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UNHINGING THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK

PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSNATIONAL LIFE WRITING



editors

Babs Boter, Marleen Rensen
& Giles Scott-Smith

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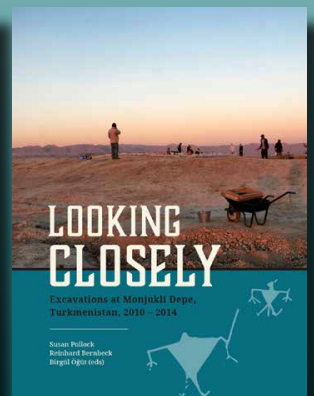
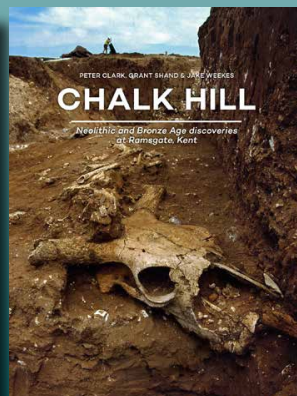
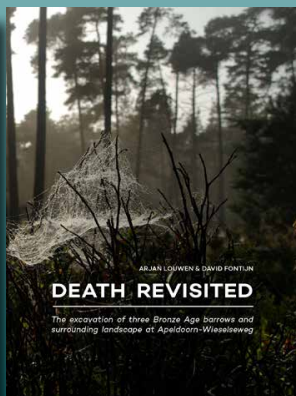
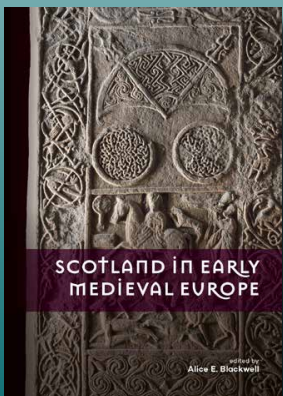
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**Babs Boter, Marleen Rensen
& Giles Scott-Smith**

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Introduction

Babs Boter and Marleen Rensen

Living in an increasingly transnational world we are no longer surprised to learn that many of our colleagues in academia focus their research on subjects, texts and ideas that transgress national boundaries.¹ They examine the effects of social media on diasporic communities,² or study the lives of those involved in internationally operating criminal, terrorist or social activist networks.³ They carry out surveys on UN fighters working abroad, analyse transnational movements of fascism and feminism, or investigate a European-based resistance movement during the second world war.⁴ They

1 We are grateful to Susan Legêne for sharing her comments on a first draft.

2 Koen Leurs, *Digital Passages: Migrant Youth 2.0. Diaspora, Gender & Youth Cultural Intersection* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015); Bart Cammaerts, "ICT-Usage Among Transnational Social Movements in the Networked Society: To Organise, to Mobilise and to Debate," in *Media, Technology, and Everyday Life in Europe: From Information to Communication*, ed. Roger Silverstone (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 53-72.

3 Francis J. Pakes, *Comparative Criminal Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Efstathios D. Mainas, "The Analysis of Criminal and Terrorist Organisations as Social Network Structures: A Quasi-Experimental Study," *International Journal of Police Science & Management* 14, no. 3 (September 2012): 264-282; Tatah Mentan, *Dilemmas of Weak States: Africa and Transnational Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); William A. Gamson and Micah L. Sifry, "The #Occupy Movement: An Introduction," *The Sociological Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (March 2013): 159-228.

4 David Samuel Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Samuel Huston Goodfellow, "Fascism as a Transnational Movement: The Case of Inter-War Alsace," *Contemporary European History* 22, no. 1 (February 2013): 87-106; Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, eds., *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945* (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); Gay W. Seidman, "Gendered Politics in Transition: South Africa's Democratic Transitions in the Context of Global Feminism," in *Globalizing Institutions: Case Studies in Regulation and Innovation*, eds., Jane Jenson and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (New York: Routledge, 2018): 121-144; Ranjoo Seodu Herr, "Can Transnational Feminist Solidarity Accommodate Nationalism? Reflections from the Case Study of Korean 'Comfort Women,'" *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 41-57; Ranjoo Seodu Herr, "Reclaiming Third World Feminism: Or Why Transnational Feminism Needs Third World Feminism," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 12, no. 1 (March 2014): 1-30; Ismee Tames, "Transnational Approach to Resistance: Turntable the Netherlands," Working Paper (Amsterdam: Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 2016).

explore a transnational framework for understanding the experiences of 1930s Jewish refugees, or the 20th century globally enmeshed lives of Australians.⁵ Still others write the lives of transnational colonial individuals and families.⁶

This cutting-edge research asks how individuals and groups experience a globalised world, and what kinds of transnational consciousness and identity arise from living in a world where national borders can more easily be transgressed yet seem so significant at the same time. It questions which tools, instruments, and frameworks we should employ when studying the lives and textual expressions of subjects who are increasingly mobile and moving.

