Born translated memories: Transcultural memorial forms, domestication and foreignisation

Eneken Laanes
Tallinn University, Estonia

Abstract
This article offers translation as a new model for conceptualising the transnational travel of memories that operates through transcultural memorial forms. It draws on translation studies, world literature studies and receptions studies to describe the domesticating and foreignising effects of memories that are ‘born translated’ and the ways they are received. The second part of the article discusses Sofi Oksanen’s novel Purge as a translation of memories of Soviet state terror through the transcultural memorial form of war rape and its foreignising effects in the local context of remembering of these events.

Keywords
born translated memories, domestication, foreignisation, transcultural memorial forms, transnational memory, war rape

In 2008 Sofi Oksanen’s novel Purge (Puhdistus), originally written in Finnish, shot up the international bestseller lists after it was rapidly translated into 25 languages, winning the European Book Prize, the Nordic Council’s Book Prize, the Prix Femina étranger, and many other awards both at home and internationally. The narrative deals with the historical trauma of state terror, deportation and sexual violence against women in Soviet Estonia after WWII and with sex trafficking in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. This engaged novel seems to offer itself as a universalist attempt to draw attention to women’s history and the gendered violence that women endure in the midst of political upheavals. But it is set in the specific historical and cultural setting of Stalinist Estonia and in its representation of violence against women it makes a veiled reference to war rape both in the Bosnian war in 1993–1995 and in Berlin in spring 1945. What are we to make of the alignment of these different historical instances of sexual violence against women through the transcultural memorial form of war rape? What purpose does it serve in the representation of the Soviet Estonian past? The use of war rape as a transcultural memorial form may help to make sense of and articulate local experiences, but Purge also seems to be part of a larger cultural movement in which peripheral histories are represented in aesthetic media of memory with a conscious effort to make those histories relatable for international audiences and to carry them across linguistic and national borders through the use of recognisable transcultural memorial forms. In drawing on Walkowitz’
The concept of ‘born translated’ literature that is written with global audiences in mind in this article I will call memories produced by such acts of remembering ‘born translated’ memories. These memories raise further questions. What does the cultural translation of Soviet state terror through the transcultural memorial form of war rape do to the understanding of that history? What is gained and what is lost in this translation?

Transnational memory studies and translation

The questions raised address the problem of ‘travelling memory’ (Erll, 2011b), which has been studied in the past decade in transcultural and transnational memory studies (Bond and Rappson, 2014; Bond et al., 2016; Crownshaw, 2013; De Cesari and Rigney, 2014; Erll and Rigney, 2018). Transnational memory studies has tried to move beyond the methodological nationalism of the memory studies of the 1990s, in which the work of Assmann (1995) and Nora (1997) conceived collective remembering as a vehicle for collective identity, mostly the collective identity of the nation (Rothberg, 2010: 6). It has expanded the narrow national focus and is interested in how memories of war, displacement and political conflict do not remain contained in the local or national communities but travel beyond their borders and circulate globally, how they are compared, and how communities borrow templates of memory from each other. In the past decade various concepts like cosmopolitan memory (Levy and Sznaider, 2006), multidirectional memory (Rothberg, 2009), palimpsestic memory (Silverman, 2013), prosthetic memory (Landsberg, 2004), globital memory (Reading, 2016), and others have been developed to make sense of the processes of comparative remembering and the travel of memories.

All these approaches highlight the huge potential that such memories have for solidarity between people, but they also draw attention to problematic ethical and political questions about the transnationalisation of memories. How do we differentiate between comparisons that lead to solidarity and those that aim to create a competition of suffering? If memories travel by using comparison and transcultural templates of memory, how can we preserve the historical and cultural specificity of memories and counter the dehistoricising and homogenising tendencies of global cosmopolitan memory?

Central to my discussion of the travel of memories in this article is Landsberg’s (2004) idea of prosthetic memory. Landsberg has famously argued that prosthetic memories generated by aesthetic media of memory, in particular by the experiential sites of cultural commodification and technologisation such as cinema and interactive museums, let people take on the memories of others and carry them like an artificial limb. Like this they make it possible for us to ‘remember experientially’ things that we have not lived through and that are not directly relevant to our collective identity. As such these prosthetic memories create empathy, contribute to an ethical relationship to alterity and help to form political alliances that transcend race, class and gender (Landsberg, 2004: 22). Landsberg’s approach has sometimes provoked ethical concerns over the identification with and appropriation of prosthetic memories, but my interest in the use of transcultural memorial forms in the articulation of local memories and their travel raises a different question, that of cultural translation that takes place in the process of prosthetic remembering.

The concept of translation has not been greatly theorised in transnational memory studies. One of the first attempts to do so was made by Rigney (2012) who addressed the question of how to create solidarity in Europe between people who do not have extensive historical knowledge about each other’s pasts by putting a lot of hope on the movement of ‘subtitled’ memories such as literature and film across what she, following Emily Apter, calls ‘translation zones’:
translation of narratives from one European translation zone to another creates a new memory at the point of destination that is prosthetic, but that nevertheless has power to convert a ‘distant’ reading of other European countries or migrant groups into a closer reading by staging a virtual contact with the singular experiences of individuals in another zone. (p. 622)

Translation of memories is conceived as a transparent transfer of the singular experiences of others, a smooth process where nothing is lost and all is gained.

