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**Entangled Histories and Divided Audiences: Overhearing Joseph Conrad, W. G. Sebald
and Dan Jacobson**

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Notes on contributor:

Kaisa Kaakinen finished a PhD in comparative literature at Cornell University and conducted dissertation research at the Humboldt University of Berlin as a DAAD graduate fellow. She is the author of a monograph *Comparative Literature and the Historical Imaginary: Reading Conrad, Weiss, Sebald* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and has taught comparative literature at Cornell University, the University of Turku and the University of Helsinki.

Abstract:

This article focuses on specific effects that occur when transnational literary texts encounter diverse readerships that do not share the same historical imaginary. The author highlights a readerly dynamic of “overhearing,” in which readers realize their outsider position within the discourse of a text but also recognize something sufficiently familiar in it to imagine a linkage to their own historical and social position. This dynamic is studied through texts by twentieth-century émigré authors Joseph Conrad and W. G. Sebald as well as by Dan Jacobson, whose memoir on the Lithuanian past of his Jewish family is referenced by Sebald.

Keywords: Comparative literature, transcultural memory studies, postcolonial studies, post-Soviet studies, Central and Eastern Europe, history and literature

Introduction: The Heterogeneous Historicity of Reading

“There is something ghostly, in this history where questions disappear, and answers survive.” (Moretti 2014, 14)

This remark appears in a brief chapter about the relationship between history and literature in Franco Moretti’s book *The Bourgeois – Between History and Literature* (2014). Moretti explains in this passage how he sees aesthetic forms in literature as “structured responses to social contradictions” and adds that what makes literature peculiar is that it preserves these resolutions, while the “dissonances have quietly vanished from sight” (2014, 14). In order to understand the questions to which literary texts provided answers, scholars must do some “reverse engineering,” as Moretti puts it, work their way towards the vanished past and its living tensions. Thus, literature may give mediated, never direct, information about a past context. This kind of perspective on literature produces a social history of literature, which is part of a broader history of society, as opposed to literary history, in which formal choices are seen as more intrinsic to the development of literature as a system (see Moretti 2014, 14–15).

If we think not only about the production of literary texts, but also their reception, it becomes clear that the questions, to which a literary text can be seen as an answer, do not only vanish as time proceeds. They are also replaced by new questions – posed by future readers, whose reading positions could not be anticipated in the context of the text’s first publication. This article will shed light on analytical questions that are raised when literary texts are linked to “social contradictions” not only in the literary texts’ initial context of production, but also in their multiple contexts of reception. More specifically, my aim is to provide one concretization of what it means to adopt a perspective of entangled histories in the study of reading and reception. My project is informed by the contemporary challenges posed to the discipline of comparative literature, which in the twenty-first century seeks to analyze the literary output of the whole world.¹ Unlike in the earlier models centered around national literatures written in major European languages, the new comparative literature can no longer assume a unified historical trajectory, in which the horizon of expectation of readers in a given moment in time is understood as relatively homogeneous. The broader geographic scope and the diversifying contemporary

readerships demand that comparative literature focus more attention on specific effects that occur when literary narratives encounter readerships that do not share the same historical imaginary. In a book-length study², I have expanded upon the analytical consequences of considering the fact that situated readers “fill in the gaps” in literary texts by posing context-specific questions in changing worldly situations and in heterogeneous³ reading contexts. I would like to use this article as an opportunity to link the problem of heterogeneous historicity of reading to the problem of entangled histories, in reference to specific challenges posed by the Baltic and, more broadly, the Central and Eastern European context. Rather than reading literary texts as containers of a certain historical narrative, I read them as textual media that direct and prompt the construction of historical narratives by historically situated readers.

I will concretize the entangled historical dynamics of transnational literary reception by presenting briefly the cases of two European émigré authors of the twentieth century, Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) and W. G. Sebald (1944-2001), as well as of Dan Jacobson (1929-2014), South African writer and critic of Lithuanian Jewish descent, to whose memoir Sebald refers in his novel *Austerlitz* (2001). Conrad and Sebald wrote literary texts that dealt with transnational historical phenomena and have had a considerable reception across linguistic and cultural contexts.⁴ I read their texts as case studies that serve especially well for illustrating the historical dynamics of situated reception in the case of literary texts that respond to transnational histories of violence, such as colonialism, the world wars and the Holocaust. Conrad is most often read as an author depicting the world of Western European colonialism, and Sebald’s works, known for their concern with the legacies of both colonialism and the Holocaust, center around Western European locations and histories. I will show, however, that even literary texts that are not commonly thought of as dealing with Eastern European or Baltic history may make visible historical dynamics of reading relevant for the Baltic and Eastern European context. My aim is to show that texts such as those by Conrad and Sebald, that engage with transnational history and have circulated widely across various national, cultural and linguistic borders, demonstrate the analytical need to differentiate between reading positions that literary texts may prompt when

they meet readers, whose historical imaginary is different from that of the primary audience of the text.

