

Call for papers

THE POLE(S): COETZEE AND OTHERS

Research seminar

17-18 October 2025

Research Centre for Transnational Literary Studies, Jagiellonian University in Krakow

RESEARCH CENTRE FOR TRANSNATIONAL LITERARY STUDIES

OŚRODEK TRANSNARODOWYCH BADAŃ LITERACKICH

In 2023, J.M. Coetzee published *The Pole* – the most complex and extensive means of addressing his lifelong concern with Polish cultural heritage to this day. In Coetzee's writing, Poles seem to appear everywhere. The likes of Frédéric Chopin, Zbigniew Herbert, Tadeusz Konwicki, Czesław Miłosz, Andrzej Munk, or Bruno Schulz show up in the writer's novels, essays, interviews, lectures, (e-)letters, notes, manuscripts, and research materials. Their presence is subtle, often bracketed, discreet and unassuming, and quite unexpected. However, once they materialise in his writing (as historical or fictional figures, as sources of inspiration or subjects of inquiry, or providers of intertexts), they usually become crucial points of reference and interpretative tools. Coetzee's preoccupation with Polish literature, culture, and history is certainly to be seen as part of a larger strategy: that of seeking new alliances and partnerships, of building an alternative "affective community," and of, simultaneously, de- and reprovincialising oneself and one's oeuvre. But it has also been an attempt to seek one's rightful ancestry: literary and cultural, as well as genetic. In *The Pole*, the pianist Witold Walczykowski is much more than just a literary trope or the subject of Coetzee's scholarly/readerly interest. Above all, he is yet another instrument of both self-defacement and self-creation – another "fiction of the self, version of the self."

Although the breadth of Coetzee's engagement with the Poles remains quite unprecedented, he is in fact one of many South Africans who since the beginning of the 20th century have responded, in various shapes and forms, to Polish history, visual art, and literature, as well as acknowledged Poland's influence onto their creative practice. At first, Poland – especially Warsaw and Vilnius with their vibrant publishing markets – served a number of South African Jewish writers and thinkers as a means to access and contribute to the Yiddish cultural infrastructure (e.g. Meyer Dovid Hersch, Hyman Polsky, Morris Hoffman). What is more, in various auto/biographical accounts produced by Central European immigrants to South Africa, it oftentimes featured as a site of nostalgic and nostophobic memory: both an idyllic *mein shtetle* and a bloodland. But it was only in the second half of the 20th century that Polish literature, visual art, and history started to enjoy a more prominent position. The establishment of a new post-WWII world order which put People's Poland and the apartheid regime in an antagonistic relation, the arrival of new generations of Polish migrants in South Africa, as well as the global success of Polish poetry (especially Miłosz and Herbert) resulted in the emergence of a complex network of alliances and occasional estrangement; and, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, a new sense of comradeship between the oppressed groups and communities in Southern Africa and the Eastern Bloc. While, in many instances, an almost simultaneous collapse of apartheid and communism brought an end to many cultural, political, and social coalitions and animosities that were forged in the aftermath of WWII, it also encouraged and fostered new forms of dialogue between the two countries and their cultural production – many of which continue until this day.

Taking Coetzee's *The Pole* as the seminar's major point of interest and analysis, its aim is to investigate South Africa's multifaceted engagement and dialogue with Poland – its history, culture, literary production, and heritage. What are the genealogies of this dialogue and what parallels (political, affective, identity-related) between Poland and South Africa do they reveal? What were (and are) the effects and motives for establishing transnational artistic and cultural alliances across the north-south/east-west divide? How have South Africans understood, perceived, and conceptualised Poland over the decades? How did the immigrants from the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Second Polish Republic, and People's Poland contribute to South African cultural, social, and political life? What kind of role has Poland played in South African cultural production and how to explain its appeal to a number of iconic South African writers and artists such as Dan Jacobson, Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, Deborah Levy or William Kentridge? Is it the search for phantasmagorical and lost home? Or, perhaps, a manifestation of an alliance of peripheries formed against the Eurocentric paradigms and shaped not only by the experience of subordination to oppressive regimes of power but also by a special kind of sensibility? How have the dominant and discourse-generating power centres mediated in establishing and sustaining the South African-Polish creative conversation? Finally, has the South African-Polish dialogue been a properly reciprocal relationship?

We invite proposals that will attempt to answer the above questions and address other links and connections between Poland, Central Europe, and South Africa. Suggested themes include but are not limited to:

- *The Pole* and its Polish tropes
- *The Pole* and Coetzee's other writings
- reception of Polish literature (e.g. Zbigniew Herbert, Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska) in South Africa (e.g. Lionel Abrahams, Dan Jacobson, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, J.M. Coetzee, William Kentridge, Deborah Levy, Denis Hirson, Douglas Reid Skinner, Stephen Watson, Peter Horn, Robert Berold, Kobus Moolman)
- Polish and Polish-Jewish visual culture in South Africa (Yehudo Epstein, Wolf Kibel, Tadeusz Kantor, William Kentridge)
- Polish and Polish-Jewish migrants to South Africa in the 20th century
- Warsaw, Vilnius, and the Yiddish writing in South Africa
- Poland, Central Europe and the South African imaginary
- transgenerational memory of Poland and Central Europe in South Africa
- Poland as a site of nostalgia and nostophobia in South African life-writing
- South Africa and the Second World – apartheid, communism, anti-apartheid, solidarity
- cultural transfers between Poland/Central Europe and South Africa in the 20th and 21st centuries
- reception of Central European literature and visual culture in South Africa (e.g. Aharon Appelfeld, Elias Canetti, Miroslav Holub, Bohumil Hrabal, Franz Kafka, Milan Kundera, Sándor Márai, Joseph Roth, and Josef Škvorecký)
- transnational affinities
- South Africans in Central Europe / Central Europeans in South Africa
- South African history, literature, and visual art in Poland

Proposals for **20-minute presentations**, consisting of a brief biographical note (including academic title and institutional affiliation) and a **150-word abstract**, should be sent to robert.kusek@uj.edu.pl no later than **15 June 2025**. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by 29 June 2025. The research seminar will be held on 17–18 October 2025 at the Institute of English Studies, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland.

Selected papers delivered at the research seminar will be published in the monograph *The Pole(s): Coetzee and Others* in the “TRANSitions. Transdisciplinary, Transmedial and Transnational Cultural Studies” OA books series published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlag (Brill). **Deadline for the submission of book chapters is 30 November 2025.**

Organisers:

**(UN)ACCIDENTAL
TOURISTS:
POLISH LITERATURE
AND VISUAL CULTURE
IN SOUTH AFRICA IN
THE 20TH AND 21ST
CENTURIES**



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