The nexus of translation and memory has also been approached from the perspective of translation studies. Brodzki (2007) has shown how in the practice of interlingual translation there are embedded processes of cultural translation of memories. Brownlie (2016) has brought various memory studies concepts to bear on translation studies and has offered a framework for exploring the relevance of interlingual translation for various forms of memory of human rights. They both highlight the ways in which translation that inevitably includes transposition and transmutation is essential in the survival of memories (Brodzki, 2007: 2; Brownlie, 2016: 7).

In this article I will elaborate on the idea of cultural rather than interlingual translation of memories and will draw on translation studies and contemporary debates in world literature and reception studies to offer translation as a new model for conceptualising the transnational travel of memories that operates through transcultural memorial forms. It explores how these forms are used in the articulating local memories as a cultural translation of local experiences and the ways of remembering into a global idiom and vice versa. Aesthetic media of memory are particularly appropriate for such a study because they have a global mode of circulation and they allow the articulation, circulation and reception of the collective processes of cultural remembering to be studied. As will become clear though, such cultural translation is not limited to these media but also occurs in commemorative practices, monuments, digital memories and social and political discourses about the past. In the second part of the article I will illustrate my ideas about memory and translation by discussing Sofi Oksanen’s novel Purge more closely as an example of translated memories.

(Trans)cultural memorial forms

My use of the concept of memorial form is inspired by Rigney (2005: 16), who followed Foucault’s idea of the scarcity of discursive forms to highlight a gap between historical experiences and the memorial forms that are available in the given historical and cultural moment to allow public expression to be given to those experiences. The repertoire of memorial forms is scarce, culturally and historically specific, and continues to evolve over time. To handle the scarcity, older forms may be recycled or memorial forms may be borrowed or appropriated from other cultures. Rigney (2005) emphasises that even though the past of different groups is always specific to them alone, the mnemonic technologies and memorial forms used to remember the past are often borrowed from other groups and recycled (p. 24). Rigney (2005: 22–23) talks about memorial forms and models of remembrance as a language that is used to articulate historical experiences or a medium for experiences to be translated into, and she focuses on transfers, imitation, copying and translation.

Various other concepts have been developed to try to capture the enabling role of something like memorial forms in articulating and mediating experiences. Jeffrey Olick has argued that images of the past are path-dependant on the ‘genre memory’ of earlier commemorative practices, and depend not only ‘on the relationship between past and present, but on the accumulation of previous such relationships and their ongoing constitution and reconstitution’ (Olick, 1999: 382). Erll (2011a) has talked about ‘traditional and strongly conventionalised genres’ that ‘provide
familiar and meaningful patterns for experiences that would otherwise be hard to interpret’ (pp.
148–149), and she has also discussed travelling schemata, both visual icons and narratives (Erll,
2014: 32). Andrew Hoskins’s concept of ‘memory schemata’ addresses the ‘mediatisation’ of
memory in the mass media. Hoskins (2009) draws both on cognitive psychology, where the sche-
matas designate a framework developed from past experiences that is then used to make sense of
and shape new experiences, and on media sociology, where media templates are the frameworks
of past media events, images and sounds that are used to frame incoming news: ‘the frames,
images, and more broadly discourses (presumed by the news editors and producers to be familiar
to their audiences) that are routinely employed as often instantaneous prisms through which cur-
rent and unfolding events are described, presented and contextualised’ (p. 36). Whereas Erll and
Hoskins emphasise the cognitive necessity of memorial forms for understanding and articulating
experience, Bond (2015) uses her Halbwachs-inspired concept of ‘frames of memory’, which she
defines as ‘the representational schemata that provide a way of explaining, and containing, past
events’ (p. 11), to draw attention to the homogenising and remediating qualities of memorial
forms. Exploring the commemorative practices of 9/11 in the US, she shows that frames of mem-
ory inherited from the past ‘are not neutral instruments, but often function as vehicles of norma-
tive preconceptions and conventions that shade and, to some extent, determine the shape of the
memory articulated therein’ (Bond, 2015: 11). By drawing on diverse disciplinary histories, some
authors such as Erll and Rigney conceive memorial forms more in terms of figures, tropes and
images, while others like Bond and Hoskins see them as schemata and narrative templates.3

The focus on memorial forms offers an important corrective to the study of transnational mem-
ory as multidirectional, palimpsestic or prosthetic in many ways. Firstly, these concepts have
mostly concentrated on the explicit references and comparisons in the shared articulation of diverse
historical memories, but the focus on memorial forms allows for the study of the implicit relation-
ality between acts of public remembering in different parts of the world that is established by the
use of memorial forms that have been borrowed, appropriated and recycled from other cultures.
Secondly, the study of transnational memory from the perspective of memorial forms highlights
the need for meaning making. Borrowing and recycling memorial forms helps to articulate and
understand something that is new, confusing and difficult. It helps to translate experiences into an
understandable language. As always in translation, something is gained, which in this case is the
understanding of an experience, but as Bond argues when she stresses the importance of the nor-
mativity of frames of memory, something is lost, since it is understood in one certain way and not
in another. This means that the new is understood through the old, and that the foreign is under-
stood through the familiar, which leads me to my third and final point. Transcultural memorial
forms are important not only for articulating an experience, but also for making its memory travel
by making it understandable to people who share the same memorial forms. Transcultural memo-
rial forms are then also a language that can be used to culturally translate experiences in order to
make them known and intelligible to others.