In this analysis, I will highlight a readerly dynamic that I call “overhearing,” and that I understand as a particular reading position, in which a reader realizes he or she does not belong to the implied audience set up by the text, but then uses this text to negotiate historical experiences and phenomena relevant to his or her own situated position as someone outside the text’s implied structure of address. I will introduce this dynamic in the first part of the article through the case of Joseph Conrad’s Polish reception, which has interpreted Conrad’s texts in a nation-based historical framework and tried to link these texts, that deal with the transnational imperial world and were written for the British audience, to Polish historical references and concerns. Conrad’s reception is an interesting case for scholars studying entangled histories and memories in the Baltic context, because it brings to light a dynamic of literary reception, in which texts intended for audiences in European metropolitan centers are read by readers located in European regions outside these centers. Furthermore, the Polish and Baltic contexts are to some extent comparable in view of their position vis-à-vis Anglophone discourses of colonialism and postcoloniality. Focusing on the position of Baltic and Eastern European contexts in transnational cultural discourses extends and differentiates postcolonial studies of cultural hierarchies, which have traditionally not dealt with European contexts situated outside the imperial centers of Western Europe. Conrad’s reception has provoked questions about the extent to which one may use the postcolonial paradigm in the context of the post-Socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (see Kaakinen 2017, 154-165), a concern raised in recent years also in the context of Baltic and Soviet Studies (see e.g. Annus 2017; Etkind and Blacker 2014).

In the second part of the article, I will develop the notion of ‘overhearing’ further by connecting it to transcultural memory studies and focusing on a more recent literary text that has a broad geographic frame of reference and wide international circulation, W. G. Sebald’s last novel *Austerlitz* (2001). I use Sebald’s novel here as an example of a literary text that makes historical comparisons in a transnational idiom and may prompt readers to reflect on linkages to the Baltic context, as the novel’s end refers to the memoir *Heshel’s Kingdom* (1998) by Dan

Jacobson. *Heshel's Kingdom* recounts Jacobson's search for his family's past and his trip to Lithuania, where his Jewish grandfather, Rabbi Heshel Melamed, died in 1919. The remaining family emigrated from Lithuania to South Africa already much before the Second World War; thus, they escaped the Holocaust in which many of their relatives and friends perished. The reference to Jacobson's book links the explicit narrative of *Austerlitz*, centered around Western Europe, to both South Africa and Lithuania, which lie outside the novel's explicit geographic frame of reference.

While the implied interpretative framework in Sebald's *Austerlitz* and Jacobson's *Heshel's Kingdom* is the transnational memory paradigm centered around the memory of the Holocaust, Sebald's reference to Jacobson also raises questions about the coming together in today's world of various memory discourses that have previously been conducted rather separately, such as the postcolonial and post-Soviet frameworks. The emphasis in Sebald's, and also to an extent in Jacobson's, poetics on gaps and absences invites scholars to ponder how the text's primary frame of cultural reference comes in a paratactic contact with historical experiences and memory cultures that are not its own primary concern, such as those concerning the Soviet and the post-Soviet eras. The cases of Sebald and Jacobson show that historical material relevant to different memory discourses might meet in the same text, and that scholars should be able to understand how these texts produce meaning as they travel across various memory discourses in the contemporary world. Furthermore, my analysis emphasizes that if the borders that these transnational texts cross in their circulation across the globe are understood only as national, important aspects of the relationality of reading, remembering and cultural imagination remain obscure.

Overhearing Joseph Conrad: Questioners at the Edges of the Present

I first used the word overhearing to characterize a specific mode of situated reading when I was writing about Joseph Conrad and his Polish and postcolonial reception. I borrow the word overhearing from Conrad scholar Aaron Fogel and his study *Coercive Dialogue*, in which Fogel analyzes Conrad's obsession with the study of speaking situations, especially those characterized

by forceful pressure and asymmetrical power relations. Fogel argues that overhearing is a recurring figure of transmission in Conrad's texts, used both as a stylistic strategy and as an explicit theme (1985, 55–56). In the famous Conrad story *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, the ominous character Kurtz is introduced to readers through a passage, in which the protagonist Marlow overhears a conversation about Kurtz not intended for his ears (Conrad 2006, 31–32). In *Lord Jim*, the narrator Marlow's first discussion with the protagonist Jim only happens because Jim misinterprets a curse that Marlow's discussion partner aims at a dog as one aimed at himself. This example of overhearing is interesting, because it not only initiates a tangential turn in the narrative but also generates the whole ensuing story (see also, Jameson 1981, 223–224). Thus, overhearing is here portrayed as both accidental and integral to the novel's narrative.

While Fogel focuses on Conrad's presentation of speech and dialogue, I employ the word overhearing to discuss the historical dimension of Conrad's texts beyond their implied address and cultural imaginary. Here, overhearers are those readers who realize that they do not belong to the implied audience but who actively use the text as a tool in articulating the significance of their historical location. It is interesting to note that Conrad's texts have not only had a broad international reception, but also one that is characterized by highly identificatory modes of reading, as my examples of Polish readings will show. Conrad's texts, however, are also characterized by the author's gesture of writing to a specific audience, of writing for "the English" and "calculating 'the effect it will have on an English reader'" (Jasanoff 2017, 83; see also, Walkowitz 2006, 38–39). Conrad's texts, especially those in which Marlow spins his yarns for his fellow seamen, tend to have a rather clearly defined address to a British imperial audience. Since Chinua Achebe's famous essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (see Achebe 2006), first delivered as a lecture in 1975, it is well known that Conrad's texts can be seen to operate within an imperialist discourse of civilization, in which the African characters are placed in the prehistoric past of the more advanced Europeans and are shown as unable to speak anything but "violent babble of uncouth sounds" (Conrad 2006, 19). Thus, Conrad's texts prompt questions on how literary texts characterize their implied or intended

audiences socially and culturally and how certain readers may be implicitly excluded from the conversation established by the text.

