

South Africa-sur-Nemunas¹: Transnational Hinterlands in Dan Jacobson's *Heshel's Kingdom**

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the representation of Central Europe and its hinterlands in selected works by 20th-century South African writers. It pays special attention to Dan Jacobson's *Heshel's Kingdom* about Jacobson's travel to Lithuania in search of the writer's "middle-European" patrimony. Drawing on previously unpublished archival records, the study argues that Jacobson's book merges Central European hinterlands (their histories, identities, landscapes) with South African ones in a radical act of re-mapping both areas. The paper also insists on recognising a distinctive mode of conflating Central Europe and South Africa. This hinternational poetics annuls the existing imperial cartography and builds transnational connections between different hinterlands and their pasts. Additionally, the article demonstrates how the need to "unlearn" imperial history allows for a geographic/spatial overlap between the "heart of the country" and the "core of Europe," as well as creation of a network of transnational solidarity and implication across nations and ethnicities.

KEYWORDS

South Africa, Central Europe, transnationalism, hinternationalism, Dan Jacobson

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Been here before. Not in her person. But in her blood-line. The
 history to which she belongs. There it was—is—[...]
 (Gordimer, “Mission Statement” 42).

Introduction: Towards a Hinternational Paradigm

Lionel Abrahams’ 1984 poetry collection entitled *Journal of a New Man* includes a poem which immediately prompts one to consider a variety of links and forms of dependence between Central Europe and South Africa. “Place” opens with the following bracketed note of introduction: “A party of white Johannesburgers reads Zbigniew Herbert, Holub and other poets near a mine-dump, Summer 1969” (24).

It seems tenable to argue that the quoted entry—as well as the nostalgic poem which follows in its wake and which recounts an outdoor poetry reading held in the late 1960s by a group of friends on a mine estate outside Johannesburg—is a direct encouragement to investigate the nature and scope of the relationship between Central European literary production and its reception in South Africa. Although the presence of Central European writers in 20th and 21st century South African literature has been well marked out by the likes of Monica Popescu, Jeanne-Marie Jackson, or Lucy Gasser, it appears that further research into the potentially formative role played by Central European literature (considered a distinctive literary phenomenon) in the development of South African writing still holds urgency and relevance today—as testified to by J. M. Coetzee’s 2022 novel *El polaco*, a tribute to Coetzee’s lifelong reading of Zbigniew Herbert and other Polish authors.² Needless to say, Abrahams is far from being the sole South Africa-born writer whose body of works not only manifests familiarity with Central European literature but also acknowledges the impact that the latter has had on their oeuvre—suffice it to mention Nadine Gordimer, Dan Jacobson, Deborah Levy, Stephen Watson, or, most notably, the before-mentioned J. M. Coetzee. Their dialogue with Central European literature, especially poets, could certainly be conceptualised via different frames of reference: as a strategy of seeking alternative alliances and partnerships, a means of de-provincialising one’s oeuvre, or a way to seek one’s literary patrimony (or “*matrimoine*”).

Abrahams’ poem alludes to two aspects of this transnational, Central European–South African conversation. Both seem to be particularly relevant not only to the whole group of South African writers that have engaged in some form of creative dialogue with Central Europe but to the present essay’s discussion of Dan Jacobson’s *Heshel’s Kingdom* (1998):

a memoir which offers an account of Jacobson's visit to Lithuania in the 1990s in search of traces of his grandfather Rabbi Heshel Melmed.

Firstly, "Place" appears to recognise a number of post-WWII Central European and South African writers as being part of a shared and essentially anti-imperialist "affective community" based on the various forms of "transnational or affiliative solidarity," especially in the face of oppressive regimes (Gandhi 10). It is the new "axis of filiation" (10) acknowledged by Abrahams in his poem—the kind that successfully crosses the South-East divide and thus goes beyond the well-established communities of belonging contingent on the categories of nation, ethnicity or race—that prompts the speaker of "Place" to dismiss the lines of Abrahams' "fellow" poets such as Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali or Sylvia Plath (among others). Instead, the speaker welcomes the "humane affirmative thrust / of two scientist-poets out of Europe's East" whose "translated lines / we there, with voice and ears and hearts / lent scope and life, brought strangely home" (25).

Secondly, "Place" seems to re-imagine the South African space (alongside its history and memory) by means of "unlearning" the laws of geography. This attempt clearly belongs to an imagined or phantasmagorical geography (Said) and does not only place one space (i.e. South Africa) *next* to the other (i.e. Central Europe) but, quite deliberately, *onto* the other in an attempt to investigate their mutual linkages and forms of embeddedness. Thus, Abrahams' poem is not just an invitation to endorse a "transnational solidarity" that exists between the writers of the South and of the East—writers that might be seen as the "figures of implication" (or "implicated subjects") due to their occupying an "ambiguous space [...] between and beyond the victim/perpetrator binary," as well as their "entanglement in historical and present-day injustices," the apartheid and communist regimes respectively (Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject* 33). Crucially for the present paper and its central argument, "Place," true to its very title, encourages its readers to re-visit the familiar space of the Highveld. More specifically, it emboldens them to bring together two distant topographies (of South Africa and Central Europe) and overlap one landscape (post-industrial ruins "weathered to bones and muscles"; "primitive Johannesburg" [Abrahams 24, 25]) with another (Warsaw and Prague intimately familiar to Herbert and Holub, respectively); one "wasteland secreted in the suburb's groin" (Abrahams 25) with the "inhabited ruins of Central Europe" (Sayer and Gafijczuk); one hinterland³ with a "hinterworld" (Magris 29). Abrahams' poem may, indeed, be concerned with establishing a network of transnational solidarity/implication but it is equally involved in the annulment of

the existing cartography. In the act of an imaginative leap, the poem's speaker—"at home" in both Herbert's and Holub's words, as well as in their "unimaginable" cities (Abrahams 25)—overlays the "heart of the country" with the core of Europe.