A first book-length collection bringing together a great variety of research projects approaching lives from a perspective of global mobility was *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700-present*.⁷ Its case studies focused on the ways in which, since the 18th century, national identity has been destabilised for a whole range of subjects, from “the elite to the subaltern.” Our current volume moves on from there. It offers a wider scope in the sense that it focuses on subjects beyond the English-speaking world; places its case studies in a more specific framework of Life Writing studies, and focuses on the late 19th and 20th century lives of men and women. Working from an interdisciplinary angle it explores how these narrated lives add innovative transnational perspectives to the entangled histories of the two world wars, decolonisation, the Cold War and post-colonialism.

Life writing and identity

Life Writing is an umbrella term for a wide range of writings about personal life experiences, such as biography, autobiography, travel writing, memoir, letter, diary, oral history and auto-fiction. It challenges the traditional genres of biography and autobiography that privileged the history of great (white) men, military leaders, men of state, intellectuals and artists. Building on the democratic ideal that all lives and modes of life documentation are of interest and deserve recognition, Life Writing studies aims to be more inclusive across subjects and genres. In the last few decades it has grown into an active field of research where much work has been done to write and study the lives of ‘ordinary citizens,’ ‘women’ or ‘postcolonial subjects’ as relevant historical actors in their own right.⁸

5 Debórah Dwork, “Flight and Exile,” in *A Companion to Nazi-Germany*, eds., Shelley Baranowski, Armin Nolzen, Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018): 449-463; Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, Angela Woollacott, eds., *Transnational Ties: Australian Lives in the World* (Canberra: Anu Press, 2010).

6 Robert Bickers, *Empire Made Me: An Englishman Adrift in Shanghai* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Patricia Ann Schechter, *Exploring the Decolonial Imaginary: Four Transnational Lives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Caroline Drieënhuizen, “Social Careers Across Imperial Spaces: An Empire Family in the Dutch-British World, 1811-1933,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 44, no. 3 (2016): 397-422.

7 Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700-present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

8 Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Margaretta Jolly, ed., *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*. 2 vols. (London: Routledge,

Both in the academic and non-academic world the interest in Life Writing has been given a boost. Within the Humanities the recently signaled so-called Biographical Turn and Autobiographical Turn offer evidence that scholars such as biographers and historians increasingly take into account the role of individual actors.⁹ Occasionally moving away from investigating large social and political structures, they have come to focus more on personal experiences. Outside of academia we also recognise a renewed attention for individual subjects. Life stories are immensely popular and figure on top of many bestseller lists. This is significant, as it has now been widely established that life stories have particular societal relevance, as they emotionalize history and appeal to the readers' faculties of empathy and identification. Consequently, they are increasingly employed to claim citizenship or protect human rights through an 'ethics of recognition' across nations.¹⁰ In addition, life stories are particularly valuable sources that offer intimate access to the complex layers of identity. They help gain insight into the multiple ways in which individuals negotiate their attachments to local, regional, national and transnational communities. While the national framework is still dominant in the Life Writing field, new transnational approaches are being developed to give a more adequate representation of the lives of individuals who literally crossed national borders, or who implicitly or explicitly renounced a framing of themselves as national citizens.