Erll (2011b: 14–15) has addressed the question of the relationship between transnationally
available schemata, their travel, and the translational work they perform. She detects two-way
movement as transcultural schemata are localised and vernacularised, and so translated into local
repertoires. But local memorial forms may also be transnationalised, or ‘translated from local spe-
cificities into languages and practices that render those memories widely intelligible and relevant’
(Erll, 2014: 38). What get overlooked here is the way in which local memories are ‘born translated’
(Walkowitz, 2015) from the beginning, articulated through transcultural memorial forms that make
them travel in search of recognition for local histories. In this article I would like to illustrate the
ways in which transcultural memorial forms function as vehicles of travel for local memories, and
explore the ethical and political dilemmas linked to this movement.
What happens in translation? Domestication and foreignisation

Alongside the concept of memorial forms, the lessons provided by translation studies, world literature studies and reception studies could prove useful for the study of the transnational travel of memories. The first of these lessons is Venuti’s (1998, 2013) differentiation between domesticating and foreignising translation as two distinct strategies of translation in the target language. The domesticating translation adapts the text into the linguistic and cultural context of the target language, while the foreignising translation maintains its foreignness. These terms could be borrowed to describe the processes of the cultural translation of memories. To take the example of aesthetic media of memory, many internationally successful novels and films that centre on the local history of one part of the world, such as Sofi Oksanen’s *Purge*, are sometimes consciously made for global audiences and so they often use transcultural memorial forms and domesticate local memories into the language of global memory culture in order to make the local memories intelligible to those wider audiences. Often this domestication is an unavoidable prerequisite if the memory is to travel, and foreignisation is not an option here.

However, such films and novels have obligations to multiple audiences and they also circulate locally and are re-territorialised there. I propose to use the concept of foreignisation in a redefined sense to describe an aspect of the local circulation of such acts of memory. Because these art works are made for global audiences, they are sometimes foreignising in the local context that they represent, so much so that they create heated public debates about local history and memory. The process of cultural translation that globally oriented art engages in may simplify local history and implant certain memorial forms that can dehistoricise it. In one of the earliest discussions of the impact of the global Holocaust memory, Huyssen (2003) warned that ‘while comparisons with the Holocaust may rhetorically energise some discourses of traumatic past, it may also serve as a screen memory or simply block insight into specific local histories’ (p. 14). But the foreignising effects may also be a way for such art to open up important debates about new ways of approaching the local past and relating it to other contexts. As Brownlie (2016) puts it: ‘[translation] can be a site of fruitful cultural learning and exciting hybridity, and it can also be a site of manipulation, domination and reinforcement of othering stereotypes’ (p. 5).

It is important to point out that if we approach prosthetic memories as translations that use transcultural memorial forms as their language, the question arises of the source and the target of that translation. If the target is the global memory culture, what is the source from which the translation is made? If, as I argue, some representations of the local past that are rendered through transcultural memorial forms are foreignising in the local context of that past, what constitutes the original in relation to which the translation is felt to be foreignising? I want to make clear that when I talk about local context I do not have in mind the historical reality, some primordial ‘the way it really was’ but rather the local ways of remembering that reality. A representation of the past feels foreignising in the local context if it breaks with the established images of the past. As already noted, I do not think that foreignisation is problematic in and of itself. It may open up new and progressive ways of dealing with the local past. However, it may also have negative effects on local memorial cultures.

Extensive work has been done in memory studies on the role of trauma as a transcultural memorial form (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009; Kennedy, 2020; Tomsky, 2011). In a critical vein, some scholars have drawn attention to the limits of trauma as a memorial form in representing subjects like the long-term everyday violence of colonialism (Craps, 2012), and to how it influences the understanding of political subjects as victims (Fassin, 2008).

In her studies of the transnational travel of various local memories such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Indonesian killings of suspected communists in 1965–1966, Kennedy (2014, 2016) has tackled the domesticating effects of transcultural memorial forms. In the human rights
interventions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict she highlights the impact of the global memory imperative and the discourses of witness testimony, suffering and trauma. In focusing specifically on the Goldstone Mission, which was the investigation by the United Nations Human Rights Council into the Israeli attack on Gaza in 2008, and the popular remediation of its report in *The Nation* in 2011, she shows how that remediation de-territorialised and reframed the testimonies given in the context of the mission for the American public sphere. Kennedy (2014) argues that in that publication ‘the process of domestication occurs through the selection of testimonies that are included in the report, how they are framed and edited, the discourses they use, and the tropes they exemplify – all of which humanises the Palestinians and potentially makes it easier for Americans to identify with them’ (p. 70). While Kennedy studies the domestication of deterritorialised testimonies for the national American public, I argue that domestication can also happen in global memory culture through the tropes that circulate there.

With the Indonesian killings, Kennedy (2016) shows how Joshua Oppenheimer’s documentary film *The Act of Killing* draws on ‘cosmopolitan tropes, discourses and languages’ (p. 47) developed in the context of Hollywood cinema and the witness testimony developed in the context of the Holocaust to provide ‘a familiar discursive framework for the interpretation and reception of the film into transnational markets’ (p. 52). Instead of providing historical insight into the killings, which have not been officially remembered in Indonesia, it offers a version of memory that Kennedy calls, borrowing from Ulrich Beck, ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ (p. 59), or a global paradigm that is localised in specific nations, producing a novel local memory.