Similarly to Abrahams' poem, Dan Jacobson's *Heshel's Kingdom* opens at a mining site—one located on the outskirts of Kimberley in the sparsely populated Northern Cape.⁴ Despite some ostensible differences between the sites which necessitate different modes of their presentation, they are frequently discussed with the use of a similar figurative language. If the mines near Johannesburg generate a sense of terror and awe in the poem's speaker ("dominating emptiness on an unguessed-at plain"; "sterile [...] / with residual poison"; "brick-and-concrete/ of a remnant too unseasoned to be called a ruin"; "flat veld/ [...] greyish, in nature minimal/ a wasteland" [Abrahams 24, 25]), the open pits evoked by Jacobson have produced an almost identical set of responses in the book's auto/biographical narrator ("the emptiness that yawned fatally from it"; "flatness"; "black space"; "absence" [*Heshel's Kingdom* ix, x, xi]). The narrator of *Heshel's Kingdom* states: "It was terrifying to stand above them [pits]"; and concludes: "This is what the past is like: echoless and bottomless. [...] [D]arkness that gives back nothing" (xi). But the "affinity" between Abrahams' poem and Jacobson's "Prologue" to *Heshel's Kingdom* does not stop at the level of language only. The former piece's juxtaposition of the ruinous landscape of South Africa and Central European capital cities becomes replaced in the latter work by a much more dismal parallel. The mining pits near Kimberley become inextricably linked to the death pits, the hidden graves of the Holocaust which Jacobson visits during his travel through the heart of Lithuania and which populate the post-Holocaust traumatic landscapes of Central European hinterlands.

Sheila Roberts is most accurate when she states that in *Heshel's Kingdom* "the pits become correlative metaphors for the eternal nothingness of death" (61). However, a far more comprehensive reading of the pits has been offered by Michael Rothberg in his discussion of W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001). Sebald famously makes a direct reference to Jacobson's memoir in the final pages of his novel when the book's narrator takes *Heshel's Kingdom* (given to him by Austerlitz during their first meeting in Paris) from his rucksack and ponders over the relationship between the mines and the past:

Most of the mines, so I read as I sat there opposite the fortifications of Breendonk, were already disused at the time, including the two largest, the Kimberley and De Beers

mines, and since they were not fenced off anyone who liked could venture to the edge of those vast pits and look down to a depth of several thousand feet. Jacobson writes that it was truly terrifying to see such emptiness open up a foot away from firm ground, to realize that there was no transition, only this dividing line, with ordinary life on one side and its *unimaginable* opposite on the other. The chasm into which no ray of light could penetrate was Jacobson's image of the vanished past of his family and his people which, as he knows, can never be brought up from those depths again.

(413–414; emphasis mine)

In his luminous reading of Sebald's *Austerlitz*, Rothberg argues that the pit (or the abyss)⁵ is capable of generating the so-called "multidirectional sublime" ("Multidirectional Memory" 46): it becomes a site of "multidirectional link[s]" or connections (39) where various narratives of loss and trauma can come together and which, as a result, is defined by "restless transnationalism" (46). While repeating Sebald's gesture and juxtaposing Breendonk, a former Nazi prison camp visited by the narrator of *Austerlitz*, with the Kaunas-based Ninth Fort, a place of mass murder where Jacobson stops during his exploration of Lithuania's past, Rothberg accurately notes that in *Austerlitz* the multidirectional sublime "operates horizontally"—despite the mines' vertical position (depth or height): "the narrative's lateral movements establish networks of complicity and connection" (46–47).

The aim of this paper is by no means to question or rival Rothberg's interpretation but to offer an extension or supplement to his study of various intersections of transnational Holocaust history and post-memory. My intention is to discuss Jacobson's representation of present-day Lithuania and, consequently, show how his memoir builds horizontal (cf. Boehmer 145–172) and transnational links and connections between different pasts (Polish, Lithuanian, Jewish, South African)—including those that are not directly related to the Holocaust. In this sense, my discussion of *Heshel's Kingdom* will complement (but not discount) the previous readings of Jacobson's memoir (e.g. Roberts, Davis, Braude) and pursue the interpretive path opened by Kaisa Kaakinen, who in her comparative analysis of Sebald and Jacobson suggests that the "transnational memory paradigm" postulated by Rothberg with regard to *Austerlitz* and *Heshel's Kingdom* may not necessarily be "centered around the memory of the Holocaust" ("Entangled Histories" 375); that the Holocaust is not a *sine qua non* condition to the process of identifying "multidirectional" and "transnational" links. Instead, it appears to welcome analogies that might

