Kaisa Kaakinen

Narrating Historical Experience for Heterogeneous Readerships: Transnational Reading as Limited Participation in Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project*

In a black-and-white photograph on page 52 of Aleksandar Hemon's novel *The Lazarus Project* (2008), a bearded man dressed in a suit and a hat is holding the head of another man, who is sitting on a chair with his eyes closed. Although it may not be apparent at first glance, the man seated on the chair is dead. Readers have by now learned that he was a Ukrainian-Jewish immigrant to Chicago named Lazarus Averbuch, who had survived a pogrom in 1903 in Kishinev, now Chișinău in Moldova, before coming to the United States. The first chapter of the novel imagines a historical incident, recorded in archives, in which Averbuch was killed by a Chicago police chief in 1908 as a suspected anarchist. Reading further, it becomes apparent that the chapters about Averbuch have been penned by the narrator and protagonist Vladimir Brik, a Bosnian-born emigrant, who came to Chicago from Sarajevo in the early 1990s, just before the Bosnian War, and is now trying to write a novel about Lazarus.

In an article written for *Bomb* magazine, the writer Hemon recounts that the archival images from 1908 in which the dead Averbuch is "being triumphantly offered by a blazingly white policeman to the American public", were the starting point for writing *The Lazarus Project:* "In 1908 these photos were supposed to show that [Lazarus's] alleged anarchist proclivities were visible in his body and that the foreign life in said body was successfully terminated by law and order" (2014). Hemon adds that when he later saw the photographs from Abu Ghraib,[1] he recognised their structural and ideological similarity to the photographs of Averbuch. He explains that his aim in writing the novel was to "engage the readers into confronting the history that is signified in the photographs".

But what kind of history do readers confront when reading *The Lazarus Project?* As Hemon's comments suggest, the structure of historical analogy is at the heart of the novel's poetic concept, and this structuring principle gives the readers plenty of freedom to determine the status of the suggested narrative and historical linkages. It is possible to read *The Lazarus Project* in relation to several historical concerns, such as the early twenty-first century war on terror in the USA and its

1 Hemon (2008, 188) also mentions them in the novel.

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historical precedents, the history of transatlantic migration, or the memory of the Yugoslav Wars, which the novel brings into contact with the US context. Furthermore, the broad temporal and geographic scope of the novel points to a more general problematic of the comparative exploration of histories of violence and their lingering effects. Given the proliferation of potential connections, it is not all that surprising that, in his generally positive review of the novel, the critic James Wood suggested that there may be "one project too many" here. "Brik is pursuing his 'Lazarus Project,' Hemon is pursuing *his* 'Lazarus Project,' and the book's photographs represent another kind of mimetic project" (Wood 2008). However, this multiplicity need not be interpreted as a failure of coherence; it may instead be seen as part of the novel's concept. The perception that readers may feel unable to participate in all of the novel's narrative projects might actually be crucial for grasping the novel's take on transnational historical narration.

Hemon's whole oeuvre of short stories, novels, and essays is profoundly focused on the condition and experience of migration, and he excels in depicting how the life stories of migrants bring together separate experiential and discursive spheres that are distinguished by different affective histories. Furthermore, Hemon's oeuvre is marked by its sustained exploration of the relationship between history and fiction, and of what Hemon himself has called "the overlapping zone" or "the exchange zone" (2014) between them. In this analysis of *The Lazarus Project*, I will study the protocols of reading that emerge from the novel's poetic strategies and ask how the novel's specific poetics of historical narration contributes to its transnational dimension.[2] I pursue this analysis in the spirit of reception aesthetics, as I ask how the text's formal strategies interact with the changing horizons of expectation of the readers. However, while this analytical interest has much in common with the approach proposed by the Constance School theorist Hans-Robert Jauss (1982) in the middle of the twentieth century, the contemporary transnational reading context emphasises the need to devote more concerted analytical attention to the effect of the readers having heterogeneous historical imaginaries and cultural proficiencies. Even when readers share the same present, they may bring very different experiential and narrative frames to the event of reading. Many contemporary literary works resist reading modes in which the co-presence of the heterogeneous experiences of readers is contained by a unifying idea, such

2 I have written extensively about the legibility of literary narratives of history, active modes of reading and the heterogeneity of twenty-first-century reading contexts in Kaakinen 2017, which analyses the conditions of reception of twentieth-century literary texts by Joseph Conrad, Peter Weiss, and W. G. Sebald. Furthermore, the current analysis draws significantly on my earlier article, which discusses transnational narration of historical trauma in Hemon's *The Lazarus Project*, relating it to Teju Cole's novel *Open City*. See Kaakinen 2020.

as the nation – an imagined community that allows readers to imagine themselves belonging to the same frame of reference. I will approach Hemon's novel as a "born-migrated" text,[3] in the expression introduced by Rebecca Walkowitz in her book *Born Translated* (2015). Walkowitz shows that certain pieces of contemporary literature "begin in several languages and several places" (2015, 30), address multiple audiences simultaneously, and "build translation into their form" (2015, 6). She thus proposes that a heterogeneous context of literary production and reception shapes the very structure of texts, as authors anticipate that the texts work differently when they encounter differently situated readers.