This characterization of readers is linked to the cultural imaginary of the imperial era that placed different cultures and races in a developmental hierarchy of civilizations, in which the European West occupied the most advanced position. My analysis of overhearing is indebted to postcolonial analyses of the modern temporal regime by Homi Bhabha and Natalie Melas, who have illuminated the logic of developmental temporality that served as a basis of equivalence in nineteenth-century models of cultural comparison (see Bhabha 1994, 348–352; Melas 2007, 2009). Bhabha and Melas stress that especially the category of race has been used as a basis of exclusion in the modern era. Drawing on and criticizing Michel Foucault's analysis of modernity as a question about the present to which the questioners themselves belong, Bhabha and Melas argue that the analyses of narratives of modernity should take into account postcolonial questioners who have come as if "too late" to the conversation of those (Western) subjects who have posited the unified present of modernity. Thus, they face a present that has already been constituted without them. As Melas puts it, in the postcolonial era, the "unspoken unity" of modernity's present "cannot be maintained with so many unanswerable questioners at its edges" (2009, 572). We might say, then, that the position of "overhearers" is inherent in the developmental temporal structure that postcolonial discourse exposes. I seek to analyze this discursive structure in historically concrete terms by looking at ways in which literary texts define those, who can take the positions of participants in the present that they construe through various discursive strategies.

My analysis of reading as overhearing also draws on the discussion of socially differentiated address by Doris Sommer, who has studied minority literatures in the Americas and drawn attention to how literary texts do not always invite all readers into a dialogue but may also refuse intimacy with certain readers. Sommer calls for a "version of hermeneutics" that recognizes "the asymmetry of positions [that] restricts a reader's travel from one place to the other" (1999, 24, 9). Sommer's approach cautions against taking cultural continuity and an unproblematic dialogue between text and reader for granted. In the case of Conrad, his texts record the imperial

asymmetry, which then creates specific conditions for the texts' reception and circulation that go beyond the truism that every literary text is interpreted differently by different readers. The developmental temporality and the role of race in the cultural imaginary of Conrad's texts divides Conrad's audience in a historically distinct manner, which then makes social positionality an important aspect of how these texts travel across temporal and cultural divides.

Furthermore, Conrad's postcolonial reception is also interesting because many of the postcolonial readings do not only expose the racism in Conrad's texts but often also identify a tension between what may be called a stylistic excess in Conrad's prose and the implied Eurocentric narrative frame. Critics have seen Conrad's modernist or impressionist style as particularly likely to produce significantly different readings. According to Fredric Jameson, "the discontinuities objectively present in Conrad's narratives have, as with few other modern writers, projected a bewildering variety of competing and incommensurable interpretive options" (1981, 208). Conrad's modernist focus on isolating sensory effects and foregrounding a semi-autonomy of the senses makes his style, as Said puts it, "more advanced" than what he was "actually saying" (1984, 90). According to this logic, Conrad's poetics sparks readers' historical imagination beyond the texts own historical and cultural imaginary. The ambiguous style of Conrad's texts produces displaced, unintended but still historically materialized local concretizations beyond the intended address of Conrad's texts. Said writes that Conrad's "persistent residual sense of his own exilic marginality" made him produce "provisional and liminal narratives that opened towards an unspecified outside" (1994, 25). Said argues further that Conrad "permits his later readers to imagine something other than an Africa carved up into dozens of European colonies, even if, for his own part, he had little notion of what that Africa might be" (1994, 26) Thus, Conrad's texts record an ambiguous tension between the implied cultural address and the culturally heterogeneous and entangled imperial context, which sparks the imagination of postimperial readers, who recognize the traces of the margins of the empire in Conrad's texts and amplify them to imagine postcolonial futures.

Said's approach to Conrad illustrates well how the reading strategy I call overheard does not refer to any interpretation that reacts to literary polysemy, but to a historically particular

mode of reading. In this mode of reading, readers realize their outsider position within the discourse of the text, but also recognize something sufficiently familiar in it to imagine a linkage to their own historical and social positions. While Said is particularly concerned with unimplied postcolonial readers of Conrad outside Europe, we might ask how the structure of opening the narratives to an “unspecified outside” operates in Conrad’s narratives in relation to European margins. Examination of a passage in the novel *Under Western Eyes* (1911), in which Conrad himself links overhearing to a pressure of history that makes certain readers perceive meanings other readers are unable to detect illuminates this question. This novel, the only Conrad novel that is geographically situated in the Eastern parts of Europe, recounts actions of revolutionaries in the Russian empire around the year 1910 and features a narrator figure, who employs a rhetoric of civilization to portray Russia, the “East,” as a less developed cultural sphere in relation to the West. However, while the narrator intends this discussion of Russia for “Western ears,” he also suggests that his words could transmit something else to readers, who know more than the implied audience about being subjected to an oppressive regime:

The object of my digression from the straight course of Miss Haldin's relation (in my own words) of her visit to the Château Borel, was to bring forward that statement of my friend, the professor's wife. I wanted to bring it forward simply to make what I have to say presently of Mr. Razumov's presence in Geneva a little more credible – for *this is a Russian story for Western ears, which, as I have observed already, are not attuned to certain tones of cynicism and cruelty, of moral negation, and even of moral distress already silenced at our end of Europe.* (Conrad 2002, 121, my emphasis)

This passage suggests a secondary audience situated outside the implied dialogue, but able to perceive and amplify tones to which the implied readers are deaf; tones resonating in those who have experienced the pressures of an autocratic state such as Russia. Furthermore, this effect is placed in a developmental time frame, in which the Russian east represents a past that Western Europeans have already forgotten.

