree of awareness of her reception in English (and Dutch), and scholars working in Afrikaans often seem to assume a certain tri-lingually informed reader (Afrikaans, English and Dutch). Conversely, though, there is a perhaps unsurprising tendency in many of these scholarly works to read Van Niekerk not just as an important, multi-faceted chronicler of Afrikaans history and culture, but also to read her work in relation to its serious investment in Afrikaner identity and its future, reflecting the multiple levels in terms of which this can be thought about in Van Niekerk's prose, poetry and drama.

## Chapter 5: A Comparative Perspective on Van Niekerk

Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness. It works with difference and sameness but also with their limits, their predicaments, their moments of complication. So often the story of the post-apartheid has been told within the register of difference – frequently for good reason, but often, too, ignoring the intricate overlaps that mark the present and, at times, and in important ways, the past, as well.

— Sarah Nuttall (2009:1)

### 5. Introduction

In the preceding two chapters, I offer an in-depth consideration of Marlene van Niekerk as respectively an author in English and an author in Afrikaans. In this chapter, I want to expand on and analyse the most salient observations from those preceding discussions. From a comparative point of departure, I will discuss in more detail some of the points of entanglement between the respective Afrikaans and South African English literary systems that have now come into clearer view, and the forms they have taken. This manifests, broadly speaking, in two dominant critical gazes: The internalised, detailed, and, at times, more insular gaze foremost in the Afrikaans system, and the externalised gaze of the English system, which shows a more broadly encompassing desire to extrapolate into existing political and literary discourses.

I thus return to the multiple polysystems that feature throughout my study: the Afrikaans literary system and the South African English literary system, and their respective places within the dynamic larger system of South African literature. Beyond this, though, I also discuss what the case of Van Niekerk's work within these systems reveals about the asymmetrical relationships between the local literary system and larger systems – the systems of Anglo-American literature and world literature.

### 5.1. Reception as a map of formative processes in the system

The constitution of what can be considered Van Niekerk's respective Afrikaans and English oeuvres is something that has a marked impact on how the author is viewed from within each of the relevant literary systems. In Chapter 3, I paid attention to Van Niekerk as an author in English translation. I analysed the discourses surrounding the translation of her work and how her translators have, as influential agents in this process, placed their translations within the polysystem via their approaches to their translations, on the one hand, and their own arguments regarding the role of translation in the broader South African literary system on the other. I then considered both the English popular and scholarly reception of the author's work, which, through the international accessibility and impact of English, operates from the overlapping systems of the local (the South African English literary system) to the global (Anglo-American literature and world literature). Ultimately, it is clear that Van Niekerk is seen as a powerful force within the South African English literary system and canon – mainly due to the reception of her prose works and the reciprocal elevation her work in English has consequently enjoyed, both locally and globally. What this might illustrate of conceptions of the author in this literary system is somewhat opaque, though, as it illuminates only a narrow section of her work – that which I have called her engaged or mimetic work, which leads the reader perhaps more easily and more often to the thematically apparent concerns of the texts. Subsequently, one could argue that Van Niekerk's more limited English oeuvre offers fewer opportunities to explore the author's artistry in expanded ways that might stretch aesthetic sensibilities. Despite the significant size of the English reception of Van Niekerk's work, it is still restrained by the limited number of primary texts of hers available in English, and there is therefore very little mention of an authorial grasp and vision that reaches across multiple texts and multiple genres.

In Chapter 4, Van Niekerk is considered within the Afrikaans literary system. In my reflections on her as an author writing in Afrikaans, I consider the longer duration of the development of her Afrikaans oeuvre, and her position in the Afrikaans canon. The respective popular and scholarly reception of Van Niekerk's texts in Afrikaans evidences how the development of her work is very often read alongside her development as an author over the course of four decades. Within this context, it is her work in all genres that has centred her in the canon and slowly established her as an influential figure within the Afrikaans literary system. Her standing herein, however, has admittedly also been mutually reinforced by the recognition she has

received for the English translations of her work. And, significantly, this is also because of her stature in the literature of the Low Countries, due to the translation of her work into Dutch. As such, an additional dimension that has added to the image of Van Niekerk as an author within the Afrikaans literary system is her connections with Dutch and Flemish literature, language and culture; matters not only explored in her literary works, but also reflected in her presence as a public intellectual and an author within the literary landscapes of the Netherlands and Flanders. I tend to agree with Viljoen (2014:6), who argues that Van Niekerk's transnational entry into Dutch literature is an instance of Afrikaans literature accessing the European centre, even if Dutch is a minor language that is not as close to this centre as a language such as French is. Though I have not extensively explored these latter connections, as they fall outside the narrowed scope of this study, their strong presence within the Afrikaans cultures of reception of Van Niekerk's oeuvre is indicative of critical stances that tend to read an author and their works in a literary tradition that is inextricably linked to a language (Afrikaans) and that language's heritage (a heritage shared with modern Dutch). Thus, the conception of Van Niekerk within the Afrikaans literary system shows a strong sense of interconnectedness between all the different works in her oeuvre.

What is clear, then, in the previous chapters on Van Niekerk as an Afrikaans and a South African English writer, are the ways in which the author's work is positioned within the relevant literary systems. Importantly, her work has been absorbed into the canons of both of these literary systems, and can thus be considered "major," even if the supposed "cumulative consensus of critics [and] scholars" (Abrams, 2005:29) behind this positioning might differ substantially in the literary systems. In other words, to alter Altieri's point slightly to make it directly illustrative of the specifics of this study, the differing "strategic constructs by which [the] societies [of the Afrikaans and English language groups] maintain their own interests" have still resulted in both canons placing Van Niekerk's work close to their canonical centres (Altieri, 1990:21). This points back to Even-Zohar's conception of the overlapping centres and peripheries of polysystems, wherein "a certain element [like a literary text] is transferred from the periphery of one system to the periphery of an adjacent system within the same polysystem, and then may or may not move on to the center [sic] of the latter" (Even-Zohar, 1990a:14). In the South African literary polysystem, a text on the margin of the Afrikaans literary polysystem might therefore be transferred, through the process of translation, onto the periphery of the English literary polysystem, and thereafter find itself moving steadily towards the centre of the latter, while simultaneously its untranslated original has also moved towards the centre of the

former – as has been the case with some of Van Niekerk’s work. The forces that determine this transference are, however, subject to the aforementioned processes of positioning.

What has further been brought into clearer view are the different agents and forces in the field that operate on existing connections within these individual literary systems to both dynamically receive, position and re-position the author and her work as her oeuvre (and the socio-linguistic and socio-cultural context of South Africa) continues to develop – in fact aiding the interference of each system in the other. Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 thus already provide detailed responses to some of the research questions posed in Chapter 1, as they offer a comprehensive schema for thinking about the varied scholarship on Van Niekerk’s work – a schema that is at once both malleable and encyclopaedic. Nonetheless, some of the research questions remain to be answered.

What I want to highlight in my argument here are the entanglements themselves. Simply stated, this manifests in the specific prominent forms that the abovementioned agents and forces take, and subsequent to that, the effects of these within the system. Using entanglement to conceptualise the connections within and between systems offers the reader a view of a complex polysystem, but from which one can draw useful conclusions. As such, it offers more depth than Stephen Gray’s notion of an archipelago of literatures (1974:14). At the same time, entanglement does not lose sight of the crucial factor of time in viewing polysystems. Unlike Leon de Kock’s seam, entanglement acknowledges the dynamic overlaps *of* time and *in* time – what Mbembe calls the “multiple durées” of the postcolony (2001:14) – opening up not only ways of conceiving of the past, but also of the present, to enable us to see the “foldedness” (Sanders, 2002:11) of multiple agents and forces within the system. Entanglement allows one to see the one-directional and the reciprocal, the willing, invited and acknowledged, but also the unwilling, the uninvited and the ignored – all within a frame that can identify the manifold agents and forces that determine these, or produce them unknowingly.

What I have therefore done with entanglement in this project, when put plainly in an indulgent metaphor, is to have drawn a dynamic map. But what is still needed is an explanation of how the different routes and travellers visible within this active map have shaped and still shape its continuing development. To complicate this deceptive simplicity, it follows that my analysis here should be concerned with how in some instances, agents and forces of the field, when positively viewed, firmly place Van Niekerk’s work in existing literary and cultural paradigms,

whereas, when viewed more circumspectly, they might also be fossilising extant and now inadequate conceptions of literary and cultural practices, and, perhaps most dangerously, in so doing might be entrenching problematic epistemic approaches and values of a major literature to the detriment of those of the minor counterpart from which it draws. Simultaneously, these same agents and forces will also be charting new territory in the relevant literary systems by propelling Van Niekerk's work into novel directions, thereby broadening existing systems through the creation of new nodes and connections. As I have mentioned previously, these ongoing dynamic processes are not one-directional, but rather multifaceted, often showing, through reciprocal force, active overlaps and interactions. In the sections that follow, I distil some of these entanglements into observations that might speak to broader concerns surrounding the diverse but unequal subsystems of the broader South African literary system – a point I return to in the conclusion of the dissertation.