What is crucial for my purposes in Walkowitz's analysis is her articulation of how born-translated or born-migrated literature intervenes in the habits of reading:

> Whether or not they manage to circulate globally, today's born-translated works block readers from being "native readers", those who assume that the book they are holding was written for them or that the language they are encountering is, in some proprietary or intrinsic way, theirs. Refusing to match language to geography, many contemporary works will seem to occupy more than one place, to be produced in more than one language, or to address multiple audiences at the same time. (2015, 6)

Walkowitz also points out how born-translated novels are "not produced from nowhere to everywhere" (2015, 28), as they offer an alternative both to national simultaneity and to global disarticulation of particularity. Walkowitz's analysis focuses on multilingual strategies, but I want to extend the consideration of heterogeneous audiences to the analysis of strategies of historical narration in the context of transnational literature and the literature of migration. This contributes to the project of transcultural memory studies by combining analysis of the formal innovations of twenty-first century literature with analysis of the conditions of transnational literary reception.[4]

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3 I will use the term "born-migrated" throughout this article as a shorthand for my claim that Hemon's novel evidences a consciousness of a transnational context. Since my analysis does not focus primarily on language and multilingualism but instead foregrounds historical narration and the heterogeneity of the readers' horizons of expectation, I prefer to use the term born-migrated rather than born-translated.

4 My reading does not focus on the empirical reception of Hemon but on the protocols of reading that are implied by the text's poetic strategies and on the conditions of reception of literary texts that engage with historical material from several cultural contexts. In another study, it would be interesting to study empirically the reception of Hemon's novel among different audiences. For an empirical study of the reception of literary works connected to the history of the Bosnian War, including Hemon's *The Question of Bruno*, see Ortner, Sindbaek Andersen, and Wierød Borčak 2022.

Hemon's novel is interesting for our analytical work on literature and mnemonic migration, because rather than simply transmitting local memories to faraway audiences or transposing them into a transnational idiom in a universalist register, the novel's poetics directs attention to the very structure of the transnational context in which the translation of memories takes place. *The Lazarus Project* portrays the transnational or global as consisting of multiple social spheres, which may be in contact through both historical processes and globally circulating media, but which cannot be understood as a unified audience or mnemonic community. In the first part of the article, I will show how Hemon's novel brings together historical material from multiple local contexts and creates the impression of a heterogeneous address. In the second part, I ask how the novel's narrative mode, which combines documentary material, immersive narration, and self-reflective strategies, can be analysed in relation to the novel's status as a transnational narrative with a potentially global reception. I draw here on discussions on contemporary literature after postmodernism (Boxall 2013; Huber 2014) and on new approaches to the interplay of immersive and self-reflective effects in reading literary fiction (Polvinen 2022). I also note Fredric Jameson's (2013) and Alexander Kluge's (2013) theorisations of storytelling in order to articulate how we can think of the historical mediation of experience in relation to heterogeneous contexts of literary production and reception. Hemon's novel highlights the power that storytelling has to manipulate people's historical and cultural imaginaries, but instead of simply showing that all experience is always mediated by language and discursive conventions, the novel brings this problematic to a historically specific register, pointing to contexts and situations in which storytelling is pressured by histories of violence and imbalances of power. Through its sophisticated poetics of historical narration, *The Lazarus Project* outlines a world in which different frames of experience and storytelling come into contact and conflict and have material consequences in people's lives.

Hemon's poetics thus provides a more particularist alternative to translational models that rely on translation from the singular to the universal, such as the "prosthetic memory" (Landsberg 2004) model, in which readers' experiential engagement with cultural artefacts results in them incorporating memories from distant contexts into their own mnemonic archive. I propose that in order to analyse the role of literary writing in the dynamics of mnemonic migration, we need models that are more differentiated than the concept of translation as the transposition of singular experiences into a universal register, or the idea of reading as a dialogue in which the two horizons of the text and the reader merge. The aim of my analysis of Hemon's novel is to show that literary narratives may also prompt readers to become conscious of the co-presence of other readers who are differently situated as an important horizon for their process of reading. In *The Lazarus*

Project, a struggle may be sensed with the problem of articulating situated experiences transnationally in a world marked by divergent frames of experience and uneven power relations.