What also makes Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes* an intriguing read is a conspicuous absence in the narrator’s constant discourse of the “West” and the “East” of the cultural sphere that was intimately known to Conrad from his childhood: Poland, where this distinction had long been a source of trouble. Although he was known as a British writer of the imperial era, Joseph

Conrad was born and raised in Poland, where his oeuvre has often been read as that of a Polish author who left his homeland. Readers interested in Conrad's Polish background have been intrigued by the fact that the novel *Under Western Eyes* never mentions Poland although it seems strongly connected to its author's own Polish experiences as the son of revolutionary parents, who fought in uprisings against the Russian rule. Conrad himself tried to contest some British critics' attempts to define him as a "Slav." In the preface of the autobiographical text *A Personal Record*, which was written at the same time as the novel *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad emphasizes not only that Poland had always drawn more from Western cultural sources than Eastern, but also how his father's actions against the Russian empire should not be called "revolutionary" but rather "revolts against foreign domination" (2008, 202). This attempt to distance himself from the Russian sphere echoes in the way revolutionary activity in *Under Western Eyes* is perceived as an "Eastern" practice that does not contribute to the historical development that is linked in the novel's rhetoric to the more advanced West.

It was not this novel, however, but *Lord Jim* that became important in the Polish Conrad reception, despite the fact that *Lord Jim* was situated in the Malay archipelago and completely unrelated to Poland in geographical terms. While *Lord Jim* was not widely read in Poland when it was first translated into Polish in 1904, the situation changed when it was suggested that the author wrote in the novel about his own experience of having left Poland. The writer Wiktor Gomulicki recounted in 1905 this shift in the following words:

I was about to close Conrad's book with a sense of complete dejection, I was already telling myself: 'No' This writer never *detached himself* from Poland – for he never belonged to her... ' – when suddenly I heard something shouting in me: – And what if all this is only a symbol? This ship doomed to sink... these travellers, weary of their dream, with nerves exhausted by religious ecstasy... These egoists whose lust for life makes them abandon the ship entrusted to their care... and especially this young man, noble to the core, but lost among the mean and the wicked, and whose heart, for the rest of his life, will be torn by the promethean vulture of remorse... this nobleman, who found wealth, love and trust in the foreign land, and yet seeks the ultimate relief in voluntary death – is all this, in all its depth, merely what it appears to be to the *English* reader? (Gomulicki, quoted in Zabierowski 2006, 100)

We can see here that Gomulicki gets animated by Conrad's writing when he begins to imagine a secondary implied address in them to a Polish audience; an indirect conversation with Polish readers, who understand symbols that remain obscure to the British audience.

The troubled situation of a divided Poland, which was under the rule of three occupying powers – Germany, Prussia and Russia – in the 19th century until the Polish independence in 1918, prompted readers to use Conrad as a tool in the articulation of this precarious position. The identificatory tradition of reading Conrad had its most striking manifestation later during the German occupation of Poland in World War II, as the Polish resistance used Conrad's novel *Lord Jim* for inspiration in their attempt to hold out against the overwhelming force of the occupying power. Jan Józef Szczepański, a Polish writer, who had taken part in the Polish resistance, writes in an essay "Conrad mojego pokolenia" ("The Conrad of My Generation") a famous anecdote of a Polish resistance fighter, whose death was a "direct result of his reading of Lord Jim." He identified so strongly with the protagonist Jim that he came to commit an "act of needless bravado", because he imagined that that was how Conrad's character would have acted in his place (Szczepański 1957, quoted in Najder 1983, 279). Szczepański recounts that the occupation and resistance "created a moral climate of a Conrad novel." He continues, "For us Conrad was more topical than before. His books became a collection of practical recipes for men fighting lonely battles in the dark that was *dense enough to hide personal defeats and therefore represented an additional challenge*" (ibid., my emphasis). This description echoes Said's discussion of Conrad's style: the "density" or ambiguity in Conrad seems to partake in the dynamic of sparking local concretizations. Szczepański understands this intimate mode of reception as something Conrad would not have intended, as his texts, in Szczepański's view, expressed only British patriotism.

A further interesting aspect in Conrad's Polish reception is that after 1989, Conrad has occasionally been used as a site for negotiating a link between the former "Second World" and Anglophone discourses on colonialism and postcoloniality. For instance, in an article "Postcolonial Poland", Clare Cavanagh (2004, 86) argues that Conrad's oeuvre opens the possibility for a more comprehensive and differentiated study of discourses of Empire in Europe : "Is not the interesting issue for postcolonial theory that there have been colonies in Europe — the continent of the intercontinental empires —and that most of these colonies did not attain their independence until forty-one years after India and twenty-seven after Algeria?" (Cavanagh 2004,

85). Cavanagh suggests here that an engagement with the multiple contexts of Conrad's oeuvre, which binds Western and Eastern European Empires, might counteract the tendency of Anglophone discourses to avoid discussing the position of the former Second World in master narratives of colonialism and postcoloniality.

Here, I cannot delve deeper into how postcolonial discourse, developed mainly to discuss Western European imperialism and the position of overseas colonies, might be used to analyze the position of Central and Eastern European peoples and countries as subjects of the continental empires of Russia and the Soviet Union. However, I want to point to the importance of sophisticated transnational and comparative perspectives that interrogate this link, since a dialogue between analytical approaches created in postcolonial and post-Soviet frameworks is likely to both challenge too circumscribed perspectives and function as a useful tool of differentiation. I want to stress the need for both comparative work and caution, as this work also encounters many incommensurabilities. This is apparent in my example of Conrad's "overhearers," who recognize being outside the implied audience of Conrad's texts. We might say that both Conrad's postcolonial readers and the readers linking Conrad to the Polish cultural context have reacted to how Conrad's narratives convey something about the "outsides" of the British imperial center. However, the racially differentiated hierarchy that underpins Conrad's texts puts these "unimplied" readers in an incommensurable position with respect to each other. Readers linking Conrad to Polish historical experiences, either via symbols, literary influences or moral themes considered particularly Polish, did not have to expose the social and racial differentiation of subjects that Conrad's poetics undertakes. They were able to imagine being part of the texts' discourse, as they construed a secondary implied address to Conrad's Polish readers; thus, they took a position of a participant in a dialogue set up by Conrad's texts. The postcolonial position of Conrad's non-European or racialized readers is situated outside the texts' discourse in a more radical way, because the imperial frame of Conrad's texts conceives racialized subjects as non-persons and makes it impossible for them to enter into a dialogue within the implied discursive structures.