To begin with, I pay attention to the notion of Van Niekerk as an *author in English*, on the one hand, and on the other, Van Niekerk as an *author in Afrikaans* – in both instances with clear acknowledgement of the author's own views on such labels, since she too is an agent in the field who exerts force. The view of Van Niekerk as an author in English is complicated through the lens of her being mostly a *translated* author (with the exception of a small body of poetry either composed in or self-translated into English), whereas the view of her as an author in Afrikaans is weighed not only in terms of its chronologically larger footprint in the Afrikaans system, but also in terms of its reciprocal relationship with Van Niekerk's work in the English system (and the global systems accessed via English). These two roles are both key in understanding the entanglements between the two literary systems that both she and her work are located in. My focus thus shifts to the different English and Afrikaans images of the author and her work that have been engendered by her popular reception and the subdivisions of research themes and approaches utilised over the many years of scholarly engagements with her work. As part of this section, I circle back to some of the issues mentioned regarding the individual English-Afrikaans conceptions of Van Niekerk, while I will also rely on some of the arguments relating to the epistemic effects of the translation of the author's work, and how this has become woven into the prevailing ways in which she now features in the South African imaginary.

### 5.1.1. Conceiving the South African author

Van Niekerk's own perspective on her authorship in English is muted in the degree to which she directly participates in the discourse surrounding herself within the South African English system. I have previously referred to Van Niekerk's tentative comments regarding herself as a South African author in English. This develops from an initial position of insecurity – regarding whether her work would find any form of approval in English translation (Van Niekerk in Nieuwoudt, 1999:6) – to the realisation that it did find this approval (Van Niekerk in La Vita, 2007, quoted in Terblanche, 2015). A significant point in our thinking about Van Niekerk as an author in English is her role in the translation of her work. Though the author has consistently been an active participant in the processes of translating her prose into English, she has never been the principal translator, nor does she consider herself to be an author writing in English. Rather, as I have shown, she views herself as an Afrikaans author *translated* into English – a self-identification also illustrated in her reserved feelings surrounding self-translation and producing original English work (Van Niekerk in Goldsmith, 2015 & Van Niekerk in Steyn, 2016).

A returning sentiment held by the respective translators of *Triomf* and *Agaat*, and which becomes visible in their various discussions on Van Niekerk's work, is the sense that her novels *deserve* exposure to a wider audience than can be offered by Afrikaans. De Kock and Heyns make a number of arguments as to how the translations of literary texts can – in general – succeed in communicating something of the original literary work to new audiences in a new language. They each argue how they achieve this via a clear attempt to balance, through translation, what is lost with what is also gained in the process. The translators believe that their English versions of Van Niekerk's texts are different from the originals, but also that they mostly succeed in conveying what the original Afrikaans texts do. I shall not here repeat the criticisms that can be levelled against translation into English. Nor do I want to, as I have stated before, enter into discussions about the finer technical points of these translations. Instead, as this project is concerned with what becomes visible at systemic level, I am interested in showing how the foundational sentiment of the translators – that is, that the translations are for all purposes to be considered a true enough version of the original text – might have influenced the reception of Van Niekerk's work in both the popular and scholarly spheres, or how these sentiments have continued directing or influencing conceptions and practices that exist in

English literary studies and cultural reception in South Africa. Furthermore, I want to elaborate on what the long-term impact of this might have been (and continues to be) on the image of Van Niekerk in the South African English literary system.

In both the popular and scholarly English reception of her work, Van Niekerk is often placed alongside a number of South African authors writing in English who are currently central to the South African English canon. This already positions the author closer to the centre of the system. Some of these English authors, when viewed within a frame of over five decades, have been central to the South African English system for a long time. This includes figures such as Nobel Prize-winners J.M. Coetzee (Wheelwright, 1999; Woodward, 2001; Nixon, 2004; Fuhler, 2006; Hill, 2007; Buikema, 2009; Jacobs, 2012; Medalie, 2012) and Nadine Gordimer (Nixon, 2004; Samuelson, 2008; West, 2009a), as well as other well-known figures, such as, Alan Paton (Clarkson, 2005; De Kock in Osborne, 2016), Athol Fugard (Molefe, 1999; Nixon, 2004), Zakes Mda (Nixon, 2004; Samin, 2005; Fuhler, 2006; Medalie, 2012), and Antjie Krog (West, 2009a; Hunter, 2009, 2012), who, like Van Niekerk, is positioned firmly in the English and Afrikaans canons. Notably, most of these authors are considered primarily prose authors – in their reception, at least. Considering the stronger preoccupation of English literary studies with prose – both in South Africa and abroad, and particularly within the subfields her work often circulates in (postcolonial studies, gender studies, etc.) – it is not surprising that it is Van Niekerk’s novels that are at the forefront of studies on her work and praise by critics and prize panels, an illustration of what Bourdieu calls the “space of literary or artistic position-takings” (1993:30).

In terms of how these agents of reception have conceived of Van Niekerk’s work in English, it is notable that it is in some ways a reified hybridity that is celebrated. For instance, a number of reviewers praise the quality of the English translations of the novels, highlighting the importance of their expression of locality. This is mirrored in the prizes the translations have received. The prizes awarded specifically for translation, or the awarding of the same prize to both the author and translator, certainly speak to the way in which translated texts have come to be considered within the South African English literary system. This is reflected in the reception of the English translations of Van Niekerk’s novels, as the reviewers hint at the supposed *South Africanness* of the texts, a characteristic often linked to their non-English origins. The translation of *Triomf* is, for instance, “peppered with” Afrikaans words (Walus, 1999:10) and retains “much of the local idiom” (Vanderhaeghen, 1999:17), while *Agaat*’s

translation is called “a definitive affirmation of Afrikaans” that is juxtaposed against English, which is called “an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa” (Hill, 2007:58). The importance of these two novels as originally Afrikaans texts is thus not discounted by the reviewers, but actually seen as part of the success of the *English* translation. Simultaneously, there is in many of the English reviews a strong focus on the mimetic aspects of Van Niekerk’s novels, most clearly in the cases of *Triomf* and *Agaat*. As such, both novels are read as telling the story of a nation, and not just of one of its constituent peoples. And so it is also notably the translation of *Memorandum*, a novel which lends itself least easily to allegorical and mimetic interpretation, that has received the smallest amount of critical and scholarly attention.

Of course, I stress again that the unavailability of most of the author’s non-prose texts in English is a factor in the reception of her work that cannot be denied. However, the lack of available translations is ultimately a poor justification for disregarding them – especially when one considers that it is for the most part the monolingual English reader who both offers and benefits from this excuse. One might acknowledge the difficulties faced by those readers and scholars who cannot understand Afrikaans – such being the case is readily admitted to, for example, by David Reiersgord (2015). But it is not unfair to say that translation into English may sanction a form of scholarship that knowingly ignores the Afrikaans context of even Van Niekerk’s translated work, a situation that seems immediately less acceptable if one imagines the author being studied to be someone such as Marcel Proust, with the scholar reading Proust in English without engaging with the author’s work in the original French or without accessing studies published in French on Proust’s work. I return further on to the system-wide epistemic effects of the normativity of English on the South African literary system.

In the Afrikaans literary system, Van Niekerk has been more directly involved in the discourse surrounding her authorship. While the author does not deny the influence her work has had in English via translation, she still views herself as an author writing in Afrikaans. She can, as she says, “mess in [Afrikaans]” (Van Niekerk in Goldsmith, 2015). Related to this, in Chapter 4, are the recurring tropes I identify in my analysis of the ways in which Van Niekerk is considered within Afrikaans literature. Herein her authorship is viewed as far more diverse. This contrasts the English reception of her work, where the focus is firmly on her so-called engaged longer prose, itself a result of system-wide fixations of currently dominant traditions of reception with political, social and historical allegory and mimesis. The image of Van Niekerk as an Afrikaans writer, in contrast, is informed by the long-term development of her

work as a poet, author and playwright. This is not to argue that the reception of the author's work in the Afrikaans literary system is therefore necessarily more nuanced than its English counterpart; I strongly argue against such a hierarchised distinction, as I set out below.