Outlining a heterogeneous address

> What always interests me – indeed obsesses me – is the way we engage in history. Except there is no "we." Americans do it differently, and, often, irresponsibly and without particular interest. Abu Ghraib is long forgotten now; no lesson seems to have been learned. (Hemon 2014)

The Lazarus Project compares explicitly the suspicion or indeed the outright paranoia shown towards newly arrived immigrants by the most established social groups in Chicago in the early twentieth century, with the obsession with terrorism in the United States after 9/11. However, the novel's broad geographic scope and the presence in the narrative of the Eastern European context and the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s opens the historical analogy up in further directions. The different geographic and cultural locations are woven into the narrative through the narrator Brik, whose life story is made to resemble in many ways that of Hemon himself.[5] When Brik wins a generous grant from an American foundation to work on a book about Averbuch, he asks an old acquaintance from Sarajevo, a photographer named Rora, to join him on a research trip to Ukraine, Moldova and Sarajevo. During this trip, Rora comes to tell Brik a lot of stories about the Bosnian War, of which he, unlike Brik, had personal experience. The novel's two storylines are separated by black pages that, when turned, reveal black-and-white photographs with a more or less indirect relationship to the text.[6]

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5 Hemon ended up moving to the US and staying in Chicago indefinitely, although he did not intend to do so, because he happened to travel from Sarajevo to the United States just before the war broke out in Bosnia in 1992. Today he is highly acclaimed in the Anglophone literary context for his imaginative use of the English language, attracting comparisons to famous "translingual" Anglophone authors like Vladimir Nabokov or Joseph Conrad. Furthermore, the figure of the photographer Rora can be read as modelled on the photographer Velibor Božović, Hemon's long-time friend, who took many of the photographs reproduced in the novel. Hemon and Božović have also published together the book *My Prisoner* (2015), which addresses the Bosnian War.

6 For an analysis of the role of photographs in *The Lazarus Project*, see for example Weiner (2014). Weiner emphasises in her analysis how a migrant consciousness and its "fractured yet facilitating perspective" (2014, 215) manifests itself in Hemon's novel and in the use of photographs in the text. Weiner emphasises the ability of the migrant consciousness to look at the world from multiple perspectives, referring to Salman Rushdie's image of a broken mirror (2014, 218), but my own analysis

By articulating experiences and histories that are linked to the Bosnian context, Aleksandar Hemon brings experiences from a European semi-periphery into the field of transnational Anglophone literature. That Hemon writes his works in English, a dominant language, and a lingua franca, creates further conditions for the reception of his texts. While the United States is an important context for Hemon's works, today's fast transnational circulation of literature, especially of literature in English, means that his books are likely to reach considerable audiences elsewhere across the globe. As Walkowitz observes, "[t]o write in English for global audiences [...] is to write for a heterogeneous group of readers. [...] readers of English-language texts are likely to have very different experiences: the work will be foreign, strange, or difficult for some; it will be familiar to others" (2015, 20–21).

How does the transnational context of production and reception register in the narrative of the novel? One way is that the novel's narrator figure Brik is portrayed as a voice that can convey experience from various locations. This is how he introduces himself in the second chapter:

> I am a reasonably loyal citizen of a couple of countries. In America – that somber land – I waste my vote, pay taxes grudgingly, share my life with a native wife, and try hard not to wish painful death to the idiot president. But I also have a Bosnian passport I seldom use; I go to Bosnia for heartbreaking vacations and funerals, and on or around March 1, with other Chicago Bosnians, I proudly and dutifully celebrate our Independence Day with an appropriately ceremonious dinner. (Hemon 2008, 11)[7]

The narrator enters the narrative with this gesture of placing his loyalties in multiple locations, in Hemon's signature tone of dark and snarky humour. The narrator's perspective is contrasted to the "native" perspective of someone like Brik's wife Mary, a neurosurgeon who comes from a family of Irish descent that is well established in the US. Brik reflects repeatedly on the difference, or even the chasm, between his perspective and Mary's. In one of these passages, he recalls a fight with Mary about the interpretation of the famous Abu Ghraib pictures from 2004 that showed how Iraqi prisoners had been tortured by US soldiers (188). Brik portrays Mary as settled in her security and affluence, and unable to imagine the reality of human violence and to perceive how she might be implicated in it as a citizen of a war-faring superpower.

highlights how Hemon's migratory poetics makes visible the disjunctive co-presence of different frames of experience in contemporary contexts of reception.

7 In the rest of the chapter only page numbers will be given.

The novel gestures at addressing more settled readers from a perspective that unsettles the "native" stance that takes the position of the implied reader for granted. The mode of native reading is contrasted with the perspective of someone like Brik, whose experience of the world is characterised by partial belonging in several contexts. The mode of native reading is shown to be unable to fathom the existence of what Brik calls "parallel universes" (68), places that are not subordinated or subsumable to a reader's own cultural location. Brik presents Mary's father George as someone for whom the United States represents the centre of the civilised world, and for whom people from remote places can "arrive at humanity only in the United States, and belatedly" (162), evoking developmental ideas of world history that sustained the imperialist project of the Western powers.