Transnational lives

In the 19th and 20th centuries, scores of well-known artists, intellectuals, and politicians, but also ordinary citizens such as labor migrants, exiles, refugees, expatriates or frequent travelers, each with their own unique set of expectations, exchanges and evaluations, operated outside their own nation's boundaries, or negotiated with them. Many left traces that we can use to construct their lives – lives that questioned and transgressed the national boundaries that existed or emerged since the 19th century. The chapters presented here trace the casual border-crossing encounters of everyday life, the building of familial, socio-cultural and professional networks outside of the national sphere, and the travel and translations of life stories as they have been recorded in different media. Jointly they make a strong case for reclaiming personal narratives that have been passed over by more orthodox, often nation-state-focused approaches in which the biographies of great political leaders were incorporated into imaginaries of the nation. In conjunction they also offer an analytical lens that enables researchers to go beyond the taken-for-granted mono-national framework. In order to unhinge our national framework(s), Life Writing scholars need to rethink our concepts,

2001); Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run* (Michigan: Michigan Publishing Services, 2016); Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

9 See, for instance, Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, and Jonne Harmsma, eds., *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016).

10 Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Gillian Whitlock, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

methodology and standard narratives.¹¹ That way they will be able to loosen up the restrictive context as it has been selected and constructed by (literary) historians, and study the transnational subjects, their agency, social networks and discursive contexts in a new light.

By drawing on personal records and other primary sources, the chapters in this book release many layers of subjectivity otherwise lost, enabling a richer understanding of how individuals move through, interact with and are affected by the major events of their time. They follow the trajectories of individuals where the transnational dimension lies at the surface because they migrated, went into exile or experienced the fluidity of borders in the turbulent history of the 19th and 20th centuries. They also investigate the cross-border connections in the lives of people who were firmly rooted in their homeland but travelled, worked or studied abroad, had international friends and acquaintances or used ‘foreign’ media. In addition the chapters situate transnational explorations in a configuration that includes categories such as class, gender, religion and race, arguing that these categories are not bound by the nation-state frame. The case studies at hand thus contribute to an ‘unhinging’ of the national context of (literary) history-writing.

The unhinging theme is a central theme of the book. It involves a challenging or even destabilizing of the national frame. The transnational quality of these subjects’ lives does *not* mean that in their lives national identity and the nation-state have become unimportant, let alone that the subjects lead post-national lives that freely float in a universe of denationalised and deracialised discourses. Whereas they do negotiate, expand and transgress national and cultural boundaries, the subjects studied are not outside of a national paradigm or framework, even if their life histories are considered to be non-national or anti-national. Indeed, they may be firmly rooted in particular localities and local, regional or national networks, and may even at the same time reinforce national boundaries. National and transnational allegiances can add up, overlap and conflict.

Case studies

The various case studies in this volume take up transnational Life Writing in four different ways, which correspond with the four sections of the book.

Section One, “Archival Traces,” includes three studies of women who, through the diverse and fragmentary records that they have left behind, enable us to taste the social norms, prejudices, and cultural violence of their colonial environments. Their personal accounts bring to life the meaning of crossing boundaries related to nation, citizenship, and race, and how they both negotiated and challenged the social and cultural dividing lines of everyday life, taking life-changing decisions to do so. The fact that the ‘archive’ of their beliefs and actions is incomplete only adds to the sense of fragility of human experience, and emphasizes the task of the researcher to piece together the traces to recreate each subject. Ernestine Hoegen’s chapter focuses on the Dutch figure Mieke Bouman-van den Berg who lived through the transformations of decolonisation in Indonesia in the 1950s. After her husband’s departure from Indonesia she took up counsel for

11 Ulrich Beck, *Power in the Global Age: A New Global Political Economy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005).

the defence of two Dutch businessmen who had been arrested in Indonesia in 1958 for having allegedly attempted to undermine the Indonesian state. The international campaign she started to gain support for the case brought her all the way to America. Evidence shows that her desire to be recognised and taken seriously as a woman drove her border-crossings in a fundamental way. Her letters show that she was both entitled to, and developed, the individual skills and abilities, networks, resources and opportunities to transgress the gender, socio-legal and national conventions and boundaries of her time. Eveline Buchheim studied fragmentary archival sources and private documents about the wartime relationship of the Dutch-Belgian Marie-Thérèse Brandenburg van Oltsende-Geysens, a member of the colonial elite in Indonesia, and the Japanese officer Sakata Minoru. Buchheim subtly pieces together the contested evidence of a wartime marriage that van Oltsende-Geysens, under suspicion of collaboration after the war, vehemently denied. Buchheim concludes that the position in which the two protagonists found themselves was much more complicated than could have been expected based on historical writings. The time of war challenged the strict borders between enemies and turned colonial networks into quite unique transnational ones. Barbara Henkes examines the practices of ‘doing race’ in the daily life of a white Dutch migrant woman in 1950s South-Africa. Analysing the woman’s perspective on the racial divide and policies of apartheid in the letters she weekly sent to family in the Netherlands, Henkes demonstrates how the protagonist gradually familiarised herself, and identified, with the dominant politics and culture of racial inequality. Henkes further explores how the letter-writer negotiates the ambiguities that the racial order of apartheid society implied, looking closely at what she tells and what she ignores.