There is, though, a different aspect to the popular reception of Van Niekerk's work in Afrikaans. This reception is obviously far more extensive, as it includes all of her work, and there is a kind of golden thread that can be traced through the reviews. Characteristics that have come to define Van Niekerk's work – the experimentation with genre, the lyricism and her engagement with present-day issues – are both criticised and praised, with definitive emphasis on the latter. What stands out for many of the reviewers is not just the rootedness of Van Niekerk's texts in a broadly conceptualised and varying Afrikaans cultural tradition, but the almost obvious obsession of these texts to act as a kind of cultural, historical and political chronicle of Afrikaans. To the outside world, she offers an in-depth and varied view of the Afrikaner's history and culture, thereby providing what readers might experience as a kind of informative insight into this demographic group and South Africa. This at times takes shape in forms that seem to run counter to prevailing trends and ideologies in the literary system.

As is the case in the English system, the author has received numerous Afrikaans literary prizes, and this again confirms the centrality Van Niekerk's work enjoys within the Afrikaans system. But in some ways, the manner in which these prizes are awarded – and thus I am referring here to a systemic point that ripples out beyond just Van Niekerk's work – is illustrative of a kind of insularity not evidenced in the English system. It is seldom, if ever, that any of the Afrikaans literary awards that Van Niekerk has received have been awarded to texts that were translations (from English specifically). Though investigation into the dynamic system of literary awards would yield interesting results, it is not the intention of my study to offer such. Rather, I wish to draw attention in this regard to the difference between two literary systems. When compared to the awards Van Niekerk has received for her English work, most notably amongst these, the *Sunday Times* Literary Award for the English translation of *Agaat* – one could deduce that there is a certain openness in the English literary system that does not manifest similarly in its Afrikaans counterpart. This is not absolute, however. One could of course argue that there are other markers of openness shown by the Afrikaans system, such as the presence of J.M. Coetzee's novels as point of reference for a number of literary works (including *Agaat*). It should naturally be mentioned that from within the power centres of the local English literary system, such largesse can be afforded. English is in an increasingly powerful political and

social position within South Africa, and this is of course further bolstered by the influential global English literary systems that the South African system can rely on for support. There is, therefore, little risk for the South African English literary system of being engulfed by another language because of the English system having embraced some of the other language's literary works as part of its assumed role as custodian of the broadly conceptualised "South African literature". Other languages and their literary systems are not necessarily insulated in this way.

There exists an intriguing difference between the English and Afrikaans reception of Van Niekerk's work that relates to the reviewers themselves and the positions they occupy within the larger literary systems. I have not made express mention of it up until this point, but, when conducting a reading of so much of the popular and scholarly reception of the author's literary texts, certain patterns do emerge. What is obvious about the reception of Van Niekerk's work in Afrikaans is the overlap between those who act as reviewers of the author's literary texts and those who are or have also been active as literary scholars. Some are also creative writers in their own right. Many have contributed to the body of research on Van Niekerk's work. This includes, but is not limited to, Helize van Vuuren, Henning Snyman, Louise Viljoen, Hans Pienaar, Johann Johl, Gawie Botma, Tom Gouws, Martie Muller, Chris van der Merwe, Annemarie van Niekerk, Neil Cochrane, Willie Burger, Hein Viljoen, Ampie Coetzee, Nicole Devarenne, Andries Visagie, and Thys Human. Those figures who have acted as reviewers of some of Van Niekerk's texts, are (or have been) active as literary scholars and who are themselves published creative writers, include Marius Crous, Charl-Pierre Naudé, Anastasia de Vries, Joan Hambidge, Henning Pieterse, Hennie Aucamp and Fanie Olivier, in addition to those who are (or were) known as both creative writers and arts journalists, such as Barrie Hough and Deborah Steinmair.

Through such a mapped-out view of these individuals and the different roles they have fulfilled in relation to the work of a single author, one becomes aware of a strong systemic entanglement between individualised agents (authors, reviewers, researchers) as representatives of larger structures in the literary system (publishers, media houses, universities). To be clear, this form of entanglement will naturally exist in all literary systems, since these various institutions (or parts of them) are reliant upon each other for their operations and, to some extent, continued existence – and so my identification of this systemic phenomenon is in itself not novel. However, what makes commenting on it significant for this study is what the case of Van

Niekerk's work reveals about the Afrikaans literary system: it is a close-knit network that evidences the influence of literary scholars also on the popular reception of literary texts.

Conversely, a glance at the mapped-out popular and scholarly reception of Van Niekerk's work in English, as compiled in Chapter 3, shows no such clear sign of the mutually reliant relationships between individual and institutional agents in the South African English literary system. This is not to say that there are no such instances in the entirety of this system. After all, a figure like Leon de Kock, who is author, translator and academic, does contribute to publications aimed at a less academic market. De Kock also represents a nexus of entanglement, as he is well-known in both literary systems, and so his impact in both of these systems is authoritative and legitimising.<sup>139</sup> Similarly, Michiel Heyns is a well-respected author writing in English, an academic, and a respected translator. He is increasingly known for his translations of a number of important recent Afrikaans works into English (such as, amongst others, J.C. Kannemeyer's *J.M. Coetzee: 'n Geskryfde lewe*). It would appear, though, that in comparison with the Afrikaans system, these types of overlaps are far less frequent. There is, however, a different kind of systemic influence that is observable in the South African English literary system: that of the international English reception of Van Niekerk's translated works on how we conceive of such works in the system of world literature.

Throughout this dissertation, I have referred to three English-based literary systems, in order of size: the South African, the Anglo-American and world literature. Many connections exist between these three different systems, and the sum of any one does not necessarily fit into the entirety of the others. Though parts of the South African system have been taken up to become visibly part of the Anglo-American system and the system of world literature – such as the work of J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer, and, of course, the translations of Van Niekerk's *Triomf* and *Agaat* – not all authors and literary works in the South African system have attained the kind of nodal autonomy that the work of the abovementioned authors have. Coetzee and Gordimer can be considered to have, in some senses, peaked in all three of the mentioned systems. Both have received broad acclaim in South Africa and the rest of the English-speaking world (particularly North America, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand), and

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<sup>139</sup> An instances of De Kock's prominent position in both the Afrikaans and South African English systems is further visible in his selection as one of the translators of the love letters between André Brink and Ingrid Jonker, which were edited by Francis Galloway and published in 2015 (*Flame in the Snow: The Love Letters of André Brink and Ingrid Jonker*).

within world literature, they also loom large, quite perceptibly, by way of being winners of both the Booker Prize and the Nobel Prize in Literature. Though Van Niekerk has not received either of these prizes, what is noticeable from the reception of her work published in English is the sheer reach translation has given it. As mentioned previously, this illustrates a kind of evolution of Even-Zohar's concept of literary interference (1990c:54), where the dependent relationship between literary systems is no longer being guided by (either or both) geographic proximity or a primarily shared language. Instead, the influence of the non-English text on the English system is effected both locally and beyond. This is less reflective of the geopolitical realities and cultural histories that still hearken back to the idea of nation states that are closely bound to a particular language, and more reflective of the postcolonial realities and cultural histories that have been entangled and continue to be so within the context of a modern, multilingual emerging state.

For the most part, the international reviews of *Triomf* and *Agaat*, discussed in Chapter 3 (and to a lesser extent, Chapter 4), are telling of the geographical, and therefore cultural, reach that English literature enjoys. However, as I also discussed in Chapter 3, the translation of a text into English and its entry into global systems of English literature is not absolutely without complications. While the text's reach is increased remarkably through translation, there is an element of epistemic silencing – or, as Spivak calls it “translation-as-violation” (1999:164) – which is summed up in the sentiments of Charlie Hill, reviewer of *Agaat* for *The New Statesman* (UK). Though I have quoted his review in part before, I want to quote from it here at greater length:

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee writes of David Lurie, an English-speaking professor of communications, that “more and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa... Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened.” The same has frequently been said of Afrikaans. But such fatalism is not for van Niekerk [sic]. *The Way of the Women*<sup>140</sup> was written in Afrikaans. Some vocabulary remains untranslated and there is a glossary. [...] Later there is a reference to Afrikaans's place in the culture, a role more commonly identified by its association with apartheid. “There's more to language than is written in a dictionary,”

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<sup>140</sup> *The Way of the Women* is the title under which the English translation of *Agaat* appeared in the United Kingdom.

says Milla, when Agaat and Jakkie have an argument about a word in a game of Scrabble, "...and there would have been mighty little happening on Grootmoedersdrift if you'd had to farm only with the words in [the] Chambers [dictionary]." *The Way of the Women* is important, then, because even in translation it is a definitive affirmation of Afrikaans. A language that remains, inescapably, one of the mediums for the truth of South Africa.