Hemon's narrative outlines a different perspective, in which no single centre co-opts the multiplicity of perspectives on the world. The novel highlights the heterogeneity of the US context itself, as Brik is presented as someone who observes the US both as a participant, with particular political affiliations and the right to vote in the US, and also as an observer, who is able to illuminate and manipulate the thought mechanisms of more established Americans. The novel particularises the US context further by embedding its story in the local history of Chicago. The Lazarus chapters convey to the readers a sense of the deep social divisions and political tensions between the established and the outsiders in early twentieth-century Chicago, connecting this location to a larger network of historical relations. This contributes to the presentation of the United States not simply as the centre to which the material from Bosnian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan locations is translated, but as one of the local contexts in the narrative.

The awareness of a heterogeneous context is reflected also in the novel's linguistic texture, which suggests a dislocated perspective on the Anglophone sphere or on the English language.[8] Other languages have a subdued presence in the novel, for instance when the narrative includes untranslated Bosnian expressions (18, 45) or refers to the central square of Lviv with the word *Rinok* without translating it (75). The word is readily understandable as a "marketplace" to readers familiar with Slavic languages, but it is not necessarily so to others. On other occasions the novel seems to take both Anglophone and Bosnian audiences into account. It reproduces a Bosnian nursery rhyme in its original language for in-

8 The subdued multilingualism of *The Lazarus Project* resonates with Rebecca Walkowitz's analysis of the various multilingual effects used by contemporary writers in Walkowitz, *Born Translated.* Like Walkowitz, I see the multilingual effects as a literary strategy that contributes to the sense that the text addresses multiple audiences. As Hemon's novel deals with historical experiences and memories, this sense of the heterogeneity of the novel's audiences also reminds us that the text may spark connections to multiple historical narratives and mnemonic communities.

stance, but also translates its meaning into English in the ensuing narrative (38). However, the centre-periphery relationship is subverted in this passage, as it recounts how Rora tricked Western tourists into pulling out their wallets by making up exciting stories about Sarajevan locations and by adding the words "Isus Krist" to the nursery rhyme, presenting it to American pilgrims as a Bosnian prayer.

Furthermore, Hemon's variegated English vocabulary and his way of playing with the material and sensory qualities of words ("a bus disgorged a gaggle of high school kids" (40)) creates the sense that the reader is overhearing the English language from the point of view of someone perceiving it both as a participant and an observer. To give one more example, when Brik refers to his wife's father George, he accidentally uses the word *dead* where he means to say "dad", making a grave mistake that arises from the transcription of how a person with a certain American accent would pronounce the word, and that hints at revealing something about Brik's relationship to George (162). The shades of multilingualism and the accentuation of the materiality of the English language contribute to the impression that the narrative addresses multiple proficiencies.

The effect of the novel bringing together historical material from various contexts is that situated readers will amplify some resonances of the novel's historical material more than others. The associations sparked by the word *Chetnik* for instance depend both on the knowledge of readers and on how those readers position themselves in relation to the Bosnian war. As the passage on Abu Ghraib already suggested, the novel evidences an awareness of how histories of war and violence divide people's experiential horizons. When Brik describes a Bosnian Independence Day party in Chicago, he presents himself as a partial insider, since he, unlike many others in the Bosnian immigrant community, does not have direct experience of the Bosnian war. Those who actually experienced the war seem to create bonds through stories and humour.

> Inevitably, over the dessert, the war is discussed, first in terms of battles and massacres unintelligible to someone (like me) who has not experienced the horrors. Eventually the conversation turns to funny ways of not dying. Everyone is roaring with laughter, and our guests who do not speak Bosnian would never know that the amusing story is, say, about the many dishes based on nettles (nettle pie, nettle pudding, nettle steak), or about a certain Salko who survived a mob of murderous Chetniks by playing dead, and now is dancing over there – and someone points him out: the skinny, sinewy survivor, soaking his shirt with the sweat of lucky resurrection. (12–13)

Here, the narrative manages to translate an impression of the dark humour of those who experienced the war. However, it also illustrates how what these funny stories mean to them cannot really be translated.