Nevertheless, the postcolonial and Polish reception of Conrad also show that cultural discourses are constructed through constant acts of comparison and borrowing, in a multidirectional exchange in which, as the theorist of cultural memory Michael Rothberg has argued, a more established discourse is often used to articulate experiences that have not yet been given a sufficient articulation (Rothberg 2009). Furthermore, one can say that the global exchange in the twenty-first century intensifies this dynamic, as cultural discourses previously conducted more locally or nationally, such as Conrad's Polish reception, are likely to come to contact with a transnational circulation of cultural discourses developed in different contexts. While the two unimplied reading positions of Conrad discussed above are incommensurable, the increasingly global or transnational 21st-century reading contexts also highlight the need to see them in relation. Instead of construing a false equivalence or a competitive comparison of victimization between postcolonial and post-communist contexts, I want to highlight that if we approach the historical dynamics of reading Conrad in more multifaceted ways, Conrad can mediate a comparative and collective project of understanding (and dismantling) the entangled legacies of imperialism in today's cultural imaginaries. Since the different contexts of Conrad are linked to each other by transnational histories of imperialism, we need to bring together studies on empire and decolonization both inside and outside Europe to properly understand the historicity of Conrad's texts and the problems of hierarchy posed by them.

Overhearing W. G. Sebald and Dan Jacobson: Superimposed Nowheres

The world is made up of 'nowheres' and 'somewheres' – but which counts as which depends on what 'where' you look from. The story of Konrad's life, and the world in which he lived, was a story of nowheres colliding with somewheres. (Jasanoff 2017, 19)

These words by Maya Jasanoff, in her recent biography of Joseph Conrad, articulate in general terms a hierarchical structure that is reflected in the notion of overhearing I have discussed above. The overhearers perceive that they are reading a text from a location construed within its implied cultural imaginary as a "nowhere." From the British point of view, Conrad came from a nowhere, since Poland was not significant in the British geographic imagination, in the "worldwide web of somewheres" of the greatest of Empires (Jasanoff 2017, 19, 58). This was of course exacerbated

by the fact that Poland was literally erased from the map of Europe during the time in which Conrad wrote his tales. Conrad's reception suggests that there is a strong affective potential in readers' recognition of such a general structure of hierarchy in a text as a structure of experience with which they are themselves intimately familiar. This recognition may invite them to identify with historical realities that are not commensurable with their own, but that may nevertheless help them articulate their own marginalized position. As cultural memory theorist Ann Rigney has argued, "models of remembrance may be exchanged among groups with a similarly marginalized position within the public sphere" (2005, 24). This mode of reading Conrad might be behind some attempts to see an affinity between Conrad's Polish background and postcolonial perspectives on the British empire (see Kaakinen 2017, 154–165).

Conrad's reception illustrates a relationality that characterizes cultural memory discourses more generally. Rigney points to a dynamic that she calls a "scarcity of discursive forms and a plenitude of experience," a tendency of multiple and specific historical experiences and memories to coalesce on certain sites and symbolic artefacts that are used by different individuals and collectives in their projects of remembering and historical orientation (2005, 18–26). In other words, and to use the vocabulary with which I opened this article, literary texts and other cultural artefacts come to be regarded as responses to social contradictions in the contexts of reception rather than (only) in the context of production; they become sites of an uneasy negotiation between incommensurable historical realities and experiences. In the second part of the article I do not refer to actual readers and their interpretations, as in the case of Conrad, but draw attention to how specific stylistic strategies in transnational texts are likely to produce different readings across the interrelated, but still often separate memory discourses in today's world.

It happens that the relationship of nowheres and somewheres also arises in *Heshel's Kingdom* by Dan Jacobson, to which W. G. Sebald refers at the end of his last novel *Austerlitz*. However, in Jacobson's case, the word 'nowhere' is used primarily in a meaning different from that given to it by Jasanoff: as a reference to a trauma that takes the place of a geographic origin.

In a passage in question, Jacobson discusses his relationship to the Lithuanian and Latvian past of his parents, who had moved to South Africa before the Second World War.

For Lithuania I never hankered. If anything, it was like a wound within me. So far from being a country to which my childhood longings and ambitions could attach themselves, it was the place my mother had escaped from: nothing else, nothing more. The same applied to Latvia, my father's country of origin, which he had left many years before her departure from Europe. . . . To put it bluntly: like most Jews of my generation, I believed that our parents and grandparents had come from Nowhere." (Jacobson 1998, 75–76)

It is impossible to have roots in such an abyss, Jacobson adds. He writes: "The country which the emigrants had left behind was no longer just a geographic and political entity. It had become instead one of the names – one of the hundreds, even thousands of names – given to an unparalleled catastrophe" (1998, 98). The word abyss echoes the book's beginning, in which the narrator describes the terrifying experience of standing at the edge of a diamond mine, a sight familiar to him from his childhood in Kimberley, South Africa, where his parents had emigrated. Jacobson's description of the mine becomes an image of the irretrievability of the past, which appears as an "echoless and bottomless void" and a "darkness that gives back nothing" (1998, ix-xi).