— Hill (2007:58)

My discussion of Van Niekerk as a translated author bears out this tension. The translators are clear in that they have attempted to preserve something of Van Niekerk's novels' character – a character which is expressly tied to the Afrikaans origins of the texts. Translation into English has given these Afrikaans texts – these compendiums of history and culture – “speaking room” (De Kock in Osborne, 2016) in the salons of English literature, and Afrikaans has thus been given opportunity to effect some “linguistic and cultural transfer” (Chapman, 2010:12). For Hill, translation into English is “a definitive affirmation of Afrikaans,” which “remains, inescapably, one of the mediums for the truth of South Africa” (2007:58). And yet, somehow, “to enter [the] world arena, *of course*, Afrikaans novels have to be translated, most importantly, *into English*” (Attridge, 2014:396; my emphasis). The bind of a minor language like Afrikaans is that it deserves the attention of the major language – that much is frequently stated – but first, it must plead its worth in that different tongue. It is the South African English literary system that facilitates this process of cultural flow from Afrikaans into a local and global English, but this point of entanglement is not without a powerful inequity due to which the English reader cannot (nor has to) sense what has been lost in the translation. What is lost, is what Van Niekerk calls “to mess” in a language, and what Spivak calls a process that “obliterate[s] the irreducible hybridity of all language,” which, I would add, is the process that props up the normativity of English as the *de facto* lingua franca of world literature. And as my discussion of these politics, the losses and gains of translation, as well as the reception of Van Niekerk in translation has shown, our cultures of reception very often, to paraphrase Spivak, sanction this ignorance (1999:164).

The challenges faced by minor languages are not unimportant. However, it should be mentioned that, while the increasing power of major languages like English is real, and might dominate some world literature discourses, world literature also exists in other languages. Indeed, as David Damrosch writes, world literature includes any texts that “[circulate] out into

a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin” (2005:3). Within such a conception of world literature, Dutch translations of Afrikaans texts, for instance, are certainly also forms of world literature, as Viljoen (2014) convincingly shows. The challenge that remains is to keep these in mind, as they act as a counterweight to the normativity of English. Comparative literary studies remains in a unique position to respond to this challenge, but later in my discussion, I say more in this regard.

### **5.1.2. The focuses of scholarly reception**

I here compare the overlapping and divergent research focus areas and approaches in the reading of Van Niekerk’s literary texts in both English and Afrikaans scholarship. The crux of what I discuss in this section will be what manifests as the differences in what I would like to call the critical gazes on Van Niekerk’s work. By this, I mean that in the literary systems under discussion, there are broadly speaking two distinctive ways in which Van Niekerk’s work is viewed within the polysystems of literature: the more internalised gaze of the Afrikaans system on the one hand, and the externalised view of the English system on the other. As will become clear in my discussion below, the scholarly reception of Van Niekerk’s work (and even to some extent, the popular reception discussed above) is marked by these two different focuses – roughly corresponding to the two literary systems. I also demonstrate how these gazes do not exist in isolation, but are responses to particular contexts. As such, they are influenced by aspects such as the sizes of the respective systems, as well as the reciprocal connections of these to larger and more powerful systems – a series of associations and references that are, importantly and understandably, varied, but are also, to re-purpose a phrase by Franco Moretti, profoundly unequal (2000:55-56).

I consider in this chapter the research themes that have to do with, firstly, Van Niekerk’s prose, which has been read primarily through socio-politically engaged approaches and represents the majority of the body of scholarship on her work, and, secondly, her poetry, which is smaller in scope but contains studies that offer novel ways of thinking about the author’s work outside of mimetic approaches. Lastly, I look at her drama, which is the genre that makes up the smallest part of her oeuvre and has been studied only briefly. Overall, I will tease out what the different forms of entanglement that have been identified might mean, as this keys into my final

observations in the next chapter on how these entanglements between different systems might allow us to conceive differently of literary systems in the South African context.

### 5.1.2.1. Prose: The differences in social engagedness

Whereas the mimetic aspects of Van Niekerk's work have received a considerable amount of attention in scholarly reception in English, Afrikaans research on her work has certainly not ignored or abandoned these politically and socially engaged approaches.

Undoubtedly dominant in the existing bodies of research on Van Niekerk's texts are those approaches that I referred to in Chapter 3 as rooted in critical theories that rose to prominence during the ethical turn in the humanities during the 1980s and into the 1990s. The use of these theories have been most obviously concerned with Van Niekerk's two most successful novels, *Triomf* and *Agaat*, and very briefly also her short story "Labour" (translated from "Klein vingeroefening rondom hibriditeit"). Writ large in the background of most of these studies is South Africa and its violent history. For instance, in research that has appeared in English, predominant themes within this engaged frame are, as I have identified and organised them: Van Niekerk as postcolonial author; nationalism, history, allegory; Van Niekerk and the *plaasroman*; race, gender and sexuality; corporeality/the body; animals and nature; and urbanity and space. Within Afrikaans literary studies, the main themes have been, according to my identification and organisation: Apartheid and the history of Afrikaner nationalism; language, narrative; space; postcolonialism, the *plaasroman* and other current issues; and gender.

There are distinct overlaps between these themes, despite the categories I have sorted them into not aligning exactly. The reason for the asymmetry of the categories is not by accident. Rather, the categories have been influenced, firstly, by the variety of views and readings offered by researchers in the respective English and Afrikaans research (which represent different nuances and emphases, as one would expect from such a large body of texts and two distinct, if entangled, literary traditions), and, secondly, by what I have referred to as the positioning of the critical gaze. In surveying the English research, it becomes apparent that Van Niekerk's work is read – to a large extent and even as a point of departure – as part of a broader *South African* canvass. In other words, while the specificities of the particular Afrikaans cultural and

historical elements of her novels are not ignored, they are often read far more in relation to how they can be seen to speak to the greater whole of the South African reality (both past and present) than simply as speaking to these issues within the more limited context of Afrikanerdom as a vessel of its own culture and history.

Concerning research in English that analyses Van Niekerk's work, Louise Viljoen's 1996 article on the Afrikaans version of *Triomf* can be considered one of the earliest research articles to have appeared. Later, Zoë Wicomb would also utilise this version of *Triomf* in an article written in English that discusses the relationships between "Afrikanerhood" and whiteness (2001:159). Viljoen's article, itself written in English, predates the publication of the English translation of the novel, and indeed focuses on the "postcoloniality" of Afrikaans literature, arguing against the problematic focus on only English-language texts in the seminal *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1989). I would argue that Wicomb's article takes a similar position to Viljoen's on this, even if it is not expressly voiced. The distinction between languages within a postcolonial context that is so central to Viljoen's article appears more muddled, however, after the publication of both *Triomf* and *Agaat* in English translation, with the boundaries between the respective Afrikaans and English versions of these texts thereafter becoming less apparent, at least within some sites of scholarly criticism (Carvalho & Van Vuuren, 2009; Fourie, 2011, 2016; Olausson, 2017).

In research published in Afrikaans on Van Niekerk as postcolonial author, the focus in discussions is firmly on the original text. Similar to English research on this topic, the notion of the *plaasroman* is often invoked to explore postcolonial concerns (De Villiers, 2007; Prinsloo & Visagie, 2007 and 2009). Also notable is the research that offers an interrogation of some mimetic aspects of *Triomf*, and reads the text itself as commenting on mimesis (Burger, 2000, 2002). Tied into the readings of Van Niekerk's work by these scholars, there are various aspects relating to race, history, and allegory. The *plaasroman* features strongly in scholarship on *Triomf* and *Agaat* in both English and Afrikaans. The English criticism emphasizes nationalism and Afrikaner identity within the frame of apartheid South Africa (Devarenne, 2006; Brophy, 2006; Du Plessis, 2009; Fourie, 2011 & 2016; Van Houwelingen, 2012a) more than the Afrikaans criticism does, which tends to concern itself primarily with the two novels as rewriting or continuing the *plaasroman* subgenre (Van Coller, 2003; De Villiers, 2007; Prinsloo & Visagie, 2007 and 2009), as well as issues of race (Prinsloo & Visagie, 2007 and 2009) – even as both English and Afrikaans converge on the role of the land in relation to

practices of history-making itself (Prinsloo & Visagie, 2007; Moore-Barnes, 2010; Fourie, 2011, 2016; Van Houwelingen, 2012a; Fincham, 2014). This marks an important site of overlap in which the analytical range seems imbricated, drawing on the same intellectual histories of the post-apartheid present even as they remain located within their own literary aesthetics and concerns through distinctive critical gazes. This evidences, to borrow Nuttall's formulation, "difference and sameness but also [...] their limits, their predicaments, their moments of complication" (2009:1).