In some passages, non-American or non-Western readers may find themselves observers to the translation that Brik is involved in, when he transmits his experiences from his trip to Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia. The travelogue passages could be read as illustrating how Brik brings with him not only the American passport he has acquired, but also some specific cultural scripts, as he notes, for instance, a "Darth Vader-like Orthodox priest" (73) walking down the street in Lviv. Brik's descriptions of the scenery in Ukraine and Moldova may even appear to some readers to be pervaded by a certain "Western gaze", depending on the affective relationship of the readers to the locations in question. However, the hyperbolic character of the travelogue passages, with their veritable procession of seedy hotels, brutal businessmen, prostitutes, casinos, and sex trafficking, also connects to the novel's repeated references to how storytellers embellish details to create a particular effect on their audiences. In a scene in which Brik phones his wife Mary, he describes Lviv as "depressing" (72), with filthy streets, Soviet architecture, and so on. The scene suggests that Brik feels a growing sense of disconnect from Mary's world back in the United States and tries to counteract this by telling Mary what he thinks she expects to hear. Brik portrays hyperbolic narration as characteristic of Bosnian attitudes to storytelling, with Rora being a prime example of this in the novel, and he distances himself from the American way of dividing stories neatly between fiction and nonfiction (102–104). All this attention being focused on approaching storytelling not through its verisimilitude but through its effects could be taken as a hint that the later descriptions of Ukraine and Moldova should not be taken at face value either. However, the novel also reminds readers about the very real existence of violence, for instance in the scene in which Brik and Rora realise that they have unwittingly become accomplices to human trafficking, as they have travelled in the same taxi as the traffickers and their victim (263–264). In the next section, I will delve into the novel's constant thematisation of the relationship between storytelling and history, and its use of self-reflective strategies.

As a born-migrated text, *The Lazarus Project* does not assume that its implied readers share the public sphere or cultural discourses of the context within which it is produced, nor does it expect readers to translate the text into their own experiential world by way of the universal human condition. The narrative seems instead to register the existence of different reading horizons that are partly separate and partly intertwined. Although the narrator of *The Lazarus Project* may be said to be addressing US audiences in a specific, post-9/11 moment, the text implies that this conversation is surrounded by the co-presence of other situated points of entry to the archive of historical experience explored in the novel. Furthermore, Brik's perspective is likely to resonate with those readers who recognise something familiar in how the structures of experience created by migration are

depicted, whether or not they are familiar with the novel's cultural references. Such readers bring into the event of reading their experience of becoming a material link between contexts that belong to separate spheres of historical experience and discourse. Furthermore, the born-migrated quality of the narrative can also accommodate a semi-peripheral reader, who may recognise a familiar structure of experience in Brik's negotiation of a position of European margins in the transnational circulation of cultural discourses. This interaction with migratory or semi-peripheral readerships does not assume that the readers share the same cultural discourses and proficiencies. These examples remind us that the experiential horizons of readers are not divided only by their linguistic, cultural, and national belonging, but also by more complex frames of mnemonic belonging that are linked to various processes of socialisation, and by the position of the readers in the structural hierarchies that underlie transnational contact.

Narrating experience with immersive and self-reflective strategies

> As a diasporic person I've learned that it's in fact really easy to leave your country. What is difficult is leaving its history, as it follows (or leads) you like a shadow. That kind of history is in your body (as it was in Lazarus's) and cannot be relegated to a museum or, as in America, to entertainment. (Hemon 2014)

These words by Hemon betray a preoccupation with the historicity of experience, which also manifests itself in how Hemon's texts use the affordances of literary storytelling to highlight embodied experiences while constantly reminding readers of the status of the narrative as a textual construct. The remainder of this article analyses how this tension in Hemon's novel contributes to the sense that the implied readers of the novel are made aware of different experiential horizons that are co-present in the same slice of time, and that each reader is being only partially addressed in the text.

The double gesture of inviting readers to become immersed in "the world as it had been in 1908" (41), and of laying bare the devices used for storytelling can be seen right at the outset of the novel.

> The time and place are the only thing I am certain of: March 2, 1908, Chicago. Beyond that is the haze of history and pain, and now I plunge:
>
> Early in the morning, a scrawny young man rings the bell at 31 Lincoln Place, the residence of George Shippy, the redoubtable chief of Chicago police. The maid, recorded as Theresa, opens the door (the door certainly creaks ominously), scans the young man from

> his soiled shoes up to his swarthy face, and smirks to signal that he had better have a good reason for being there. (1)

After reminding readers of how sparse the known historical facts about Averbuch's death are, the narrator makes an ironic remark about the creaking door, as if reminding readers of the narrative conventions that are designed to create certain effects in the audience. However, the brief reference at the beginning of the passage to the "haze of history and pain" suggests a certain commitment to the dimension of history as something that envelops and pressures these gestures of storytelling. There seems to be a double impulse of laying bare the literary devices while still remaining committed to the ability of storytelling to convey something about the historicity and materiality of experience.