‘Born translated’ memories and their reception

A second set of ideas that may prove useful for studying the transnational travel of memories comes from contemporary debates in world literature on the question of (un)translatability (Apter, 2006, 2013; Cassin, 2014) and on the concept already hinted at of literature that is ‘born translated’ (Walkowitz, 2015). Rebecca Walkowitz’s notion of ‘born translated’ refers to texts that are written with a global audience in mind, and it tries to reverse the traditional debate that associates translatability with mediocre artistic value and the superficiality of the global. It valorises the cultural phenomena that are born translated for countering essentialist claims and for offering instead of identification ‘partial fluency, approximation, and virtual understanding’ (Walkowitz, 2015: 30). In that sense it enables us to rethink the traditional opposition of ‘authentic’ local memories and ‘artificial’ transnational memories. It also reverberates with Landsberg’s idea of prosthetic memory and helps us to appreciate the essential value of transcultural memorial forms in bringing local experiences to the global arena even if in a reframed form. But it also forces us to ask whether ‘partial fluency, approximation and virtual understanding’ are enough in the context of historical memory, in the way that they are in literature, and to explore the ethical and political consequences of the translation.

While Landsberg argues that prosthetic memories enable the past of others to be remembered experientially and Rigney (2012) hopes that ‘subtitled memories’ provide ‘a virtual contact with the singular experiences of individuals in another zone’ (p. 622), the question here is whether the memories are actually so ‘other’ at all, if they have to be domesticated in this way in order to travel, be consumed and be understood transnationally. The aim of the argument is not to embrace a conservative understanding of translation that would insist on untranslatability. As scholars of memory and translation have emphasised, translation is always unsatisfactory, but it is still the only way that knowledge, texts and memories can be disseminated and so can survive. But we still need to problematise an overly optimistic take on prosthetic remembering and argue for the need to study as well the questions of homogenisation and dehistoricisation that may occur in the process.
Walkowitz’s (2015: 30–31) study of born translated literature emphasises the importance of circulation, and of reading as a process of production and reception. Part of my proposal to study the transnational travel of memory with the concept of cultural translation is also a renewed focus on reception. In cultural memory studies we too often merely hold out hope for the potential of imaginative accounts of the past to create solidarity between people and communities, instead of actually scrutinising the often divergent meanings they produce in their journey through different parts of the world.7 In the context of world literature studies Kaakinen (2017) has drawn attention to incommensurable ‘historically or culturally concrete reading positions’ (p. 8) in the reception of aesthetic acts of memory. In order to trace these positions, the local and international reception of the aesthetic acts of memory should be studied much more carefully than has been the case so far, through reviews, public debates, artistic prizes, endorsement by official publicity and so forth. Through a more meticulous study of reception we could gain new understanding of what happens to memories during their transnational travel.

A more careful study of reception would also allow a rethink of the interrelationships between the different scales of cultural remembering, the local, the national, the regional and the global. Instead of understanding the global as a generic flat space covering the planet and largely following the patterns of global capitalism, we should take seriously Cheah’s (2016) question raised in the context of world literature studies, ‘What is the world?’, and we should explore how globally circulating memories create the global by their trajectories of circulation.

Born translated memories in Sofi Oksanen’s Purge

In the rest of the article I would like to analyse ‘born translated’ acts of memory and the domestication and foreignisation that they perform by discussing Sofi Oksanen’s novel Purge in more detail. Purge (2008) is a transnational novel written in Finnish by an author of Finnish and Estonian background and dealing with women’s history and the continuities of female suffering in different historical contexts in Eastern Europe. It has two intersecting plot lines, one dealing with Stalinist repression and sexual violence against women in post-WWII Estonia and the other with the trafficking of women in post-Soviet Eastern Europe in the 1990s. One of the protagonists of the novel is Aliide Truu, a woman with a difficult past who was raped by Soviet officials in the 1940s, but who later collaborated with them to help send her sister to the Gulag. Her traumatic past is brought back to Aliide in the 1990s when a Russian girl Zara, a victim of human trafficking on the run from her procurers, ends up in her farm and turns out to be her grandniece. The story is a thriller of trauma, betrayal, sacrifice and redemption that elaborates on female empowerment and solidarity between the female victims of historical sexual violence under state terror and in the age of global capitalism.

After publication the novel enjoyed immediate success both at home and abroad, winning all the major literary awards in Finland9 and quickly becoming an international bestseller with its publication rights sold for 25 territories.9 The Nordic Council Literature Award (2010), The European Book Prize (2010) and the Prix Femina étranger (2010) testify to its critical success abroad.10 Even though this is perhaps the most widely known recent cultural representation of Baltic history, it should not be taken for granted that its primary aim is to produce prosthetic memories specifically about the Estonian past. As I have been arguing above, it is crucial to study the reception of such imaginative accounts of the past so as to capture the different ways they can be and have been read.

In Britain and in North America the novel was marketed and sometimes also read as a genre novel, as part of the recent wave of Nordic Noir (Villalon, 2010). The cover image of the Atlantic Books 2011 edition clearly directs the readers towards such a reading of the novel.11 In many other countries the novel was read as a transnational novel about women’s history, most notably so perhaps in France, Spain and Italy where there is a strong tradition of, and interest in, novels about the
lot of women in the non-European world, mostly the Middle-East and North Africa (Bentivoglio, 2010; Noiville, 2010). In France, for instance, the novel received the prestigious Prix Femina étranger prize. In this case, Estonian history is merely a setting for discussion of more universal issues of the fate of women in the face of historical violence.