Engagements with the themes of nationalism, history and allegory, as well as race, gender and sexuality often manifest within English literary studies in investigations that utilise a Van Niekerk text along with other literary texts in English – contrary to instances in Afrikaans research where these issues are not fleshed out in comparable depth. This includes investigations into aspects of Afrikaner identity using some Afrikaans texts in the original language, and others in English translation (Carstens, 2002; Jacobs, 2012), studies that rely on English translations of Afrikaans texts only (Robbe, 2010), as well as more comparative approaches that utilise Van Niekerk's novels in English translation along with other texts originally published in English (Buikema, 2009; Hunter, 2009; Robbe, 2010; Medalie, 2012; Moonsamy, 2014a; Robbe, 2015). What is interesting here is not just the choices of the researchers, but also the question of whether they engage at all with the fact that they are using *translated* texts. These articles do, to differing degrees, acknowledge the fact that the novels feature Afrikaner (or Afrikaans) characters and concerns related to this, but these are consistently placed within the broader frame of national issues. The more encompassing but perhaps less distinct *South African* gaze that characterises much of the English reception therefore ultimately seems to supersede the more specific and maybe more limited *Afrikaans* gaze. Sometimes, this is qualified: Jacobs (2012) and Emmett (2013) in their respective articles reveal the impression that specifically the *white* Afrikaans and English literary systems are intertwined through their mutual struggle to come to terms with both the other and mutual aspects of white identity; Medalie (2012) views the English translation of *Agaat* as an entirely separate text from the Afrikaans source text; and Moonsamy (2014a) can only be assumed to share Medalie's sentiment to an even greater extent than the latter himself, as she makes no mention in her study of Van Niekerk's novel even being a translated text.

The interchangeability of the two translations of Van Niekerk's novels in research published in English reveals an admittedly problematic assumption of equivalence in translation, but it is

in my view not entirely unjustifiable when one considers that every scholar cannot be expected to engage with questions surrounding translation in every study involving a translated text. However, I draw attention to this observation not to principally criticise the researchers' actions, but rather to hold it up as an aid to understanding the relationship between two literary systems. While research produced within literary studies in English seem more confident about collapsing the boundaries between the source and target texts, there is an apparent reticence to do so within the practices of Afrikaans literary studies.

Linde (2018:29) observes that what defines some of the research on Van Niekerk's work within English literary studies is interesting (from the perspective of Afrikaans literary studies) in that it (research in English) is not driven by the prevailing trends of its Afrikaans counterpart. This is certainly borne out in my research when one focuses on particular research themes, such as race, gender and sexuality. Due to the historical context of Van Niekerk's prose texts, it is certainly not surprising that issues of gender, race, class and sexuality may loom large, to some degree, in many of the research studies on these texts. But the extent to which researchers have focused on these themes is again telling of the difference between literary systems, and here, significantly, is not indicative of entanglement, but indeed of difference and separation.

In a number of English articles, for instance, gender is utilised to explore a multitude of other issues of post-apartheid South Africa. This is often illustrative of a critical gaze that uses gender to speak to broader historical and societal concerns. To name but a few: For Buikema, the notion of national boundaries can be reconsidered through their gendered construction (2009); Robbe uses gender to read power relations (2010 & 2015); Jennifer Fuhler explores the literary depiction of the violation of female bodies as political allegory (2006); and Antoinette Pretorius (2014a) reads Jak's masculinity against the prevailing criticism of how apartheid-era gender identity constructions are depicted in *Agaat*. There is of course also the ways in which the representation of gender is read by scholars such as Mary West (2009a) and Eva Hunter (2009) as part of bigger gender discourses in literature. Furthermore, a number of related readings concerned with bodily spatiality and corporeality in Van Niekerk's work have been conducted within English literary studies, resulting in a significantly large body of scholarship (Buxbaum, 2011, 2012, 2013; Rossman, 2012b; Pretorius, 2014b; Fourie & Adendorff, 2015; and Crous, 2016a). Many of these studies focus on aspects that speak to concerns that can be extrapolated outside of the historical and socio-political contexts of the literary texts under discussion – quite similar to related gender-centric works. It is also within the research focus of the body

that the English translation of *Memorandum* receives more attention than within other areas in English scholarship (Crous, 2011; Rossman, 2014 & 2015).

Concerns with gender are not absent in Afrikaans scholarship on Van Niekerk's work. As I have already noted, gender is often discussed (or mostly rather only mentioned) as a secondary element of the author's longer prose, particularly in relation to how her texts – again mostly her first two novels – engage aspects of traditional subgenres such as the *plaasroman* (De Villiers, 2007; West, 2009b). However, the wide-ranging studies in English that are concerned with gender (Viljoen, 1996a; Fuhler, 2006; Buikema, 2009; Hunter, 2009; West, 2009a; Fourie, 2011 & 2016; Kossew, 2012; Robbe, 2005 & 2012; Bystrom, 2016; De Caires Narain, 2013; Pretorius, 2014a) greatly outnumber what is the case in Afrikaans, while there exist no studies that are concerned with aspects of bodily spatiality and corporeality in Afrikaans reception of Van Niekerk's prose. Indeed, it is in truth only a study by Henn (2010) that directly focuses on gender in one of Van Niekerk's texts. Henn looks at *Agaat*, and how Milla's various traditionally defined female roles (young girl, daughter, wife, mother, mistress and patient) can be read against the backdrop of the socio-political and socio-cultural context of the novel. This shows a pre-occupation with gender within the sphere of Afrikanerdom specifically – again evidencing a critical gaze that does not necessarily look to speak to greater national concerns, but rather to those directly relevant to a white Afrikaans milieu.

It is not surprising that Van Niekerk's notions of space, urbanity and land would feature prominently in research on her work. In English, again, such an approach is taken in relation to her most successful novels, which encompass detailed notions of space within the context of postcolonial South Africa (urbanity, countryside, land and landownership). Engaging with the urban space of Triomf/Sophiatown, as well as space in the rural setting of Grootmoedersdrift, English researchers often employ the idea of the palimpsest (or variations thereof) to read space as a kind of historical archive (e.g. Clarkson, 2005; Samuelson, 2008; Poggenorf, 2013). What is noteworthy here, though, is that within these English studies, there is again the utilisation of Van Niekerk's texts along with South African English texts, many of which are by canonical English authors such as Ivan Vladislavić, Zoë Wicomb, Kopano Matlwa, Alan Paton, Phaswane Mpe and Nadine Gordimer.

H.P. van Coller (2003) discusses the city and countryside as opposites in Afrikaans prose, and he places *Triomf* within this literary-historical perspective by showing how Van Niekerk's

suburban novel pays homage to older texts in the Afrikaans canon. Though Van Coller thus continues the trend that I have identified of Afrikaans literary scholars to frequently limit their attention to the sphere of Afrikaans literature only, the fairly recent study by Bibi Burger (2016) within this same research category deviates from this trend.

As I discussed in Chapter 4, Burger's study is comparative in nature, utilising both Afrikaans and English novels, and, even though *Triomf* is only discussed briefly, it is her observations regarding the connections between Afrikaans and English literary studies that are important to consider for my project. Within the limitations of her research focus area, Burger states that she found very little cooperation between Afrikaans and English literary scholars in studies that are concerned with the depiction of city spaces (2016:224). Her own work, however, begins filling this gap through a comparative approach to texts from both systems. This approach is one that I would like to earmark, as I return to it in Chapter 6.

The last socially engaged topics of interest that have been central to a number of studies on Van Niekerk's work, are those with a focus on animals and nature. As discussed above, these topics, in both literary systems, are often folded into discussions centred around other related subjects, such as the novel within a postcolonial frame or read within the subgenre of the *plaasroman* (Moore-Barnes, 2010; Fourie, 2011). A few studies that have appeared in English concentrate on animals and nature more directly, though, and in these articles, researchers contemplate the role of the Benade's dogs in the English translation of *Triomf* from different perspectives (Woodward, 2001; Jackson, 2011; Libin, 2009). Some of these studies arguably take a more traditional ecocritical/animal studies approach (also drawing comparisons with Coetzee's *Disgrace*), whereas they also play with the interpretative possibilities of the animal characters in the novel, concluding with extrapolated readings that suggest that the text reflects something about both the past and present of South Africa.

Juxtaposed with the abovementioned, Afrikaans scholarship has to my knowledge produced no studies on Van Niekerk's prose that take as principal point of departure discourses prevalent in animal studies or ecocriticism. Be that as it may, a number of articles concerned with nature and conservation have utilised Van Niekerk's poetry. I discuss this further on.