The impact of this abyss is such that, as the narrator reflects in another passage, his parents' references to Vilnius as a great center of Jewish learning never enter young Jacobson's personal imaginary of the place:

So we knew we were right to think of it as we did. In migrating from Lithuania to South Africa they had moved from Nowhere to Somewhere. It never occurred to us that in certain respects the opposite may have been true: that they had actually exchanged Somewhere for Nowhere. We could not imagine that Jewish Vilnius and Kaunas – I specifically exclude here, as I must, the riches of their then-predominant Polish and Russian cultures – might have been centres of a high civilization, compared with anything the immigrants would find in Johannesburg and Cape Town. (Jacobson, 1998, 75-76)

Thus, while Lithuania had the position of a Nowhere in the personal map of the young Jacobson, the older Jacobson writing his memoir notes that for new Lithuanian immigrants to Johannesburg or Cape Town such as his mother, it might have been South Africa that might have

appeared as a “Nowhere.” Here, the “Nowhere” of a traumatic abyss, the site of the Holocaust, gets superimposed with a Nowhere of a civilizational scale reminiscent of the “nowheres colliding with somewheres” in Joseph Conrad’s life that traversed the world of the imperial era.

The young Jacobson’s imaginary of Lithuania seems to influence the way in which he writes in the second half of the book about the visit he pays to Lithuania in the 1990s as an adult in search of his family’s past. “My first impression of Lithuania was of its emptiness,” he writes at the beginning of his account (Jacobson 1998, 109). The descriptions of Lithuanian cities, villages and landscapes are written under the sign of emptiness that evokes the pronounced absence of the murdered Jewish population and their descendants who were never born (see Jacobson 1998, 115). They also potentially create associations to the lack of discussion in the postwar Lithuanian context on the Lithuanians’ role in the Holocaust.

The depiction of the present material world as an index to an absent traumatic past is the dimension of Jacobson’s memoir that resonates with the poetics of the German-born emigré writer W. G. Sebald, who refers to Jacobson on the last pages of his novel *Austerlitz*. Sebald’s anonymous narrator revisits the fortress of Breendonk in Belgium described at the beginning of the novel and reads *Heshel’s Kingdom* handed to him by the novel’s protagonist Jacques Austerlitz, a son of Prague Jews sent to Britain in one of the *kindertransports*. While in Breendonk, the narrator reads Jacobson’s description of another fortress, Fort IX, which is situated outside Kaunas in Lithuania, and in which more than 30,000 people were killed between the years 1941 and 1944 (see Sebald 2011, 296-298; Jacobson 1998, 158). The gesture to end the novel with a reference to Jacobson’s memoir can be seen as an invitation for the readers to consider the magnitude and geographic breadth of the Holocaust, and perhaps even to read Jacobson’s memoir. The reference to Jacobson’s book also seems to intensify the melancholic conception of history presented in Sebald’s novel, for Jacobson stresses the impossibility of retrieving the past. Sebald’s narrator comments that even Jacobson’s visit to Lithuania did not bring him closer to the life world of his deceased family members: “On his travels in Lithuania, Jacobson finds scarcely any trace of his forebears, only signs everywhere of the annihilation from

which Heshel's weak heart had preserved his immediate family when it stopped beating" (Sebald 2011, 297).

Sebald and Jacobson share the mode of presenting geographic sites as indexes to the absent and traumatic past, but Sebald's novel and his other texts show that the rhetoric of absence in the literary descriptions of the material world may also open a relational mode of reading. This mode of reading goes beyond the structure of traumatic remembering that in Sebald's *Austerlitz* characterizes the protagonist Jacques Austerlitz's own engagement with the traces of the past. As I have argued elsewhere in more detail, the implied mode of melancholic reading, which connects the texts' details to a traumatic temporal frame and a specific historical trauma, coexists in Sebald's literary texts with a more unruly analogical mode that invites readers to draw linkages to historical experiences and contexts not directly discussed in the text (see Kaakinen 2017). This is due to the detailed historical and geographic references readers might recognize as intimately familiar and with a poetics that emphasizes historical linkages and analogies. This poetics mobilizes readers to imagine specific linkages between historical contexts and narratives that are placed next to each other in a paratactic manner. Michael Rothberg also stresses in his reading of Sebald's reference to Jacobson that this mode has performative effects that are visible only if we do not simply follow the experiences of the protagonist Austerlitz, but also draw attention to experiences of *reading* the text (see Rothberg 2013, 42). In Rothberg's reading, the image of a diamond mine described as an abyss by Jacobson functions in Sebald's novel as a "multidirectional sublime," a contact point that implies an opening beyond the novel's explicit narrative centered around the Holocaust. According to Rothberg, the reference to Jacobson in Sebald invites relational modes of reading that do not function in the logic of equation; it creates a "multidirectional link between South Africa and the challenges of remembering the Holocaust." Thus, the end of the novel connects the histories of the Holocaust and colonialism by linking the novel's narrative to a "transnational network of modern violence encompassing and connecting Europe and Africa" (Rothberg 2013, 39). The exact status of the linkage to South Africa is not elaborated in the text; it is a weak analogy that mobilizes a relational imagination in readers.