This reading of the novel is reinforced by a transcultural memorial form that Oksanen uses to tell the historically situated story of female suffering, the memorial form of war rape. In a multidirectional act of memory, Oksanen represents sexual violence against women in Estonia immediately after WWII by making reference not to an earlier historical event but to a later one, the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. Purge’s central scene of rape, where the protagonist is raped by NKVD officers during her interrogation, is borrowed from Drakulić’s (1999) novel S. A Novel About The Balkans that deals with war rape in the Bosnian war between 1992 and 1995. Like Drakulić, Oksanen uses the metaphor of the fly and represents the experiences of the victim in the form of psychological dissociation. Furthermore, in depicting the sexual relationship between the protagonist Aliide and her hated communist husband whom she had married for protection, Oksanen may have borrowed from the anonymous diary A Woman in Berlin (1954, Eine Frau in Berlin), which documents the rape of German women by the Soviet army in Berlin in spring 1945. By making reference to the important sites of transnational memory of war rape Purge draws attention to sexual violence against women in various wars and political conflicts, an issue that has sadly increased in urgency since the novel was published.

It must be stressed that Oksanen draws on topoi of transnational memory that are perhaps to this day neither fully established nor uncontroversial. While the Bosnian war was still being fought, local and foreign feminists disagreed strongly about how to stop the sexual violence against women, to interpret it and to offer justice to the victims. While American feminist MacKinnon (1993) blamed pornography in what she saw as the ‘genocidal rapes’, some local Chroatian anti-nationalist feminists such as Vesna Kesić, Slavenka Drakulić and others stressed the gendered aspect of violence rather than the ethnic aspect. They noted MacKinnon’s unfamiliarity with the local context and hence her blind, albeit perhaps unintended, complicity with the Croatian nationalist war propaganda that distorted the nature and the extent of the rapes to incite ethnic hatred (Kesić, 1994: 268).

In the decades since the end of the conflict, the memory of war rape has dwindled in the politically complex local situation of Bosnia-Herzegovina because of cultural norms and the ethno-nationalist frameworks of memory (Jacobs, 2017; Todorova, 2011). Jacobs (2017: 431) argues that the major memorial site of the Bosnian war, the Srebrenica memorial that was established in 2003 largely thanks to the activism of local women, represents female victimhood only in the form of widowhood and maternal loss, but not in the form of sexual violence. She blames that on the persistent patriarchal values and on the local ethno-nationalism that valorises the masculinist memory of war and reads the rape of women as the defiling of the nation, an occurrence that should best be silenced (Jacobs, 2017: 434).

That Oksanen’s access point to the memory of war rape in Bosnia is Slavenka Drakulić’s novel is not a coincidence. The trajectory of Oksanen’s drawing of parallels between post-WWII Estonia and the Bosnian war runs through Scandinavia, where many Yugoslavian war refugees were received and where Drakulić exiled herself after Croatian nationalist persecution of her and five other anti-nationalist Croatian feminists (Todorova, 2011: 8). Oksanen’s Scandinavian lens is also visible in her combination of historical sexual violence against women with contemporary sex-trafficking, awareness of both of which is generally very high in Scandinavia.

The recognition of the rape of German women by Soviet soldiers in spring 1945 has also been wrought with difficulties throughout the past 75 years and has been influenced by the politics of memory in Germany that was built on ‘negative memory’ (Knigge and Frei, 2002) of the
perpetration of the genocide of European Jewry that made it difficult to speak about German victims. The purported diary *A Woman in Berlin* was first published in English in the US in 1954. Its German publication in 1959 provoked a scandal in Germany and the author forbade publication of the text until the end of her life.

An important milestone in the recognition of the rapes was Helke Sander’s documentary *Liberators Take Liberties* (*BeFreier und BeFreite*, 1992), which interestingly makes reference to the Bosnian war, highlighting the importance of the reverberating contemporary context for the emergence of such memories. The reception of the film both in Germany and elsewhere was strongly divided along the lines of the different camps in the German politics of memory. The leading artists and scholars of cultural memory and film (Michelson et al., 1995) critically argue that by approaching the rapes from a universalist feminist perspective, Sander does not contextualise them in the wider history of WWII, such as the Holocaust and German women’s complicity in Nazism. Eric Santner (Michelson et al., 1995: 110) points out that in failing to do so, Sander risks being lumped together with the conservative revisionist camp in the German politics of history in the 1980s that was reinforced by the visit of president Reagan to Bitburg cemetery and the ensuing Historian’s Debate, and that focused on German victimhood. Relevant to my discussion is Santner’s conclusion that there may be an essential gap between the experience and the available memorial forms: ‘the film perhaps opens up more widely the gap between the trauma of the rapes and the available narratives and rhetoric we have to describe it’ (Michelson et al., 1995: 113).

As I have been trying to show, sexual violence against women has been difficult to remember in various historical contexts. In that sense Oksanen is one of those transnational actors who by representing Estonian history through the memorial form of Bosnian war rape lets the different histories emerge and resurface together. In doing so though, she also culturally translates and, as I will show, domesticates a lesser-known experience of Stalinist repression in the Baltic states into a quite specific and more widely intelligible memorial discourse.

When looking at the local reception of the novel, the question of what counts as local has to be answered first. The category of the local is open to debate, because the novel is local to Finland in terms of its original language and context of writing, while being local to Estonia in terms of its setting and the historical and cultural context represented in it.