### 5.1.2.2. Prose: Reading the crossovers between literature, art, and music

The crossovers between the literary text, visual art and music is an aspect of Van Niekerk's output that has received notable attention in Afrikaans literary studies. In terms of visual art, the researchers' attention is directed towards the relationship between Van Niekerk's work on the one hand, and that of a visual artist on the other. It is mainly a series of paintings by Adriaan van Zyl, who is credited as co-author of *Memorandum*, and some of the works of Marlene Dumas, two of whose works have been used as the respective cover images for *Die sneeuslaper* and *The Snow Sleeper*, that are drawn into these discussions (Nel, 2009 & 2012b; Roux, 2009). Additionally, some research has focused on the possible ars poetical impact of *Memorandum* and *Die sneeuslaper* (Van Vuuren, 2014; Linde & Van Schalkwyk, 2016). There are also the studies that consider the references to music in Van Niekerk's work and how these can be read to deepen one's understanding of the text – especially within the historical and socio-cultural context the novel is set in (Van der Mescht, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011; Van Vuuren, 2014). As such, the scholars' critical gazes are again engaged with the details of a specifically Afrikaans cultural sphere, albeit one that is shown to be strongly influenced by a shared European musical history.

These aspects of Van Niekerk's work have clearly posed more of a challenge to researchers working in English, as only four English articles have appeared that grapple with the overlap between literature on the one hand, and art and music on the other. In all four of these articles, the focus falls on the intricacies of *Memorandum* as simultaneously visual and textual work (Sanders, 2009; Crous, 2011; Rossman, 2014 & 2015). As such, the approaches followed are in some ways quite similar to their counterparts in Afrikaans, even though the authors of the English articles do not situate their studies within the Afrikaans cultural sphere, but rather extrapolate their interpretations to have more broadly applicable (almost universal) meaning: ascribing meaning through memory (Sanders, 2009); a visual-textual perspective on illness and its related practices (Crous, 2011); as a kind of threshold of life and art (Rossman, 2014); and the novel as a sort of crossing between life and death (Rossman, 2015). Drawing conclusions related to universal human experiences – memory, illness, life and death – is more removed from the kind of textual specificities that are read mimetically, enabling a more philosophised view on mortality. This is a way of reading applied in research published in English that externalises to a degree that goes beyond even national and historical cultural discourses.

These differences are illustrative of the varying predominant traditions and voguish discourses (at certain moments) that circulate in respective literary systems. We may observe both overlap and difference here, but these developments within literary studies express the constantly developing value judgements (and tastes) of scholars who work within the boundaries of their fields, and ultimately this will inform the points of departure of studies on the work of Marlene van Niekerk .

### **5.1.2.3. Poetry: Both depth and absence**

The different structures of the preceding two chapters already act as a telling suggestion of a marked difference regarding conceptions of, on the one hand, Van Niekerk as an author in English, and on the other, Van Niekerk as an author writing in Afrikaans. In Chapter 3, I discussed Van Niekerk's limited poetry output in English, and I explored the potential reasons why this is matched by a similarly limited popular and scholarly reception – a state of affairs that is not only influenced by the limited availability of English poetry penned by the poet. In Chapter 4, I have illustrated how, conversely, the role of poet, in which Van Niekerk made her literary debut in the Afrikaans system, is one that has had a marked impact not only on her works in other genres, but also on the reception of her whole oeuvre and of her authorship.

The limited reception of Van Niekerk's poetry in English is glaring when one considers the size of the body of reviews and scholarship that has been produced on her prose works. Viewed within this frame, the reasons for the dearth of engagement with her poetry can be ascribed not just to a single factor, but to many. Firstly, there is the obvious fact of the limited number of poems by Van Niekerk that are available in English. The arguable low demand for poetry as a reading genre in the reading cultures of many languages all over the world, and here in South Africa in English in particular, might also explain why there has not been a more concerted effort by Van Niekerk herself and others to translate her poetry into English. Secondly, there are the prevailing discourses in literary studies that give preference to prose, and particularly prose that might “fulfil certain Western stereotypes,” wherein the reader can see South Africa “as [a place] of bitterness and unrelenting historical determinism” (Frenkel, 2008:77). This is not to say that the critical approaches utilised in studies in English discussed above in relation to research on Van Niekerk's work are therefore irrelevant or unnecessary. One cannot deny, however, the patent link between many of these engaged approaches, their persistent

preoccupation with mimetics – or, as Sandra Bermann writes, the “lack of close readings and its frequent recourse to thematic approaches” (2012:174) – and the expectations put to literature from former colonies; what Spivak calls “third-worldist literary pedagogy” (1999:164). And lastly, then, there is, seemingly, in the limited analysis I have been able to conduct within the scope of this study, the problematically simplistic ways in which Van Niekerk’s English poetry has on occasion been read – the reasons for which range from reading practices that are highly politically charged to instances of plain misreading. As I have argued, this could perhaps have been alleviated if these readings had been undertaken with an active awareness of Van Niekerk’s larger poetic (but also shorter prose) oeuvre. While I remain careful to extrapolate the abovementioned instances too widely into South African English literary studies, it is, at least, a telling example of how even a successful writer such as Van Niekerk may have her poetic work at best misread and at worst ignored in the South African English literary system.

This final reason again relates to entanglement as a lens making us aware of the overlaps *of* time and *in* time within the literary system. It is noteworthy that Van Niekerk’s most lauded and most studied work happens to be that which coincides or comes after South Africa’s first democratic elections (her novels, play, later short stories and later poetry). In English research, this temporal placing is meaningful, as it operates without a detailed knowledge of her work produced during apartheid (her early poetry and first short story collection), and so her later work is read not in a continuum with these earlier texts, but almost entirely in their absence. The impact of this is demonstrated by the different ways in which Van Niekerk is read in the Afrikaans system – that is, for both the characteristics of her writing and her intellectual, authorial persona. Subsequently, the relative paucity of comparative literary studies as methodology, particularly amongst monolingual English-speakers, results in the mis-placing of Van Niekerk’s poetry (both that available in Afrikaans and in English), putting it into the domain of the mimetic – which further shapes how it circulates within the system. And so, without the knowledge of the development of Van Niekerk as an author over the course of all of her work, the satirical, rebellious, challenging and currently impolitic tone of at least two of her original English poems have no frame able to effectively engage with an authorial mode that is more obvious to the bilingual reader who is also aware of Van Niekerk’s early work written in Afrikaans.

In comparison to this stands in the Afrikaans literary system not only the lingering awareness of Van Niekerk’s roots and abilities in the genre of poetry that is evidenced throughout the

reception of her literary works in all genres, but also the studies on her volumes of poetry. These research works cover a range of topics. There are the various forms of care (Crous, 2017) evident in *Kaar*, which tie in to aspects of conservation (Crous, 2016b; Marx, 2018), a focus that shows some overlap across literary genres with articles in English that are occupied with animals and nature in Van Niekerk's prose. Intriguingly, both the relevant studies by Marius Crous and Anelda Marx discuss the problematic dualism between human and non-human animals that is explored in *Kaar*, while Marx also links this to postcolonial ecocriticism, through which the analysis of the Van Niekerk text serves to speak to concerns greater than those specific to an Afrikaans milieu.

The other research themes I have identified in the Afrikaans criticism all share a kind of entanglement between predominant notions of Van Niekerk as an author, the different discourses in the reception of her work, as well as Van Niekerk's authorship itself. This notion of authorship is not only related to Van Niekerk herself, but also to the very idea of the author and the role of the author in society – something that travels temporally across Van Niekerk's work produced during apartheid and thereafter. Within this latter framing, Van Niekerk's latest poetry, which includes *Kaar*, *Gesant van die mispels* and *In die stille agterkamer*, is read for its conceptualisations of a transnationalist authorship within the context of South African and global language politics, notably in the studies by Wolfaardt-Gräbe (2013), De Vries (2015), Pieterse (2017), Viljoen (2017c, 2018) and Linde (2018). These studies signal how Van Niekerk's work in Afrikaans is read not genre by genre in isolation, but as a longer, connected course of development. From such a perspective, her poetry is inextricably linked up with her prose, as her various works have evolved along with her authorship and artistry. On a systemic level, this also illustrates how poetry remains an important genre in Afrikaans literary studies in a way that is possibly not matched in current South African English literary studies.