But how does Lithuania figure in the transnational constellation created by Sebald's reference to Jacobson, if we read it not only as a site of oblivion, but also as a specific geographic location of distinct, multilayered and entangled histories? What kind of multidirectional linkage is established between the novel's narrative and Lithuania, or the triangular relationship encompassing Western Europe, Lithuania and South Africa? This question was suggested to me by two aspects of Jacobson's text: his descriptions of Lithuania, which evoke both the events of the Holocaust and the post-Soviet present, as well as the aforementioned doubleness in Jacobson's explicit discussion of the relational and shifting meanings of the word "Nowhere."

The primary reference of the descriptions of Lithuania in *Heshel's Kingdom* is the absence of the Jewish population in 1990s Lithuania. However, the rhetoric of emptiness also opens the possibility to link the descriptions to the impact of the Soviet era on the place. The narrator at times refers directly to the post-Soviet condition of the places and sites he visits:

Amid the darkness and general depopulation there were a few large plate-glass windows behind which one could make out displays of chairs or glassware aspiring to elegance and high modernity: to a positively Finnish finish. But most of the shops were meagrely and dirtily windowed, still under the Communist blight, as if nothing had changed since the death of the old order, or ever would. (Jacobson 1998, 113).

I come back to the notion of overhearing here: readers sensitized to the Soviet and post-Soviet history of the place could amplify these marginal resonances and read the geographic sites described in Jacobson's book as indexes that point to effects of the recent historical transition, which is not at the center of Jacobson's own concerns.

However, when I considered the constellation between Western Europe, South Africa and Lithuania in Sebald's reference to Jacobson, I realized a further relational dimension of Jacobson's descriptions, which I did not first know how to assess. I noticed that the double meaning of the word Nowhere (used by Jacobson both in reference to the site of trauma of the Holocaust and in reference to a place lacking in development) also echoes in Jacobson's descriptions of Lithuania.

The place looked almost as empty after we landed as it had from above. Quiet too, inside and outside the airport. There was no bustle of arrival. [...] No more than three or four cars and a battered, lifeless bus were still in the parking lot. Also waiting near the exit was a man holding

a sign bearing the name of the hotel I had booked into. I was relieved to see him. It soon became apparent that he had no English at all; no German or French either. [...] It was only about nine in the evening, in midsummer, not raining: so where were all the people? (Jacobson 1998, 109–110)

Later the narrator recounts how his son notes, looking at a livelier street scene, that Vilnius looked for the first time like a “real capital” (Jacobson 1998, 145). The narrator also himself registers the specific historical trajectory that explains the lack of “bustle” in the Lithuanian cities compared to those further in the west.

If the square [in Kaunas] and the churches nearby were all picked up and moved 500 miles to the west they would be surrounded by cordons of tour buses; the cobbled piazza would be littered with reclining backpackers; the medieval buildings would be transformed into shops selling lavender bags, glassware, oatmeal soaps and handknitted sweaters. Instead the whole area is empty every evening. (Jacobson 1998, 156)

After noticing this dynamic of a metropolitan perspective on a periphery in Jacobson’s text, I began to wonder if this aspect of the descriptions could be amplified by readers sensitized to the Soviet history and to the post-Soviet present. These readers would detect a rhetoric of “backwardness” in Jacobson’s descriptions of Lithuanian emptiness, even though the text’s primary intention is to discuss a personal experience of visiting a site of past family history cut off from the present by violence and genocide. These readers would translate Jacobson’s rhetoric of trauma into a rhetoric of backwardness referring to a remote place insignificant in the transnational circulation of people, goods and discourses.

I am not pointing to the superimposition of the two “Nowheres” in Jacobson’s descriptions of Lithuania in order to claim that these two meanings of the word are equivalent. I am pointing to it merely to suggest that some readers might displace these two meanings, placed in a paratactic relation in the text, and that this could lead to affective responses, in which the transnational framework of cultural memory centered around the Holocaust is pitted against the remembrance of the violence committed by the Soviet Union on its satellites in Eastern Europe. The Lithuanian landscape described by Jacobson indexes multiple histories of violence that have at times been placed in a competitive relationship, when the transnational paradigm of cultural memory developed in the West has come into contact with Eastern European histories of violence,

which do not share the same status as the Holocaust as a transnational *lieu de mémoire*. Aleida Assmann points out that,

while the memory of the Nazi genocide has been transformed into a transgenerational and transnational memory, providing the EU with a ‘foundation myth’ and a moral yardstick for new member states since 2005, the memory of Stalin’s terror has had a much more contested and fragmented history, fuelling the national narratives of victimhood of some post-Soviet states on the one hand and disappearing from Russian political memory almost entirely on the other. (2013, 27)

By following the offshoot created by the end of Sebald’s novel rich in multiple historical references, I want to highlight that the transnational circulation of literary texts potentially creates troubled points of contact between different frames of cultural memory and different affective cultures linked to them. The superimposition of Nowheres in Jacobson illustrates that a text written in a transnational idiom and circulating across multiple contexts might have very different effects as it comes across different memory discourses and their different historical trajectories.⁵ However, I also want to suggest that such disjunctive points of contact between separate audiences and memory discourses may also have productive effects. Such linkages may open local memory discourses to alternative perspectives and, for instance, encourage them to address more substantially the questions about the responsibility of local actors in the Holocaust. Furthermore, they could urge Anglophone discourses on cultural memory to engage more thoroughly with histories and memories linked to the former Communist countries, which, as Uilleam Blacker and Alexander Etkind (2013, 1–11) have argued, pose challenges to the paradigms of cultural memory studies developed first and foremost in relation to Western European histories and memories.