In Finland the novel was read variously as a transnational novel about women’s history and as a universal narrative of psychological trauma, the setting of which could easily be ‘moved to another time, another culture’ (Korhonen, 2011: 36; see also Knuutila, 2010; Lehtimäki, 2010). The geographical and cultural closeness of Finland to Estonia meant though that *Purge* was also read as a historical novel about a previously untold Estonian history. Nevertheless, in most of the reviews Oksanen is not treated as an Estonian-Finnish author, but as a Finnish one who happens to have an intimate knowledge of Estonian history and culture. Grönstrand (2010) notes that Oksanen is in Finland ‘an interesting example of an author who hasn’t been associated with her background, and whose Finnishness has not been questioned’ (p. 42). Even though Oksanen has discussed *Purge* internationally in the context of her persistent criticism of Finlandisation, none of the reviews raises the question of the implication (Rothberg, 2019) of Finland in the Soviet Estonian history through their tacit compliance with the post-WWII Soviet Union.

In Estonia, *Purge* was read and discussed as a novel producing transportable memories that are specifically about Estonian history and that can be taken on by readers worldwide. Even before it was translated into Estonian in 2009 it was widely hailed as the novel whose international success would finally enlighten the world about the complexities of the history of WWII and the Stalinist repression in the Baltic states. This way of reading the novel is not unwarranted, as Oksanen has repeatedely presented herself as the one who can bring the Eastern European history of Stalinist terror out of the shadow of the memory of the Holocaust and European colonialism (Harding, 2015).
The Estonian reception of the novel is an interesting case that allows the foreignising effects of transnational novels in the local context to be discussed. After the initial euphoria about the huge international success of a literary text that dealt with local history, a belated public debate erupted around the novel in Estonia in September 2010, when one of the most renowned Estonian poets Kaplinski (2010) criticised the novel for presenting a black and white picture of Estonian history that was reminiscent of Stalinist Socialist Realism. While Venuti (2013) argues that the goal of foreignisation in the target language is to put ‘an ethnodeviant pressure on [domestic] values to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreigner text’ (p. 15), the problem in the local reception of Purge in Estonia lay not in the transnational novel about the Estonian past unhinging the national framework of remembering, but, on the contrary, in the way the novel reinforced this framework by pitting victimised Estonians against Russians in an extremely stereotypical way. For many local readers who were aware of the complicated histories of local collaboration with both the Nazi and Soviet regimes in Estonia in WWII, this was the first foreignising aspect of the image of the Estonian past. In this sense Purge presents a case of diaspora nationalism and testifies to the claim by De Cesari and Rigney (2014: 7) that the diaspora may be the most prolific field of national memory today.

Purge’s affiliation with national frames of memory in Estonia that have been characterised by the externalisation of the historical violence of WWII has been open to debate both in the novel’s popular reception in Estonia and in its international scholarly reception, and has largely depended on the reading of the ending of the novel. The novel ends when the protagonist Aliide, both a victim and a perpetrator, a woman who was herself raped by the NKVD during an interrogation but who also collaborated with the Soviets in sending her sister to Siberia, decides to save her grandniece Zara, who was born and raised in Siberia as a Russian girl but arrives in post-Soviet Estonia to bring Aliide face to face with her past.

In a response to the critical local reading of the novel in Estonia, Clarke (2015: 227) has argued that far from being complicit with the Estonian national politics of memory, Oksanen represents all her characters as both complicit with and victimised by the totalitarian regimes, and thus she warns against founding political communities on the shared experience of collective victimhood. Instead, pace Clarke, Oksanen forges opportunities for solidarity between different kinds of victim. In his reading Clarke focuses on the way that after her initial hostility, Aliide finds in herself the resources for solidarity with the victimised girl based on their common experience of sexual violence, but he disregards the fact that this act of solidarity is also a double act of killing and suicide.

A different reading of the ending is offered by Frank (2017), who discusses Purge as an example of what he calls a border novel, a type of the transnational novel that does not have a fixed abode, but is still deeply rooted in the local contexts by ‘respecting cultural diversity’ (p. 85). For Frank these novels offer a welcome alternative to the type of transnational novel termed the Euroburger by the Czech writer Topol (2010), whose novels deal with similar legacies of WWII and the Socialist regime in Czechoslovakia. However, Frank (2017: 88) also accepts that Oksanen deploys the strategies of national narratives. In contrast to Clarke he reads the ending of the novel as making Zara ‘carry, if not nationalist, then at least the national torch in the future’ (Frank, 2017: 93) and supports his claim by quoting the ending of the novel, which evokes the notions of blood relations, land, passport and citizenship.

Another foreignising effect in the Estonian reception of the novel resulted from the use of war rape as a domesticating transcultural memorial form to depict the Stalinist experience in Estonia. It was foreignising because Soviet occupation and Stalinist repression in Estonia had not been represented through the prism of sexual violence against women before. We know that sexual violence against women was present in Stalinist terror, particularly in the Gulag, but there are no specific historical studies that deal with that history. The sensitive nature of the experience means it has not been widely thematised in memory culture (Kirss, 1999: 25; Kurvet-Käosaar, 2003: 315).
In that sense the foreignising effect of the novel succeeded in unhinging the local frameworks of memory in a progressive way by opening up an important debate about the experiences of women in the largely male-dominated memory cultures of WWII and the Stalinist period in Eastern Europe (Kurvet-Käosaar, 2018: 187).

However, such a foreignisation may also have the problematic consequences of homogenisation and of erasing historical differences. By representing sexual violence against women under Stalinist state terror through the transcultural memorial form of war rape, Oksanen shows it as a widespread phenomenon, which it was not. She thereby implants a topos in the Estonian memory culture that dehistoricises the local experiences not only for the international audience, but also for the local one. While serious historical studies on the fate of women under Stalin are still needed in the Baltic states, what we have seen in the past decade is the repeated remediation of the transcultural memorial form in the Baltics. The plot element of the rape of Baltic women by Soviet soldiers or officials has become a stock image of virtually every popular and arthouse historical film or television series. This memorial form was non-existent less than two decades ago, but by now it has become almost the representative experience of Soviet repression.