#### **5.1.2.4. Drama: Small but important**

Despite *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.* being the only play that forms part of Marlene van Niekerk's oeuvre, it has received a fair amount of critical attention in both the South African English and Afrikaans literary systems. In the case of the Afrikaans reception of the play, the reception falls entirely within the realm of popular reviews and awards (Steinmair, 2010; Joubert, 2011; Du Preez, 2011), while in English, the play received limited review

(August, 2011; De Kock, 2011), and a single work of scholarship has been produced on it (De Kock & Pieterse, 2012). The Afrikaans and English reviewers draw on a broader literary tradition shared by Afrikaans and South African English literature by referring to *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.* as a new kind of protest theatre, with the play being viewed as speaking to present national concerns in a style that was used to speak about the many injustices of apartheid decades before.

Both the positive reception of the play in Afrikaans and it having been received at all within the English system emphasises the importance of Van Niekerk within both literary systems. The attention is especially significant when one takes into account the status of the genre in both literary systems. After all, any overview of the last decade's worth of research conducted in literary studies, literary texts published, and literary texts taught at various universities throughout South Africa are likely to show the predominance of prose and poetry (in that order) over drama. Coupled with the fact that Van Niekerk's play was not published (in the traditional sense, by a publisher with access to extensive distribution channels) and appeared only in Afrikaans, it can be argued that the case of *Die kortstondige raklewe van Anastasia W.* is not only a testament to the influence Van Niekerk's work has come to command in the respective Afrikaans and English literary systems, but it is also an indication of the author's agency in these systems, and the ways in which an *Afrikaans* text from within the Afrikaans literary system may exert influence within the South African English literary system.

## 5.2. Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that these observations, expansive as they might be within and across the Afrikaans and South African English literary systems, are still limited to only two of the many literary systems of the country. While there could very well be similarities between what I have identified here and a similar view into, for instance, the isiZulu literary system and its English counterpart, there will be agents and forces in the field unique to the former system, and so the entanglements that might be identified could also take on a very different form.

The overview of the research conducted within the Afrikaans and South African English literary systems shows both the depth and breadth of existing research, but, simultaneously, it also draws attention to approaches that have not yet been followed. The lyricism and

performative excess in Marlene van Niekerk's work that is often commented upon by critics and scholars has not materialised in any stylistic studies, for example. Considering that "messing with" language is, by Van Niekerk's own admission, so central to most of her work, there is certainly space for studies of this nature (and many others besides) on the author's work – in both Afrikaans and English literary studies.

What is also clear from my overview and discussion, and I am confident that similar studies that consider the literatures of other South African languages might find this too, is that the influence and power of English in the South African literary system has become – unsurprisingly – immense. This is in itself not problematic, at face value. However, a more detailed look, as I have provided, marks the steady rise of English as, on the one hand, a force open to trade, extending the reach of minor authors. On the other hand, this bartering is often iniquitous, if not in its intentions, then in its results. The actual reach of the minor partner is still limited by preconditions that serve to grow the major partner's literary canon by means of exorbitant gain, whereas the superficial reciprocal exchange can also easily peter out into irreparable loss on the part of the minor trading partner, because of the fossilising of a homogenising reading culture and a concomitant view of the non-English world.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have employed the metaphor of entanglement to understand the connections between the individual literary systems of Afrikaans and South African English. The aim of this has of course been to clarify the relationships between Marlene van Niekerk's work as it circulates differently in the mentioned literary systems, and to extrapolate this into valuable insights about the South African literary system. To understand some specific forms that these entanglements might take, I have relied on epitexts as visible nodes and connections within a map that is based on Even-Zohar's notion of the polysystem and Bourdieu's concept of the cultural field. Following De Geest (1991:71-76), I have included in this study what is a vast corpus of texts, but, throughout, my focus has not been on exhaustiveness as much as it has been on representativeness, enabling specific and distinct sites of comparison and analysis. I utilised these theoretical framings together, as it allows one to remain aware of the dynamicity of what is under consideration. Indeed, it is the opposite of what I mentioned in the Introduction to be my experiences of literary studies in different languages in South Africa today. It is in its very nature a powerful counterforce to the idea of figurative linguistic and cultural silos. I have shown that this notion of entanglement manifests in those instances where meaning entwines complex and active artefacts and agents in ways both willing and unwilling, purposefully but also per chance and randomly – giving us the opportunity to see the operation of literature and its attendant forces from a more distanced perspective. Within these moments is the opportunity to observe discourses and processes we are not necessarily able to observe in terms of the literary text only, or in terms of the author alone, or even in terms of the multiple other texts and agents that accompany the literary text when they are each viewed in isolation.

In this study, I have been able to give an extensive account of how Van Niekerk is differently considered within the Afrikaans literary system, on the one hand, and the South African English literary system on the other. In both systems, she is a highly regarded author. And while she might be considered differently within each of these systems, there are multiple points of entanglement between these systems *through* Van Niekerk. More importantly, though, in terms of what this shows, is the state of affairs in the current South African literary system.

For English scholars, there is in Van Niekerk's prose the kind of awareness often evidenced in postcolonial literature, and there has been a tendency to emphasise the author's work within grander narratives, with a concerted focus on the politically engaged elements of her work. For Afrikaans scholars, this is also sometimes the case, but the specificities of Van Niekerk's work as embedded in an Afrikaans context is consistently kept in sight. Additionally, there is for many Afrikaans scholars a certain activism in Van Niekerk's expression of her authorship that seemingly goes beyond the directly visible challenges of the South African past and present depicted in her texts. Van Niekerk views her own Afrikaans authorship as a form of entanglement that draws in different cultural contexts and histories, what she has herself referred to as "the unavoidable operation of entanglements and reciprocal 'contamination' of cultures" (Van Niekerk in Esterhuizen, 2016). Unsurprisingly, then, her texts are read within the Afrikaans system as both identifying and challenging past and continuing transnational colonial complicities, with an awareness of the concomitant imbrications of the legacies of the past with forms of oppression and marginalisation in the present, and these issues are frequently related to the minor status of the Afrikaans language in the face of enormous pressure exerted by English as a major language – particularly in her most recent short stories and poetry. Thus, in Afrikaans scholarly reception, there seems to be a problematising of the role of the author (entangled as she has become in both the local and the global) that manifests in reading her work not just as engaged with the issues it might directly address (being matters often stemming from past colonial and apartheid injustices), but as artefacts that also question the new (or rather, in some instances, newly visible) imbalances of power, without necessarily losing sight of the present and possible future roles of Afrikaans within a decolonising South Africa. It is this reading of the author's work – that is, speaking against what has become in the current moment subjectively epistemically valid, through means often considered impolitic within the powerful frame of discourses of supposedly "liberating" and untarnished major languages – that seems to typify for many Afrikaans scholars Van Niekerk's oeuvre.

If I am critical about my own approach and its limitations, I must acknowledge the status of both the Afrikaans and South African English literary systems. Both enjoyed to varying degrees a level of privilege and state support that ended with the democratisation of the country, but that persist in several ways into the present because of decades of benefitting from the segregated politics and cultures of South Africa. Though Afrikaans is a minor language that is struggling under the weight of the major influence of English, it is still in a far stronger cultural position than many of the other languages of the country. Thus, although many of the insights

and conclusions that I have come to do contribute to our understanding of the respective Afrikaans and South African English literary systems, as well as their entanglements, and our conceptions of a “national” literary system, these two systems cannot be assumed to ineludibly reflect the perhaps very different entanglements that exists between all the literary systems of the other South African languages. Furthermore, my point of departure relies too heavily upon entanglement (in whatever form it takes) *necessarily* taking a positive form. To be clear, the kind of entanglement between literary systems that I have illuminated in this dissertation remains, in my view, a positive cultural force. However, as my research has also shown, even aspects of entanglement must contend with the profound inequality that exists between languages, both within South Africa and beyond.

It is then also important to acknowledge that, even within the two literary systems engaged in this study, there remains a racialised inflection that could not be sufficiently explored within the limited scope of this dissertation. Though I very briefly refer to these factors here and there, it must be stated that Van Niekerk’s work does not stand outside of existing racialised boundaries that continue to inform both the Afrikaans and the South African English literary systems. These persistent issues are discussed in broader historical contexts by, amongst others, Hein Willemsse (2012; 2015) and Peter D. McDonald (2012). In both Afrikaans and South African English literary criticism and scholarship, there exist decades-old debates surrounding the highly contested notions of supposed parallel “white Afrikaans/English literature” and “black Afrikaans/English literature”. I have not been able to give due attention to these debates in this dissertation as a result of spatial constraints. But systemic approaches to these issues – or, approached otherwise, the racialised nature of literary systems in South Africa (i.e. racialised silos within distinct linguistic systems) and their entanglements (or lack thereof) – deserve to be studied in future research.