exist between a plethora of past experiences, memories or narratives which, as Kaakinen claims, “are placed next to each other in a paratactic manner” (“Entangled Histories” 383). However, contrary to Kaakinen, I would suggest that the mode of bringing together Central Europe and South Africa—a “poetics” which can be identified in *Heshel’s Kingdom* and which will be discussed in the section to follow—is not so much “paratactic” (cf. Kaakinen *Comparative Literature*) as simultaneously “discontiguous” (to use the term recently proposed to describe temporal and spatial disconnections in Central and Eastern Europe [Komska 6]) and palimpsestic. Jacobson’s memoir does not simply build a series of analogies or parallels between South Africa and Central Europe; nor does he put one next to the other, but, as this paper shall argue, in a radical act of re-mapping, merges Central European (hinter)lands (their histories, identities, and landscapes) with South African ones. This operation does not only authorise the ultimate annulment of the “imperialist mechanism of splitting” (into centre and periphery, South and East, etc.) (Azoulay *Potential History* 29) but suggests a new, essentially “hinternational” paradigm: one where “hinternationalism” is understood as an instrument to acknowledge a mutual embeddedness of discontinuous hinterland topographies, identities, and histories. What is more, in the course of this discussion, which builds on few yet revealing archival documents from the “Dan Jacobson Papers” at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, I will attempt to show that Jacobson’s favoured procedure of reading Central Europe (or South Africa) in a transnational and palimpsestic manner is not unique but should, in fact, be acknowledged as one of the major modes of post-WWII South African cultural production.

Re-mapping Central Europe

Heshel’s Kingdom was not Jacobson’s first literary exploration of Central Europe.⁶ Phantasmagorical and “real” European features in both his fiction (e.g. *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* of 1977 where it hides under the guise of the Republic of Sarmeda, or *The God-Fearer* of 1992 in which it is presented as the land of Askhenaz,⁷ as well as *The Beginners* of 1966, whose “Prologue” set in 1906 opens with Avrom Glickman’s return to his home village in the Pale), as well as his non-fiction (particularly his collection *Time and Time Again* of 1985).⁸ Jacobson’s archive at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin is particularly illuminative in this respect. For example, in a letter to Sheila Roberts written after Jacobson’s return from Prague in 1983, the writer mentions his wife’s reaction to the city and

her acknowledgement of the—apparently deliberate—parallels between fictional Sarmeda and communist Central Europe: “It’s a beautiful city, one of the richest scenically and architecturally I’ve ever been to. But as for the system—! Margaret said on our second day that she was very impressed to see *how much I’d got [it] right* in Josef Baisz: a compliment indeed! But one that the poor Czechs don’t deserve to be the occasion for” (“Correspondence—Sheila Roberts” 2; emphasis mine). What is more, in one of Jacobson’s notebooks, which includes early drafts of *Josef Baisz*, the writer refers to the fictional republic as “Sarmatia,” namely the phantasmagorical geographical category appropriated by the noblemen of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with regard to their ancient heritage (“Roughbook” 195). However, the first traces of Jacobson’s hinternational poetics which this paper will prioritise in its analysis of *Heshel’s Kingdom* can be identified in his essay “Yiddish Fiction in South Africa” from the collection *Adult Pleasures* of 1988. Implicit palimpsestuousness or double-layeredness manifests itself not only in the lives of the Yiddish writers Jacobson writes about: Hyman Polsky, Jacob Mordecai Sherman, and Morris Hoffman (“stuck [...] in the middle of the endless sun-blighted Karroo [*sic*], [...] painstakingly putting together a volume of verse in Yiddish, for eventual publication back in Poland” [Jacobson, “Yiddish Fiction” 134]); but primarily in a short memoir written by H. M. Jacobson (Dan Jacobson’s father) and clearly inspired by Isaac Babel’s *Red Cavalry*. In this short piece, the small town of Kenhardt on the edge of the Kalahari desert which Heyman Michael Jacobson visits in 1914 as a member of a Boer military unit merges with a Central European shtetl that he himself left eleven years before—one in which the poor, uneducated, and Yiddish-speaking Jewish community fails to properly spell the word “even” (stone / אָפּן) engraved on the synagogue’s foundation stone (Jacobson, “Yiddish Fiction” 129).

Nor was *Heshel’s Kingdom* the first South African memoir that recounted its writer’s visit to the Lithuanian hinterland and, consequently, to explore the parallels between Central European and South African experiences. A year before the publication of *Heshel’s Kingdom* Jacobson’s contemporary Rose Zwi released her piece of nostography entitled *Last Walk in Naryshkin Park* which narrates the story of her journey to post-Soviet Lithuania in search of the Jewish past (including her family’s past) and the region’s fading Jewish heritage. Zwi’s account of her return to “*der heim*” certainly shares a number of formal and thematic features with a conventional specimen of second-generation memoir. “The Holocaust has dominated my childhood and adolescence, supplanting like a neglected wound,” she says in the “Prologue” to her book. To Zwi, Central Europe