Conclusion: Entangled Histories of Reading – Transnational and Comparative Perspectives

By illustrating the dynamic of overhearing through the work of the two twentieth-century authors Conrad and Sebald and through Sebald’s reference to Jacobson’s memoir, I want to point to the impact of divided and uneven social relations both on formal strategies in literary texts and on processes of reading and reception, in which these formal strategies mediate a historically

concretized interpretation. The disjunctive linkages between frames of historical narration and paradigms of cultural memory that I have depicted in this article are social contradictions that the literary texts by Conrad and Sebald did not themselves anticipate. However, Conrad and Sebald's texts can still be conceived as "answers" to these social contradictions in the sense that these texts have been or have the potential to be used as media for their articulation by historically situated readers. What is particular about literary writing is that it allows for approximate relationships, and it seems that if it has both enough specificity, as in Conrad's descriptions of the transnational imperial space, or in Sebald's descriptions of post-Holocaust Europe, and enough ambiguity, as in Conrad's poetics emphasizing sensory effects of the literary medium, and Sebald's poetics relying on "weak analogies," it is more likely to invite various local concretizations beyond the text's explicit historical and cultural imaginary. The temporality of literary texts is such that they may record a "structured response to a social contradiction" in the context of production, and readers may recognize this structured response as somehow familiar and approach it as a response to a contradiction operating in the context of reception, as happened in Conrad's Polish reception. The Sebald-Jacobson -continuum illustrates here how historical material relevant to different memory paradigms might meet in the same text. This should be taken into account, when studying the circulation of transnational texts in the contemporary world.

The analytical project of articulating the dynamic of "overhearing" literary texts partakes in the larger project of transcultural memory studies, which, in Astrid Erll's formulation, seeks to complicate the notion of single memory cultures (2011, 8). More specifically, I seek to show the need for an analytical perspective that does not simply adopt the cultural categories and memory discourses implied in the text itself (or in the context of its production) but also asks what effects the specific textual structures have as they travel across various visible and more invisible borders. With the notion of overhearing that draws attention to primary addressees and secondary audiences and the socially differentiated positions between them, I want to stress that literature should not be approached as a medium of intercultural dialogue in a simplistic sense, in which the conditions of dialogue would always already be present in the world. Literary texts should also be approached as textual sites that may make visible complex entanglements, displacements

and disjunctions between historical and cultural discourses and imaginaries. This is a dynamic that cannot be captured with the traditional hermeneutic vocabulary of a dialogue between speakers, who share the same discourse. In this approach, literature becomes a prism that brings separate and partly intertwined reading horizons into view, which then allows readers to ponder about their relations and to pose questions about the conditions of dialogue often missing in the real world.

Finally, I also want to emphasize how the transnational perspective works in my analysis together with the comparative method and thereby show that comparison does not have to adhere to the methodological nationalism of traditional comparatism. Although I also had to look at the nation-based history of reception in the case of Conrad's Polish readers or refer to Lithuania as a national entity, the crux of my comparative reading is not the nation as a privileged frame of historical analysis or a homogeneous entity. I rather want to highlight reading positions that are also differentiated by other social realities and hierarchies than national or linguistic borders. Capturing the manifestations of entangled histories of violence in these authors' works and reception can be approached through comparative methods that are not based on comparison of fixed national literatures and cultures, but on a comparison of incommensurable but still-linked reading positions. When reading and the reception of literature are studied in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to have both a transnational perspective interested in various modes of movement and contact, and a comparative perspective able to articulate subtle differences and modes of approximation that occur when literary texts become invested with context-specific meanings. This enables the analysis of the interaction in today's world of transnational cultural and memorial forms and more local or circumscribed contexts of reception.

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¹ For the discussion on the scope and methods of comparative literature in the age of globalization, see e.g. Cheah 2016; Melas 2007; Saussy 2006; Spivak 2003.

² I am referring here to my book *Comparative Literature and the Historical Imaginary: Reading Conrad, Weiss, Sebald* (Kaakinen 2017), which deals with the challenges that increasingly heterogeneous global reading contexts pose to the study of transnational historical narration in literary fiction. Through the analysis of "weak analogies" prompted by the literary strategies of three twentieth-century writers Conrad, Weiss and Sebald, I propose that historical pressures in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries require

comparative literature to address not only implied but also various unimplied reading positions that engage twentieth-century history in displaced yet material ways.

³ I understand “heterogeneity” here first and foremost in relation to the multiplicity and diversity of historical experiences, narratives and orientations that readers bring to the event of reading and that often also come to contact in new ways in the reading contexts of the twenty-first century.

⁴ I was first prompted to study Conrad and Sebald side by side by Sebald’s book *The Rings of Saturn* (*Die Ringe des Saturn*, 1997), in which Sebald writes about Conrad’s Polish background and calls him with the Polish name Konrad Korzeniowski. For an extensive discussion of Sebald’s literary gesture of linking Conrad to Poland and of connecting the partitioned Poland to the Congo through Conrad’s biography, see Kaakinen 2017.

⁵ For instance, I would like to note here that Western Europe and post-Socialist countries in Eastern Europe did not adopt a transnational paradigm of cultural memory in the same historical moment. Eneken Laanes has written about the divergent historical trajectories in Western Europe and in the post-Socialist context (in her case Estonia) in adopting the language of trauma as a universalizing moral language and global memory paradigm, developed in reference to the Holocaust but used in the transnational trauma paradigm to address human rights’ violations more generally. While this language was widespread in the West by the 1990s, it was at that time still largely absent in Estonia, which had developed distinct memorial forms in addressing the memories of the Gulag (see Laanes 2019).