Furthermore, the narrative sets out to engage readers' senses, as it continuously zooms in on conspicuous sensory effects. Before Lazarus enters Chief Shippy's house and is killed, the novel narrates his visit to a grocery store and invites the reader to imagine Lazarus's experience of hunger, the shifts in his consciousness between the present in Chicago and the past in Moldova, and the contempt and suspicion of the store owners who look down on him. The narrative repeatedly returns to the detail of a lozenge, which Lazarus buys at the store with his last coins. The lozenge, slowly dissolving in his mouth throughout the passage, becomes connected with language and migration when Lazarus feels the contours of the foreign American names Billy and Pat, as if tasting them in his mouth. The detail of the lozenge subtly moves readers from imagining Lazarus's sensory environment to picturing his relationship with the English language:

> The young man's stomach growls again, and he takes another lozenge. He is glad he has a few more left; he enjoys possessing them. Billy. That's a nice name, a name for a fretful, yet happy, dog. Pat is weighty, serious, like a rusted hammer. He has never known anybody named Billy or Pat. (6–7)

Finally, the sensation in the mouth becomes associated with muteness and with the disconnection between Lazarus and his surroundings. This sense of a disconnection finally reaches its climax when Lazarus is shot dead before he has been able to explain why he has come to Police Chief Shippy's house. The narrative transitions here from its focus on Lazarus's experience to the perspective of public narratives that have supposedly remained in the archives. It introduces a citation from the newspaper The Tribune: "'Throughout the struggle,' William P. Miller writes, 'the anarchist had not uttered a syllable. He fought on doggedly with that cruel mouth shut tight and the eyes colored with a determination terrible to behold. He died without a curse, supplication, or prayer'" (9). The subsequent chapters

demonstrate how both those in power in early twentieth-century Chicago and the anarchists on the fringes construe their own political narratives and instrumentalise Lazarus's death for political purposes. The Lazarus chapters portray how more powerful stories come to obscure the entangled reality, and how the narration of such histories takes place in a world that is pervaded by uneven structures of power.

The Lazarus chapters thus operate in a state of tension between inviting readers to immerse themselves in Lazarus's experience and encouraging them to become conscious of the narrative devices that aim to create specific impressions. One way in which the narrative draws attention to its constructed nature is through the use of expressions and names that are repeated both in the Lazarus chapters and in the chapters on Brik. There are for instance two reporters named Miller in the novel, the second of whom reports on the Bosnian War in the 1990s. Another example is a bartender in early twentieth-century Chicago named Bruno Schulz (52) after the Polish writer, who lived in present-day Ukraine, close to the region that Brik visits on his trip. Such devices ironically emphasise that we are becoming immersed in a world that is constructed by the imagination of Brik, and also of Hemon.

However, the self-reflective dimension of *The Lazarus Project* does not only remind readers that history is a product of our ways of telling it, which has been argued to be the key concern of late-twentieth-century historiographic metafiction (Boxall 2013; Huber 2014; Hutcheon 1988). It instead uses strategies that are familiar from late-twentieth-century postmodern fiction to highlight the pressure of history on storytelling and to accentuate the disjunctive coexistence of different frames of experience in the same present. Hemon's novel has a twenty-first-century, or post-postmodernist historical sensibility that, in the words of Peter Boxall, evidences a "new sense of a responsibility to material historical forces" and a "gap between our experiences of living [...] and the empty, circling, repetitive narratives which we have available to give expression to that experience" (2013, 42). The interplay between documentary and metafictive impulses is a part of the novel's overall exploration of the gaps between lived experiences, and the discursive resources or cultural scripts that are available for articulating those experiences. Furthermore, the novel conveys how the divergent frames of interpretation have material consequences, like in the case of Lazarus, who moves across separate frames of reference and is shot because he fits the Chicago police officer's preconception of a foreign anarchist.

The poetic gesture of prompting readers to imagine Lazarus's world as a sensory environment amplifies the temporal dimension that Fredric Jameson has called the open present, or a "present of consciousness" (2013, 15–26), which opens the linear narrative temporality of past-present-future to a sense of the mul-

tiple possibilities that are inherent in historical instances. The gesture of amplifying the present of consciousness both invites readers to connect experientially with the text, and encourages them to approach the historical dimension with an awareness of the multivalence of each present moment. I would like to propose that this poetic strategy, together with the invitation to observe narrative conventions and their use in particular contexts, directs readers to approach the historicity of experience relationally and beyond the self-enclosed conceptions of the subject. I draw here on the thoughts of German writer and filmmaker Alexander Kluge about the relationship between experience and storytelling, which build on the tradition of German critical theory. Kluge asserts that writing has a unique ability to mediate experience "independently of time", in a manner that does not leave it "imprisoned in individual biographies" (Kluge 1993, quoted in Combrink and Arnold 2011 [translation mine]). Kluge does not approach experience as being intrinsically linked to a biographical subject or to the narratives that sustain personal and collective identities. Instead he approaches experience as "raw material for the imagination", which can spark the imagination of readers in remote contexts and engage their critical faculties against the power of "homogenised reality narratives" (Kluge 2013 [translation mine]). In this conception of storytelling and experience, reading is not about identifying with someone else's experience. Instead it involves an active and critical orientation in the spaces of experience that condition lives and narratives, and that change through time.