There are inherent problems encountered when one works with an author whose work has migrated, or rather, been migrated, into another literary system: the politics of translation and world literature. Reviewers and scholars in Afrikaans (and to an extent, the author herself) have made much of Van Niekerk’s work as not only a chronicle of Afrikaans cultural and socio-political histories, but also as a form of resistance to the homogenising dominance of English as a major language. Not only does this manifest in her work through, for instance, her reinscribing of Afrikaans with Dutch (rather than with English, which has become a major source of influence on Afrikaans) in both *Die sneeuslaper* and *Kaar*, but also in her opinion piece on

the language debate at Stellenbosch University and, relatedly, the position of Afrikaans in post-apartheid South Africa (see Van Niekerk, 2016). This awareness of the histories and politics of language is doubly interesting when one considers that the author's work in the form of translation has been drawn into the contested space that is world literature.

In their attempts to reward irreparable loss with exorbitant gain (Heyns, 2009:128), Michiel Heyns and Leon de Kock, respectively the translators of *Agaat* and *Triomf*, have tried to retain the characteristic Afrikaansness of Van Niekerk's work while simultaneously making it accessible to foreign readers. But their translations and how these are read ultimately remain subject to the powerful discourses that direct literature published in English, and these discourses can at times be malignant in favour of ever extending their own normativity, to the detriment of those minor forces in its way. As such, while we have seen through Van Niekerk as a lens the positive possibilities of entanglement – such as the access to a broader audience, increased interest in South African (and perhaps Afrikaans) literature, and the blossoming of research on the author's work in ways impossible within the Afrikaans system alone – we have also seen the more negative aspects of these entanglements. The most present of these is the continued normalisation of the homogenising influence of English, whereby translation is not a way for different cultures to converse, but simply a route through which English enjoys being spoken to on its own terms. This is a form of entanglement that is not obviously reciprocal for both interested parties. Spivak calls this “translation-as-violation” (1999:164), but perhaps it would be equally valid to refer to it as “translation-as-normalisation” to draw attention to the perilous invisibility of this fact. What the concept of “normal” here implies is in itself dangerous, for it is not just equating “world literature” to that which is available in one specific language, but it is also the relegation (willingly or unwillingly) of all experiences outside of English into insignificance. Translation into English in this context becomes the unchallenged requirement of any other language, and all that that encompasses, to *matter*.

These issues are reflected in the reception of Van Niekerk's work – especially in the previously mentioned instances where an English translation of a Van Niekerk text is not even acknowledged as being a translation of an original Afrikaans work. Moreover, it can also be seen in the trends of popular and scholarly reception that skew towards a “lack of close readings” and “frequent recourse to thematic approaches” (Bermann, 2012:174). To be fair, this is not intended to discount the importance of research that has been published in English on Van Niekerk's work. But it needs to be noted that the critical gaze that inevitably draws

towards the more broadly extrapolatable thematic readings of her texts at times comes dangerously close to reproducing the most problematic results of “wholesale translation into English,” which, in its disregard or ignorance of the text in its original language, can easily be “a betrayal of [a] democratic ideal into the law of the strongest” (Spivak, 2004:371).

There are of course those agents in the field that deviate from these problematic practices. They are the numerous scholars who, in their research on Van Niekerk’s work – and beyond – have made attempts at straddling the space between Afrikaans and English, thereby subtly revealing the possibilities of increasing accessibility through a willingness to engage not only the author’s work in two languages, but also to effect their agency by producing research in two languages. It is in these practices that we might see a higher level of awareness of the effects of entanglements between literary systems in South Africa and how this might ignite a movement away from literary silos. I speak here of course of the promise of comparative literary studies within the South African academe.

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## Addendum: Poems

### “Mud school”

(For the children of the Eastern Cape, 20 years after freedom.)

Minister Motshekga, your name is mud. Let's see  
 what we can do with you. We can fire you and make  
 of you a brick, and add you to our school, maybe  
 as the corner stone. In rain you'll turn into a turd.  
 We'll skip over you and laugh. We can smear  
 you thickly on our walls and watch you crumble  
 in the summer wind, we'll use your flakes to learn  
 subtraction until there is nothing left to reckon with.  
 We can bake a cake with you and pretend we're eating  
 lunch, or mould you to a wafer to serve us as a thin,  
 melting sacrament. We can press you in a frame  
 to form a wet slate and write this poem on you  
 with a twig and send the president a truck of sun-  
 baked tiles to read until he weeps. But maybe he  
 will only grin and say, why complain? Look where I  
 have got to with only standard six, I hold an honorary  
 doctorate from Beijing! Mrs Mud, we could erect for you  
 a headstone in every school and every morning march  
 around it chanting, till it falls down like the walls of Jericho.  
 But will it help if the element is air, or song, or pristine hope?  
 Mud is a multipurpose substance, minister, we can fling  
 it in your face, if you would show it to us, but you rarely come.  
 A grateful word for rhyming, too, this mud that is your name,  
 for chewing on, like a dumb beast on its cud, until one day –  
 for we have baked, skipped, eaten, written, reckoned,  
 ruminated, marched, prayed and chanted in its medium,  
 inhabited its frailty and studied well its force – we mix our blood  
 in it, and turn it into rock, and fan it into flame and furl  
 it into smoke and shout and tread under our feet the very buds  
 of spring, the things you should have nurtured,  
 the flowers of fresh learning, that we should have been.

(Van Niekerk, M. 2013c. Motshekga's name is mud. *Mail & Guardian*, 17 May. Available: <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-05-17-00-motshekgas-name-is-mud>. Accessed: 21 July 2018.)

**“Fallist art  
(In memory of Bongani Mayosi)”**

Bongani’s soul, his sister said,  
was vandalised, the insults  
(*sell-out, coconut*)  
cut him to the core, he changed,  
withdrew, spoke less and less  
and killed himself. He suffered  
from depression, known  
locally as punctured heart.

All you licking, fawning bastards  
who saw pure sunlight shining  
from the rad-est Fallist arses, why  
are you so quiet now? Many deans  
became unhinged, the yes-men  
fled with blessings and paid  
leave after having wrecked  
their faculties. Some rectors fucked  
off to America, others started  
drinking in their dens. And that  
is not the worst. You might  
think the damage came to  
seven hundred million, but  
not only the replaceable  
was burnt, not simply  
part of the infrastructure  
lost, the hurt was more  
unspeakable  
than that.

His soul, Bongani’s sister said,  
was vandalised, the insults  
(*sell-out, coconut*)  
cut him to the core, he changed,  
withdrew, spoke less and less  
and killed himself. He suffered  
from depression, known  
locally as losing heart.

You Angels of the New Dawn  
who butchered your departments  
for a Renaissance in Africa, why  
are you so what-the-hell on the self-  
destruction of a gifted and committed  
scientist? Have your latest anti-  
depressiva now taken proper hold?  
Is that the reason for your barren

smiles and quick-fix catwalk banter  
 on vile “assemblages of whiteness”?  
 Is that why you can gaily hack  
 the Heines, Bachs and Becketts from  
 curricula – wait for the Mbembes,  
 Butlers, Lalus – as though they are  
 makwerekwere, best to be macheted  
 out of town? Not that the parallel  
 will strike you as significant in your  
 fully junked up state of gown.

L’envoi

And me? I’m still digesting  
 what my colleague friend,  
 the famous painter, said.  
 (She sat on that committee  
 that covered up so-called  
 offending art: *from this fertile  
 rupture new things will surely  
 sprout*. As though the universities  
 were coral reefs, and Fallism  
 a moderate disturbance  
 that like a supertide would foster  
 in its wake a wonderful  
 diversity of species. (Fascists  
 always reify as nature  
 manipulated class eruptions,  
 if you want my view of this dainty  
 lady’s formulation.)

I see instead of cultural  
 florescence a closing down  
 of minds, not least in the assembly,  
 and the rising in the ranks  
 of rabid thought police. I hear  
 a host of conman academics  
 cashing in on stories of  
 the Promised Land dished up,  
 once more, by elites, to wasted  
 people of a wasted land, I hear an all-  
 pervasive mouthing of formulaic  
 English phrases and brace myself  
 and hold my poet’s breath from  
 falling, remembering  
 all the while:

Bongani’s soul, his sister said,  
 was torn apart, the insults  
 (*sell-out, coconut*)

cut him to the core, he changed,  
withdrew, spoke less and less  
and killed himself. He suffered  
from severe depression, known  
locally as fallen heart,  
a major work  
of Fallist art.

(Van Niekerk, M. 2018c. "Fallist art (in memory of Bongani Mayosi). *LitNet*, 10 August. Available: <https://www.litnet.co.za/fallist-art-in-memory-of-bongani-mayosi/>. Accessed: 10 August 2018.)