is, first and above all, a site of traumatic memories. She shows impatience when her Lithuania-based family wants to show her around the country and its monuments (Vilnius' Old Town or Trakai Castle); also, she seems indifferent to the region's changing and competing legacies: Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian. While in Central Europe, Zwi is primarily a practitioner of "dark tourism" (Lennon and Foley)—her sole interest appears to lie in empty shtetls and mass graves and the only guidebook she trusts is *The Destruction of the European Jews* by Raul Hillberg (1961). Her parents' Lithuania which in their nostalgic recollections becomes an idyllic rural dwelling place (one in which, throughout the summer months, the Jewish inhabitants of Zhager "live[d] in the orchards" and picked the fruit in Naryshkin Park—a site "where trysts were kept and hearts were broken" [38, 35]) has ceased to exist; the new Lithuania generates a sense of "menace" (198). The most telling description of her parents' "home" is to be found in the chapter which narrates her travel from Vilnius to Žagarė through the heart of Lithuania: "The further north we travel, the darker the skies become. The mist, the sleet, the empty road; the sodden fields, the copses of birch and pine, combine to form the landscape of nightmares" (189). Lithuania becomes a space where the titular Naryshkin Park hides the grave of several thousand Jews, where only one Holocaust survivor still continues to live (under the Christian name of Petrus), and where the Lithuanian Nazi "auxiliaries" and by-standers thrive. Still, even this kind of narrative finds it impossible not to establish some multidirectional and transnational links between South Africa and Central Europe—though it should be mentioned that the links are almost exclusively determined by the Holocaust and its memory: Zwi's "touchstone" against which she measures other forms of oppression and violence (62). This reading is clearly shaped by the two mottos that open Zwi's book—an excerpt from *The Destruction of the European Jews* and a fragment of the conversation between a Tutsi survivor and a Hutu neighbour who is accused of murdering the former's family. Elsewhere, she will quote her father's remark about the transnational and trans-ethnic community of the oppressed (not only politically but also economically): "How can we [Jews] fail to recognise our own lives in those of the black people?" (48) he will ask when commenting on the living and working conditions of the black mine workers in South Africa. But Zwi appears to be aware of some of the dangers that are involved in one's attempt to translate one historical experience into the other. In one episode, she recalls her reaction to a group of black men "stomping from one foot to another, chanting in unison, and brandishing wooden knobkerries as they made their way down the street towards the veld" (49). The girl's emotional response to what in fact was

a working-class ritual of the black men leaving for a drinking party is the cry of fear: “*Di Deutschen kumen! Di Deutschen kumen!*” (49)—one evidently inspired by tales of persecution in Germany. But oftentimes the overlapping of Central Europe and South Africa is not pre-determined by the memory of the Holocaust—for example when she blends the idyllic landscape of her parents’ Lithuania (forests, rivers, and “the crunch of snow underfoot”) with South African hinterland (“highveld mornings, bushveld sunsets”) (35, 70); when she mixes the Central European *vald* (“forest” in Yiddish) with South African *veld* (65, 72, 216), or when she juxtaposes Napoleon admiring Vilnius’ Great Synagogue with Paul Kruger, a Boer politician and president of the South African Republic, officiating at the opening of Johannesburg’s main synagogue (144). Finally, some effort to disassociate the Central European hinterland from its traumatic past can also be discerned in the last chapter of Zwi’s book when its author, who has finally left her guidebook behind, is able to direct her gaze away from the pits and, instead, look at the Lithuanian mounds—“the hills of Zhager” as her parents called them which turn out to be the burial mounds of the extinct tribe of Semigallians (240).

Although, similarly to Zwi, Dan Jacobson is not averse to exploring the metaphor of the “wound” (“like a wound within me” the auto/biographical narrator of *Heshel’s Kingdom* will say about Lithuania [75]), his memoir—unlike *Last Walk in Naryshkin Park*—is not a (post-)Holocaust memoir par excellence.¹⁰ Canonised by Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, the volume is characterised by considerable self-awareness with regard to its generic affiliation. “This is not an autobiography,” Jacobson informs his readers and hastens to explain that what his book intends to prioritise is “the connection [...] to the distant part of the world [Jacobson’s] parents had come from” (73). Thus, its main concern is not the self with its subjective faculties and experience but a transnational affiliation of hinterlands, their “relationship” (to adopt the word which was originally used by Jacobson in the book’s draft but later discarded in favour of the word “connection” [“Jacobson—Heshel’s Kingdom run-through, Parts I–V” 57]).

The first type of connection/relationship that Jacobson attempts to establish is concerned with the “physical, mental and emotional potentialities” (5) shared by himself and his grandfather—Heshel Melmed who died in Varniai in 1919 and whose demise made it possible for the members of his family, including Jacobson’s mother, to leave what Heshel believed to be “the best of all countries for a pious Jew” (38) and in this way escape the Holocaust. It is already in the first few of pages of *Heshel’s Kingdom* that the book’s reader can identify how different spatio-temporal orders collapse. The death of Jacobson’s mother is a direct re-enactment

of her father's death (including its circumstances and cause); the only surviving image of Heshel is taken using the same type of camera as the one used by a photographer who in the 1930s takes pictures of young Dan, his parents, and his siblings in his studio in Kimberley. Perhaps the most telling example of the simultaneity of now and then ("Now. Then too" [10]), here and there ("So close he is. So distant and indifferent" [17]), self and other is the final section of the book's "Part One" when the writer puts Heshel's glasses on. This gesture which might be read as an attempt to become his grandfather's double, his mirror-self, his *doppelgänger*, his "*semblable*" (30), is performed so that Jacobson could see "what [Heshel's] world looked like" (15); so that he could see Lithuania with Heshel's eyes—those on which "the pattern of [Lithuania's] woodlands, marshes and fallow spaces was imprinted" (12–13).