I would also like to highlight Kluge's metaphor for biographical forms, as it suggests that experience can be narrated in a frame that opens up to multiple directions of address instead of simply building the story of a subject in a linear time frame: "80 or 16 eyes glance outside from biographies, and the world and other people look back – they build the united biographies of experience" (Kluge 1993, quoted in Combrink and Arnold 2011 [translation mine]). Hemon uses the historical biography of Averbuch as a device that makes it possible to highlight the disjunctive co-presence of different experiential horizons coexisting in the same slice of time. The novel's narrative mode invites readers both to immerse themselves in Lazarus's experience, and to observe the heterogeneity of the context that his life traverses and the context of the narration of that life.

My reading of the function of self-reflective strategies in *The Lazarus Project* is also influenced by recent analysis of literary artifice by Merja Polvinen, who draws on enactive or second-generation approaches to cognition in cognitive literary studies, and on the rhetorical view of fiction of Richard Walsh. Polvinen emphasises that we should not see the self-reflective and immersive strategies of fictional texts as implying antithetical modes of reading (Polvinen 2022). If we approach literary texts as cognitive environments, we can see how self-reflective artificiality and immersive reading work together within the experience afforded by the

text, and how readers may experience these aspects of the cognitive environment quite seamlessly.

Polvinen's analysis, which approaches fiction not as an ontological category but as a quality of communication, is useful for articulating how the self-reflective dimension in Hemon's novel contributes to the reading roles I have described as a combination of participation and observation. In her own study, Polvinen uses the case study of David Eggers's memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) to show how "communicative techniques typical to fiction", which includes self-reflective strategies, "initiate a moment of *joint attention* in readers". This

> form of participatory sense-making [...] involves readers' mental processing in a triad that includes the object of attention (the story events), another person's actions in drawing our attention to that object (the metalevel commentary) and self-referential processing of our own actions in the shared situation (awareness of our own role as readers).

Polvinen proposes that such communicative techniques may afford readers "an experience of interpersonal cognition, even when the artificiality of their communicative contact" (2022, 121) with the text is made explicit. If we apply this to the problematic of transnational reading, we may say that Hemon's readers are prompted to take both a participatory stance towards the experience narrated, and the stance of an observer. This also helps them observe the co-presence of the text's heterogeneous audiences, whose frames of experience do not cohere with their own. The heterogeneous audiences engage in shared attention and participatory sense making, but they cannot assume that they are immediately all part of the same conversation.

Finally, I would also like to illustrate how the gesture of foregrounding the unreliability of stories participates in the novel's project of indirectly conveying the memory of the Bosnian War. Rora is the main source of stories about the war in the novel, but he is also presented as a highly unreliable narrator who tends to practise hyperbolic fabulation. During the trip by the narrator and Rora to Ukraine and Moldova, Rora tells about a person named Rambo, a Sarajevan criminal known to Rora since adolescence, who led an armed unit during the Bosnian War. Rora tells Brik chilling stories about Rambo and suggests that when he returns to Sarajevo, he will be in danger, because he knows that Rambo was responsible for the death of an American war reporter called Miller. And then, when Brik and Rora return to Sarajevo, Rora is shot while sitting outside a café. The narrator interprets this as Rambo's revenge, piecing together a story based on Rora's earlier accounts. However, Rora's sister Azra questions this explanation and suggests that Rora had made up his stories about Miller and Rambo's wartime adventures. She

claims that Rora's killer was just a boy, who was shooting recklessly while on drugs, and who took Rora's camera to sell it for money.

Rora's death thus appears as a random act that may have had nothing to do with Rora's wartime activities, which recalls Lazarus's death from the bullet of a suspicious police officer. Both deaths take place in a context where it is tempting to find a single cause or plot line. The relational impetus of the narrative, however, directs us away from this simplistic causation and towards a perspective that sees both deaths as embedded in complex historical structures. The narrative structure of a frustrated mystery plot is used to portray history as a complicated network of relations that must be conveyed with more intricate modes of narration.

There is also an interesting twist earlier in the narrative, as Rora suggests that it was he who brought Brik along on their trip and not the other way around, so that Brik would write down his stories about the war (84). The importance of this inversion is also underlined by the remark of Azra the doctor that Brik's broken hand has to be taken care of as he will need it for writing (292).[9] This suggests that the memory of the Bosnian War is an important thread in the narrative we have been reading, despite all the emphasis on the unreliability of Rora's fabulations. Beyond its explicit narrative, the novel points to a realm of reality that can only be conveyed indirectly, just as Rora seems to withhold his real experiences of wartime Bosnia from Brik. The black pages that divide the sections of the text also evoke a sense of the unsayable by creating the repeated visual experience of facing a black wall.