Furthermore, considering how unexpected Purge’s story of female suffering was in the largely male-dominated memory culture in Estonia, it has been surprising how quickly it was embraced by the national politics of memory to support the paradigm of collective victimhood. Again, the cultural memorial forms are important here. In Purge Oksanen deploys Finland’s 19th century image of Suomi-neito, the Maiden of Finland, a version of the transcultural gendered image of the nation (Valenius, 2003). In Estonia, the equation of the female body with the national territory, and the rape with occupation, was quite new, but it was apparently attractive for the national politics of memory for supporting its strong externalising tendencies towards responsibility for the violence during and after WWII in Estonia.

To conclude my discussion of the possible foreignising effects of transcultural memorial forms it must be said that what transcultural memorial forms sometimes do is not only simplify and reframe specific historical events for the sake of global intelligibility. They may also implant into the local context memorial forms that were not present there before, such as war rape, and that may distort historical reality. In doing so, they may sometimes end up dehistoricising the local experiences not only for international audiences, but also for the local audience.

**Conclusion**

My discussion on the usefulness of the concept of translation for the study of the transnational travel of cultural memories highlights the need to scrutinise the processes of transmission in prosthetic remembering. As Brodzki and Brownlie, the scholars working at the intersection of translation studies and cultural memory, underline, translation, even if imperfect, is the only way in which memories can travel and have an afterlife in new, wider contexts. Yet, we need to explore both the enabling and the problematic domesticating and foreignising effects that result from the use of transcultural memorial forms in the articulation of local memories in different parts of the world as well as the ethical and political questions raised in this process of translation. A degree of domestication into global memory culture may be an inevitable prerequisite for travel. Furthermore, we cannot rule out that some foreignising aspect of local memory culture can carry over to the global in the process. Similarly, the foreignisation in the relation to the local source culture that born translated memories perform may open up new and progressive ways of dealing with the local past and relating it to other contexts. In my analysis of Sofi Oksanen’s Purge I have shown how the novel opened up an important debate about the experiences of women under Soviet state terror in the largely male-dominated memory cultures of WWII and the Stalinist period in Eastern Europe.
But we still need to problematise an overly optimistic take on prosthetic remembering and argue for the need to study as well the questions of homogenisation and dehistoricisation that may occur in the process, and that are problematic both ethically and politically. I showed how Purge represents sexual violence against women in post-WWII Estonia by subsuming it under the transcultural memorial form of war rape and thereby dehistoricising it. This means we need to stay attentive to the processes of simplification of local history and the implantation of certain homogenising memorial forms. This can be done not only by scrutinising the images of the past that globally oriented art works produce, but also, as my analysis of the reception of Purge has shown, the fierce public debates that these images provoke in different parts of the world. This would reveal the implication of born translated memories in various national and transnational politics of memory. My brief analysis of the international and ‘local’ reception of Purge has shown that the transnational and the global are actually made up of multiple itineraries in different nationally or linguistically defined local contexts, so that more careful study of these itineraries helps to tackle the ethical and political effects of born translated memories.

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Notes

1. While ‘transcultural’ and ‘transnational’ are often used interchangeably in memory studies, De Cesari and Rigney establish a slight difference between the two. While ‘transcultural’ sets the perspective for the travel and flows of memory, ‘transnational’ firstly stresses the entanglement of cultural practices with social formations and institutions, and secondly makes a case for the continuing importance of national borders in the movement of memory and ‘frictions’ between different scales of public remembering, whether local, national or global (De Cesari and Rigney, 2014: 3–4). In this article I will use ‘transnational’ to designate the processes of memory that move beyond and across national contexts and ‘transcultural’ to talk about phenomena that are common more specifically to many cultures, such as transcultural memorial forms.

2. The combined perspective of memory and translation is also taken by Kershaw (2019) in her study of the movement of literary memories of WWII from France to Britain in 1940–1960.

3. Olick (1999: 383) draws on Bakhtin, Bond (Bond, 2015: 173) evokes Hayden White’s types of narrative emplotment, and Hoskins is inspired by cognitive psychology and media sociology.

4. See Myskaja (2013) for an overview of the criticism of this differentiation, which does not, however, affect its effectiveness for memory studies.

5. Venuti (1995) similarly argues in relation to interlingual translation that foreign is not the ‘transparent representation of an essence that resides in the foreigner text and is valuable in itself, but a strategic construction whose value is contingent on the current situation in the receiving language. Foreignising translation signifies the differences of the foreigner text, yet only disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the translating language’ (p. 15).