It might be argued that Heshel's vision is largely responsible for Jacobson's complex representation of Lithuania, which does not reduce this space to a site of genocide only. Puzzled and disconcerted by Heshel's deliberate decision not to leave Lithuania and his belief that there is "nothing of a place like Varniai" (32), Jacobson seeks to dismantle the view which prevailed among the South African Jews of his parents' generation (and, as a matter of fact, his own), namely that "in leaving Lithuania they had exchanged night for the promise of day, superstition for the promise of reason, limitations and frustrations for a hitherto unimaginable degree of personal autonomy" (68). To do so he brings together two antithetical categories: "Nowhere" and "Somewhere"—the former conventionally used with regard to "old Europe" (176) (i.e. parts of Central and Eastern Europe from which the Jews migrated to South Africa in the late 19th century and early 20th century), the latter to South Africa. Jacobson insists on the possibility of reversing this paradigm and acknowledging that the opposite might have also been true: "Somewhere" could have been exchanged for "Nowhere" (76). His double vision allows for this contradiction to dissolve and to overcome the paradoxical impossibility of Central Europe and South Africa being both: Nowhere and Somewhere. When in Lithuania, Jacobson will repeatedly emphasise this principle of bothness. It becomes especially conspicuous in his bringing up two poets that in Jacobson's interpretation simultaneously belong to two nations and two cultures (he considers them Lithuanian-born Poles [150, 151]): Adam Mickiewicz whose museum he unsuccessfully tried to get into and whose lines from *Pan Tadeusz* are quoted upon his visit to the Bardžiai-based museum of Dionizy Paszkiewicz (Dionizas Poška) to see the trunk of the oak tree Baublis (Baublys); and Czesław Miłosz whose descriptions of

Lithuanian landscape (urban and rural) in *Native Realm* (1959; English translation 1968) Jacobson refers to in his memoir.

Most importantly for the present discussion, the before-mentioned double vision makes Jacobson specially attentive to a variety of transnational parallels between two hinterlands (i.e. South Africa and Central Europe) that he begins to see upon his visit to Lithuania—ones that do not necessarily depend on the memory of oppression or trauma. Jacobson confesses that when he first arrived in Kimberley as a young boy, “[e]verything suddenly revealed itself to be connected with everything else. Places were connected spatially; events temporally” (72). It is evident that the same effect is achieved upon his visit to Lithuania which soon becomes almost indistinguishable from South Africa—one becoming a touchstone for the other (and vice versa).

Jacobson’s poetics of overlap is especially conspicuous in his treatment of his home-town Kimberley and the Northern Cape, as well as the town of Varniai and the Lithuanian countryside—the former presented as South Africa’s hinterland while the latter as a quintessential Central European borderland, a provincial space carved out within another provincial space which, after Claudio Magris, one might call “hinterworld” (24). When, during his stay in Varniai, Vera, the last Jew in the town and its “*rebbitzen*” (191) accurately identifies Kimberley as his South African “*heim*,” it provokes the feeling “as if the years [Jacobson] lived and the distances [he] has crossed had been transformed into a single sound from her mouth, or into an object no bigger than a chip of stone or a leaf which she has effortlessly passed over me” (192). In Jacobson’s memoir, Varniai’s description as “remote, out-of-the-way, lacking streets and convenient transportation to the central city of the country” (18), as a dwelling where only one brick-walled house exists (23), is constantly paralleled by the writer’s near-identical account of Kimberley: “shabby, bypassed place even within South Africa” (74) where the veld “beg[ins] not fifty yards from [one’s] garden” (72). For the writer, South Africa and Central Europe are each other’s spitting image: both are “provincial” (68, 145), holding the status of “rough-and-ready annexe” to civilisation (68); both are described using the same repertoire of adjectives: flat, empty, silent, vacant (71, 109, 110, 113, 149, 181, 183). Insistence on establishing a transnational landscape is also to be observed in considerable attention paid by Jacobson to architectural detail of buildings—to his own surprise Jacobson is struck by “surprising likeness” (117) of houses that he encounters in Lithuania with those that surrounded him in South Africa since his birth. He confesses that the wooden structures that have attracted his gaze since he landed in Vilnius “strike his eye with a puzzling intimacy” (117) due

to their similarity to South African houses—particularly their wooden verandas which he compares to South African stoeps (71). Their mutual resemblance is so strong that when Jacobson enters a narrow wooden “stoep” in front of Vilnius’ Green House he hears the same noise as the one made by the wooden veranda boards in his childhood home (117).

The act of re-inscribing South African and Central European topographies, as well as their pasts, gains in intensity in “Part Three” of *Heshel’s Kingdom* which closely follows Jacobson’s exploration of post-Communist Lithuania. The two hinterlands become subject to the same historical, political, and demographic processes: for example, when Jacobson comments on the distribution of Jewish population in both regions, their complex racial, ethnic, and national make-up in which different groups “did not merely overlap with one another but filled the same spaces simultaneously” (72), or political revolutions that both areas witnessed almost concurrently (the coming down of the Iron Curtain; the demise of apartheid) (95). While trying to look at his early years spent in Kimberley through his grandfather’s glasses, Jacobson will conclude that “the society in which we found ourselves was quite as fissured as any to be found in Lithuania and [...] almost as comprehensively ruled by administrative fiat” (72).