However, the emphasis in the novel's narrative mode on a particularistic and relational historical narration acts against a generalising mode of reading that focuses on the suggestion that everything points to an unsayable, traumatic kernel, to violence as a transhistorical fundament. As I have tried to show, a lot of poetic energy is spent on directing readers to the level of historical particularity and relationality, as the narrative continuously portrays moments of disjunction between the different interpretive frames that people use to make sense of the world. Since there is such a strong sense of multiple perspectives in the text, the black pages evoking the unsayable could be read as contact points functioning in the logic of approximation, or what Michael Rothberg (2009, 39) has called the multidirectional sublime, directing attention to the historically specific level of circulation of discourses about traumatic histories. While certainly posing questions about the difficulty of representing violence directly, Hemon's novel brings this question to a

9 It is also interesting that this injury, which is here linked to the act of writing, comes about when Brik attacks the human trafficker with his fists. This seems like another reminder of the connections between the realm of violence and pain and the novel's textual universe.

specific historical level and highlights the challenges of mediating histories of trauma in an uneven world.

Conclusions

> Readers do half the work of a book's life; that means we must do half the heavy lifting of its project. (Castillo 2022, 50)

In her recent essay collection *How to Read Now,* US-based writer Elaine Castillo identifies the reading position of the "expected reader", whose position towards reading literature on remote contexts and experiences is described as the posture of being "the only reader I have ever been expecting". In a biting critique of this common habit of reading, she calls forth the "unexpected reader", who registers that what binds people together in the world is not "sham empathy that comes from predigested ethnographic sound bites passing as art in late capitalism" but "the visceral shock, and ultimately relief, of our own interwoven togetherness and connection" (Castillo 2022, 49–50).

Hemon's poetic endeavour is also characterised by the negotiation between an attempt to find a transnational mode for conveying historical experience and the recognition of the need to place checks on simplistic modes of translation.[10] Hemon's novel contributes to a cultural project of finding new literary and narrative forms for conveying the challenge of transmitting experiences and memories, especially those related to histories of violence, across a disjunctive transnational powerscape. I have analysed the novel as a born-migrated narrative that encourages reading modes marked by a combination of participation and observation. These reading modes do not simply immerse readers in remote experiences nor expect the text to translate those experiences into the readers' own frames of reference. The novel's narrative mode suggests that the awareness of the co-presence of other situated readers functions as an important horizon for the readers', engagement with the text. Readers are put in the position of not belonging to the

10 I would also like to note a gesture where Hemon refuses the translation of experience in his more recent autobiographical narrative *My Parents: Introduction/This Does Not Belong to You* (2019). The address to a you in the second part of the title can be read as a provocative reminder that the text should not be read as a highway to someone else's life world. In the actual narrative, Hemon writes: "This does not belong to you. But neither does it belong to those who might read it in Bosnian, simply because it all happened a long time ago, to a small number of kids whose later lives were subsequently filled up to the brim with events large and heavy, and some of those kids have grown up to die, some too soon, some too late, no one on time" (2019, 185).

sole implied readership, and they find themselves overhearing some conversations as they notice signals targeted at differently positioned readers.[11] Furthermore, Hemon's use of self-reflective strategies does not simply underline the constructed nature of historical narratives but contributes to the invitation to the reader to register the co-presence of other situated readers. The protocols of reading implied by the novel can be described as a combination of participation and observation, as readers are invited both to engage with historically situated experiences, and to recognise their own position in a heterogeneous transnational reading context in which readers' horizons of expectations do not cohere.

The novel's narrative is thus not fitted into the frame of translating foreign experience for a transnational arena by way of the universal. Instead, *The Lazarus Project* contributes to a cultural archive of poetic strategies that register how transnational interaction puts everyone in the position of "partial fluency" (Walkowitz 2015, 30) and "limited participation" (Phillips 2001, 5), and in the position of overhearing some conversations. *The Lazarus Project* is a narrative articulation of the coexistence of different memory collectives and readerships, which are linked through entangled historical legacies and transnational circulation of media, but which do not easily share experiences in a common conversation. The novel shows that while transnational migration brings these separate spheres into relation, there is no pre-existing "we" that would have convenient access to the whole world. What gets translated across borders is consequently not so much a historical narrative as a structure of experience and an invitation to read the world in the mode of limited participation.

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11 For a discussion of overhearing as a structure of experience and a mode of reading literary texts, see Kaakinen, "Entangled Histories", and Kaakinen 2017, 130–164.

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