6. Kennedy (2014: 68) interestingly notes that in order to perform the cultural translation the signs of the linguistic translation of the testimonies are erased and a domesticating linguistic translation is provided that eliminates the repetitions and awkward English expressions.
7. A recent exception of this that brings together the questions of reception and the transnational transmission of memories is Törnquist-Plewa and Sindbaek Andersen (2017).
8. The Finlandia Award (2008), The Runeberg Award (2009) and many others.
9. http://www.sofioksanen.com/books/purge/
10. http://www.sofioksanen.com/books/purge/
11. For the English language reception of the novel see Sadovina (2012). Oksanen has repeatedly rejected the idea that she is a genre author and has termed herself a post-colonial author instead (Derbyshire, 2011; Harding, 2015).
12. For comparison see Drakulić (1999: 31–32) and Oksanen (2010: 151–153).
13. The genealogy of the transcultural memorial form of war rape is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say, the use of war rape in Bosnian war since 1992 and in Rwandan genocide in 1994 contributed to the public recognition of earlier instances of gendered violence and rape such as Nanjing Massacre in 1937 and hence to the emergence of war rape as memorial form in the 1990s (Skjelsbæk, 2012; Yoshida, 2006). The United Nations Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict was opened in 2006. https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/about-us/un-action/
14. Interestingly, Kesić comments bring up the issue of cultural translation. She reads MacKinnon’s intervention as the misfired application of her American-born theory of pornography to the culturally different context of the Balkans. She claims: ‘To support her theories MacKinnon simplifies the historic, social, cultural and political characteristics of the region’ (Kesić, 1994: 271). For more on the debate see Tripp (2015: 300).
15. A Scandinavian film drawing attention to sex-trafficking from post-Soviet Eastern Europe and specifically Estonia is the film Lilje 4-ever (2002) by Lukas Moodysson, which is loosely based on the story of a Lithuanian teenager Danguolė Rasalaitė. For Oksanen’s Scandinavian connection see Roos (2014).
16. I would like to thank Riikka Juntunen for her help with researching the Finnish reception of the novel and with the translation of the quotes.
17. Kuosmanen (2008) writes in Etelä-Suomen Sanomat: ‘For Estonians, it is likely to act as a kind of ‘truth commission’ or a mirror of conscience, while for Finns it is a startling lesson about what could have been without the Winter War’. See also Kurikka (2008).
18. For Finlandisation as a concept of foreign policy referring to Finland’s friendly foreign policy towards Russia during the Cold War that impacted both domestic policy and political culture see Forsberg and Pesu (2016). For Oksanen’s critique of Finlandisation and its lingering legacies see Derbyshire (2011), Oksanen (2014) and Harding (2015).
19. For the controversy and the local reception of the novel see Laanes (2012).
20. Pettai and Pettai (2015) argue that ‘On the level of social memory, the greater distance that the Balts could place between themselves and the Soviets would also help foster a greater sense of pure victimhood. . . . The overarching victimhood paradigm has allowed Baltic policy-makers to project issues of culpability on to an ‘other’, thus externalising questions of moral accountability for the wrongs of the previous Communist regime’ (p. 63).
21. For a reading of the ending similar to Clarke see Lehtimäki (2010).
22. Frank does not deal with the local reception of the novel and thus does not address the criticism made against Oksanen’s exoticising representation of local colour such as the traditions of the vegetable picking and superstition (Kaljundi, 2010).
23. Topol’s comment about the Euroburger, a type of the novel without strong cultural specificity that can easily be related to by all readers whatever their cultural background, comes as a response to his interviewer’s question about irony and subtle cultural references in his novels that can be understood by Czech readers, but not necessarily by English readers. Topol (2010) explains: ‘I really don’t care about the person whom you name ‘an English reader’ or a ‘foreign reader’, it is not my job. . . it is the job of a journalist or a commentator to be understood anywhere. I write what I feel and what I want and what I need to write and that is all I care about. I am not interested in writing a Euroburger and I don’t really need everyone to get what I write’.
24. For a similar reading of the ending see Laanes (2012).
25. A pioneering act of memory in this field was Imbi Paju’s documentary *Memories Denied* (2005). For an analysis of the film as the catalyst for the discussion of sexual violence against women under Soviet state terror in Estonian memory culture see Laanes (2019).

26. The sexual violence in post-WWII Estonia had a different form and scale to that in Berlin in 1945 or Bosnia in the 1990s.

27. An exception is Monika Kareniauskaitė’s ongoing research project ‘Violence against women: from harassment to crime in 20th century Lithuania’ funded by the Lithuanian Research Council 2018–2021. For the first results see Kareniauskaitė (2019). For the experiences of Polish women in the Soviet Union see Jolluck (2002).

28. Three recent cinematic representations of the Soviet mass deportations from the Baltic states in the 1940s, *In the Crosswind* (2014) from Estonia, *The Chronicles of Melanie* (2016) from Latvia and *The Excursionist* (2013) from Lithuania, all represent sexual violence as the defining experience of the deportation, whereas until recently the memorial culture that was based largely on survivor testimonies and literary representations had focused on cold, hunger and destitution.

29. Oksanen was named Person of the Year 2009 by the leading Estonian daily newspaper Postimees. The novel topped Estonian Prime Minister Andrus Ansip’s Christmas wish list (Seaver, 2009). In 2010 Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves awarded Oksanen the Order of the Cross of Terra Mariana for special services to the Estonian Republic.

30. For Oksanen’s own comments on the use of the memorial form as unproblematic see Damian Martin (2012).

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**Author biography**

Eneken Laanes is professor of Comparative Literature and ERC Project Leader of Translating Memories: The Eastern European Past in the Global Arena (2020–2024). She is the author of *Unresolved Dialogues: Subjectivity and Memory in Post-Soviet Estonian Novel* (2009, Under and Tuglas Literature Centre), the editor of *Entangled Cultures in the Baltic Region* (special issue of *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 2020) and co-editor of *Novels, Histories, Novel Nations: Historical Fiction and Cultural Memory in Finland and Estonia* (2015, Finnish Literature Society, with Linda Kaljundi and Ilona Pikkanen).