It might be argued that Jacobson is inordinately attuned to all possible intersections of Central European and South African history—even those that might be the results of his sometimes flawed knowledge of Central European history. One of the most elaborate parallels between the two societies is provided when the writer tries to build an analogy between various ethnic and national groups that have populated both regions. The dominant position occupied by the Poles in Lithuania reminds him not only of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in Ireland but also of the English-speaking South Africans who have dominated the country’s intellectual and cultural life. Conversely, ethnic Lithuanians are perceived as Central Europe’s Afrikaners. Both ethnic Lithuanians and Afrikaners are, in Jacobson’s words, a “proud but despised group, cherishing a language and culture which they knew to be looked down on by their white, English- [and, one may be tempted to add, Polish- author’s note] speaking compatriots (their Ascendancy)” (151); both are directly implied as bystanders and perpetrators in the history of oppression and violence—genocidal policy of Nazi Germany and apartheid, respectively. Elsewhere, his visit to Kaunas’ and Vilnius’ synagogues, and subsequent speculation about the museum role they were supposed to perform once the extermination of the European Jews has been completed, become conflated with what he sees as analogous ethnographic displays he saw in South Africa featuring the

works by the San peoples who in the 19th century were pushed to the edge of extinction by Cape colonists (143).¹¹

All of the above-listed examples unambiguously demonstrate Jacobson's deliberate employment of a specific mode of discourse—one in which distant hinterlands and their pasts undergo a process of mutual and transnational entanglement and, as a result, become spatially and temporally overlapped. *Heshel's Kingdom* is clearly a testament to the successful application of this principle which constitutes what I am tempted to call the memoir's hinternational poetics. In Claudio Magris' seminal *Danube* (1986; English translation 1989), the term "hinternational" is coined and subsequently used to describe the titular river and its position vis-à-vis the all-German Rhine. For Magris, the Danube, the river of Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest and Belgrade (among others) is synonymous with a "multiple" and "supranational" culture of "German-Magyar-Slavic-Romanic-Jewish Central Europe" which the Italian scholar considers a "hinterworld 'behind all nations'" (24). Magris' hinternationalism which annuls the restrictive homogeneity of the imperial gaze and cartography is thus an instrument to acknowledge mutual embeddedness of topographies, identities, and histories; it is a means to bring different hinterworlds—those "beyond" or/and "behind" spaces—together. It might be claimed that the same principle of "hinternational ecumene" (Magris 24) is to be identified as governing Jacobson's act of re-mapping his two homelands, two transnational hinterlands; to continue with the water metaphor, it is the very principle that allows Jacobson to see South Africa on the Nemunas and, conversely, Lithuania on the Orange river.

One of the most powerful articulations of this principle is to be found in the final pages of his memoir. Towards the end of his visit to Varniai, Jacobson realises that there is an alternative to the mode of connecting with the past that is symbolised by the figure of the abyss. He says: "Looking about me, I understand something that has been haunting me since my arrival in Lithuania [...]. It now seems to me that I should have always known it. The abyss of the past does not have to be figured for us by bottomless pits, vertiginous plunges, stone dropping for ever down a soundless chamber" (208). The approach that he discovers and, one could argue, implements in *Heshel's Kingdom* operates horizontally—is a form of "past presencing" (Macdonald 16) where the past can inhabit the present, where histories, spaces, and their various uses can blur into each other. It is a method that brings together different experiences and creates an opportunity for multidirectional relationships. That is why the pits become replaced by "benches and [...] civic buildings," "trees and traffic signs,"

as well as the “curve of [an] empty road” (Jacobson, *Heshel’s Kingdom* 208–209).

However, the best testament to Jacobson’s hinternational poetics is the final chapter of the book—one which the writer was particularly keen on re-writing until the last proofs of the book had been delivered to its publisher (“Jacobson–Heshel’s Kingdom run-through, Parts I–V”). In this Duchampian, assemblage-like excerpt which describes Jacobson’s dream one witnesses a complete collapse of space, time, and identity.¹² The place where Jacobson finds himself is a commixture of South Africa and Lithuania. It is a universe not much different from Schulz’s “imagined” Drohobycz which, as Jacobson himself noted in his review of Schulz’s collected works published two years after the publication of *Heshel’s Kingdom*, “has no rules, it has no narratives either: the incidents in any one chapter could be transposed to any other with little or no loss” (Jacobson, “The Light Waters of Amnion”). Though the place Jacobson dreams about is supposed to be Varniai, its soil is “sandy,” “pale,” and “dry” (234); the landscape may feature a wooden cottage like the one encountered in Lithuania but in its gardens Jacobson discovers the wrong kind of tree, i.e. gum trees; it has a wooden porch but its main door is covered with a fly screen made of gauze “in the South African fashion” (234). The children that Jacobson sees are simultaneously his own children and his grandfather’s children (“which of them was which? Who was who? How many of them were there?” he keeps asking [234]). In his dream, Jacobson enters the realm in which “there was no Hitler, no years, no Holocaust, no migration, no sorrow” (235); the realm where there is no South Africa and no Central Europe, no past and no present, no here and no there, no I and no you. He enters the world where all these things “suddenly begin to melt, to yield, to accommodate [themselves] to a power we did not know we possessed” (233). He enters a truly hinternational space which despite its “uncanniness” (which in Heidegger’s conception is inextricably linked to the existential modus of “not-being-at-home” (*das Nichtzuhausesein*) [Heidegger 189]) is not only “perfectly natural,” “homelike,” and “tractable” but also—to use the word which features in the final typeset proofs of *Heshel’s Kingdom* but which was not included in the printed version of the book—powerfully “familiar” (“Jacobson–Heshel’s Kingdom run-through, Parts I–V” 20).

Conclusion

The main ambition of this paper was neither to investigate the whole range of links between South African literary production and Central Europe

nor to demonstrate *all* forms of transnational solidarity/affinity that have existed between the two hinterland cultures in the 20th and 21st centuries. What is more, its primary objective was not restricted to showcasing various manifestations of Central European “nostomania” that can be identified among selected, mostly Jewish South African writers—i.e. their “obsession” with returning “home” to their Central European mother-/bloodlands. Although it might be hoped that the present paper has managed to reach some of those aims as well, its major goal was to provide a detailed analysis of a specific strategy that has been employed by South African writers in their various attempts to represent and thematise Central Europe—its topography, history, and identity. Despite the fact that the present discussion has prioritised only three writers (Lionel Abrahams, Rose Zwi, and, above all, Dan Jacobson), the before-mentioned strategy, which might be recognised as a mechanism of “un-learning” imperialist geography, is not incidental but could be acknowledged as one of the major modes of post-WWII South African cultural production. Suffice it to mention that the hinternational poetics described in this study can be observed elsewhere: for example, in Nadine Gordimer’s short story “My Father Leaves Home” (1990) in which Gordimer overlaps a small borderland Hungarian town that she visited in 1989 with a Lithuanian shtetel left by her father in the last decade of the 19th century; or in J. M. Coetzee’s *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) where the writer’s personal tragedy becomes fused with Fyodor Dostoevsky’s life story (following the complex process of self- and other-fictionalisation), while South African apartheid history is blended with the oppressive regime of Tsarist Russia.

However, I should like to conclude this paper with another example—one that, firstly, shows the validity of the present paper’s claim about the special relationship between South African and Central European hinterlands; and, secondly, testifies to the longevity of what this paper has acknowledged as a unique mode (or strategy or poetics) of representing this hinternational relationship.

On 22 January 2022, an exhibition entitled “That Which We Do Not Remember” and featuring works by the thespian of South African visual art William Kentridge was officially opened in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas (within the framework of the Kaunas 2022 European Capital of Culture). It was William Kentridge’s double return to Lithuania. Not only was it the first show of the artist to be held in the region where his grandfather, Morris Kantrovitch, was born; it was also the first exhibition in which Kentridge openly addressed his Litvak heritage and his “connection” with Central Europe (Vitkienė 5–7): that which he did not wish to remember, to paraphrase the show’s title. Though most of the exhibits had been

shown before (e.g. at Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin and on the banks of the Tiber River in Rome), one piece was created specifically for his Kaunas show: an installation entitled “You Who Never Arrived.” Based on Kentridge’s etching under the same title, the artwork, which was installed in the auditorium of the National M.K. Čiurlionis Art Museum and which comprised large-format prints/canvasses set up in the upper part of the room, brings two visual narratives together. One—the upmost part of the installation covering the auditorium’s walls and windows—shows the South African veld covered in grass, low scrub and trees. The other—the part of the installation which wraps around the auditorium’s top benches and desks—depicts the Lithuanian grassland which is covered with Jewish gravestones, most of which are toppled or ravaged. In Kentridge’s piece, two distant landscapes are not simply juxtaposed with one another but fused together into a single South African-Central European landscape: phantasmagorical South Africa-sur-Nemunas.

But apart from being a visual installation, Kentridge’s artwork is also audial. Significantly, the four speakers that are placed within the artwork play a lament which has been composed by Kentridge’s long-time collaborator Philip Miller. However, even Miller’s *musique funèbre* does not refrain from repeating the hinternational gesture which this paper has prioritised in its discussion of *Heshel’s Kingdom* as it is simultaneously sung by both a Litvak singer and a South African singer. “You Who Never Arrived” is thus concerned not only with the process of overlapping one topography with another but, more importantly, with bringing different temporalities, identities, voices, and pasts together—all in an attempt to build a “potential history” which, according to Azoulay, “insists on restoring [...] [the] forms of being-together that existed at any moment in history without being shaped solely, let alone exhausted, by national division” (“Potential History” 565).

ENDNOTES

1. The title of the present paper has been inspired by C. J. Driver’s review of Dan Jacobson’s *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* published in “The New Review.” While commenting on the novel’s fusion of two regions (South Africa and Central-Eastern Europe) and two oppressive regimes (communism and apartheid), Driver describes the fictional Republic of Sarmeda as “South Africa-sur-Volga” (49). Given the paper’s prioritisation of the category of Central Europe and the concept of hinternationalism developed by Claudio Magris in his study of the Danube, as well as Jacobson’s Litvak heritage, I have decided to substitute the river Volga

with Lithuania's largest river, i.e. Nemunas, which, in its Polish variant, features in the title of one of the classic realist novels of the 19th century, namely Eliza Orzeszkowa's *On the Niemen* (1888; English translation in 2014).

2. In his essay "From the Heart of the Country to the European Core: J. M. Coetzee and *los polacos*," Kusek investigates Coetzee's decades-long, multifaceted, and, essentially, transnational dialogue with Poland and its cultural production – from Coetzee's encounter of Polish poetry in the early 1960s until his 2022 novel *El polaco*. Coetzee's dialogue with Poland is interpreted as an attempt to seek one's rightful ancestry: literary and cultural, as well as genetic. The article argues that the figure of the Pole is not simply a literary trope or the subject of Coetzee's scholarly/readerly interest, but an instrument of both: self-defacement and identification with his Polish heritage (Kusek).

3. With regard to South African hinterlands typically associated with Afrikaner treks see, e.g. Easton and Foster. For the perception of South African "backveld" as a Jewish hinterland, particularly by the immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe, and, consequently, their contribution to re-map the hinterlands, consult Jacobson "Yiddish Fiction in South Africa" 130. Centrality of hinterlands to South African history has been notably addressed by J. M. Coetzee. In the "Afterword" to "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" (*Dusklands* of 1974), the volume's narrator sums up the space's (and the concept's) position in the national and colonial imaginary in the following manner: "The generations of the Coetzees illustrate well the gradual dispersal into the hinterland which has constituted the outward story, the fable, of the White man in South Africa, trekking ever northward in anger or disgust at the restrictiveness of government, Dutch or British" (108–109).

4. One should also mention J.-A. Mbembé's essay "Aesthetics of Superfluity" in which Mbembé eloquently reads the South African mines (particularly those located in and around Johannesburg) in the context of biopolitics and exploitation of black labour. Interestingly, he also makes a connection between South Africa and Central-Eastern Europe by emphasising the racial division of labour and labour organisation in the mines: "[i]f the capital, technology, and expertise for mining came mostly from Riga, [...] Hamburg, Kiev, [...] most of the '[...] men who did the digging' were 'migrant black workers without rights and with little choice but to sell their labor cheaply,'" he writes (379). Mbembé also quotes a famous line by Sarah Gertrude Millin (born in Lithuania and raised near Kimberley) who in *The South Africans* referred to the mines as a "monument of servitude, power, the vanity of vanities and death" (qtd. in Mbembé 377).

5. In his essay "Multidirectional Memory and the Implicated Subject," Rothberg also hints at other topographical features where the process of overlapping one landscape with another might be observed. He quotes a fragment from William Kentridge's "Landscape in a State of Siege" in which Kentridge juxtaposes the landscape of Poland, particularly "grey-green pine trees and rolling hills in the soft European light" near Auschwitz, with Vereeniging located next to Sharpeville, the site of the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 (cf. Kentridge 110–111; Rothberg "Multidirectional Memory" 50). Kentridge's aesthetics which mirrors Abrahams' and Jacobson's poetics of overlap/transnational hinterlands will be discussed in the concluding part of the present paper.

6. The paper's understanding of Central Europe has been informed by the works of Kundera, Miłosz, Škrabec and Le Rider, among others, and Said's idea of imagined or imaginative geography. Consequently, Central Europe is not defined by a specific territory, but by its borderland characteristics (always in between East and West, between Russian and German cultural hegemony), resistance to power, its polyphony and pluralism of voices and languages, co-existence of various identities and negotiated selves, as well as traumatic history.

7. Cf. Stähler. Although Stähler provides several convincing arguments about the relationship between alternative geography (the fictional land of Ashkenaz; the city of Klaggasdorf) and real geography (Central Europe, the city of Krakow), stronger evidence regarding the novel's mythical topography is to be found in the Dan Jacobson Papers held at the Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin. Most notably, the first draft of the novel includes a hand-drawn map of Europe where the land of Ashkenaz is situated exactly in the heart of Europe – between the land of Tserphat and Russ (“Notes and early drafts” n.pag.).

8. It is in Jacobson's auto/biographical sketches that one reads, for example, about his mother's “middle-European” literary interests such as the works by Stefan Zweig, Jacob Wasserman, and Emil Ludwig (Jacobson, “Neighbours” 26) or his father's prominent “Habsburg lip” (26). Much about Jacobson's perception and conceptualisation of Central Europe is also to be found in the reports that Jacobson submitted to Barbara Day and the Jan Hus Foundation upon his two visits to Czechoslovakia – first in April 1983 and then in May 1986 (“Correspondence” n.pag.).

9. Polsky's short stories were published in Warsaw under the title *In Afrike* in 1939, while Hoffman's collection of poetry entitled *Woglungsklangen* was released in 1935, also in Warsaw (Hotz, Sowden, Sherman, Leveson 59).

10. Despite the fact that the critical reception of *Heshel's Kingdom* has been inescapably dominated by its preoccupation with the Holocaust – see e.g. Daymond or Simon. Amy Simon goes as far as to state that *Heshel's Kingdom* is “the crowning success in Dan Jacobson's Holocaust canon” (22). What is more, Jacobson's memoir has often been positioned vis-à-vis other classical auto/biographical studies of the Holocaust by the second-generation survivors such as Eva Hoffman's *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World* (Laqueur). However, it might be argued that the best characterisation of Heshel's Kingdom and its multiple concerns has been provided by Sheila Roberts who has refused to acknowledge it as a primarily post-Holocaust narrative but, instead, hailed it as an “indefinable book” (57).

11. However, one should note that Black South Africans remain largely invisible in Jacobson's memoir. Paradoxically, they seem to be more present in the Lithuanian parts of the book (where parallels between South Africa and Central Europe, as well as between both regions' history of violence and persecution are established) than in the South African/Kimberley sections of *Heshel's Kingdom*.

12. Jacobson mentions Duchamp in the context of his explorations of Vilnius' Old Town – specifically his discovery of a former synagogue which has been turned into a tenement house and in which, as Jacobson notes, “oriental arches” co-exist with a plant and a pair of trainers “as if placed there for Duchamp-like

effect” (139). This reference to Duchamp might be recognised as an allusion to the artist’s readymades and his role as a precursor of assemblage (see e.g. Judovitz) – a technique in which heterogenous pieces are brought together. Consequently, one might feel entitled to consider Jacobson’s poetics of overlapping one hinterland with another as formally related to the technique of assemblage. For more on assemblage (especially in the wake of its theorisation by Deleuze and Guattari), see DeLanda.

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