The second section, “Networking,” includes research that deals with a type of transnationality that is more collectively constructed, in the respective networks of a writer, a social activist and an intellectual. Diederik Oostdijk shows that for the Jewish American poet Adrienne Rich travelling abroad, frequenting international circles and establishing friendships with foreign artists such as the Dutch poet Judith Herzberg intersected with issues of language. Translations of her own or other writers’ poetry helped broaden her horizon as much as travelling, and helped Rich to become more emphatic and reach out to disenfranchised women and men around the globe. Rich took themes and motifs from the poems she translated and made them her own. The act of translating foreign literature thus profoundly shaped her poetic imagination, her expression of self in poetry, and her transnational life. Lonneke Geerlings researched the visit that African American leader W.E.B. Du Bois and his wife, Shirley Graham, undertook to the Netherlands in September 1958. Geerlings takes up a multi-biographical approach to connect the Du Boises, the Suriname-Dutch communist activists Otto and Hermie Huiswoud, the Dutch translator Rosey Pool, and the Dutch antiquarian Paul Breman. In combination with an analysis of the visit this approach allows Geerlings to consider the Netherlands as a contact zone of Black Atlantic networks. Thomas D’haeninck introduces digital humanities techniques such as Nodegoat to explore the international correspondence networks of Belgian intellectual Emile De Laveleye across space and time from the 1850s to the 1890s. De Laveleye

expanded his fields of expertise as well as his agency and reach by travelling abroad and exchanging letters. He actively participated in debates related to social and political reform, and was simultaneously involved in Catholic and socialist debates, cross-fertilising both as a consequence. D'haeninck's open-source network analysis and visualisation software package provide the means to link sources in new ways, and to establish De Laveleye, the intellectual-cosmopolitan, as a mediator between several ideologies, disciplines and nation-states.

Section Three, "Circulation," presents a set of chapters that examine how, instead of lives, texts, archival narratives and/or bodies circulated beyond the borders of the nation-state. Marijke Huisman rhetorically asks whether transnational Life Writing needs a human subject. Objects are used, exchanged, traded, and re-used. They are central to the transnational flows of trade that typify global capitalism, and affect all subjects, including those who themselves are not mobile. Employing the theoretical notion of 'banal cosmopolitanism' Huisman explores African American educator and writer Booker T. Washington's 1901 biography *Up from Slavery*, which travelled around the world, and discusses the ways in which the text impacted the transcultural connections between the United States and the Netherlands, including its colonies. Ciraj Rassool discusses various areas of biographic dispute, one of which involves the proclamation of personhood and the composition of life narratives for South Africa's Khoisan subjects whose bodies and bones were unlawfully unearthed, commodified, and integrated into the collections of natural history and anthropology museums as objects of race. Rassool's biographic work tells the story of Klaas and Trooi Pienaar whose bodies had been disinterred from their graves in South Africa's Northern Cape in 1908. The Pienars had lived lives of dispersal, and their dead bodies were relocated across national and continental borders to be turned into museum objects. Nancy Mykoff's chapter illustrates that circulated life narratives can serve as an educational and comparative tools, as they enable students to identify and establish connections between life experiences across time, nations and continents. Mykoff concludes that such texts can have great value for teaching history in a transnational perspective. Drawing from her own teaching experiences, she shows how 19th century ex-slave narratives and migrant memoirs from the U.S., dealing with the trafficking of humans, their unjust treatment, and social exclusion, can make the experience of violence in transnational lives ingenious and powerful in an educational setting. Edy Seriese's unique archival project titled *Aangespoeld* ('Washed up') saves for posterity the personal narratives of Indonesians who were partially assimilated to, but also rejected by, Dutch society. Seriese allows the archive's 'inhabitants' to connect in significant ways. As a signifier for the lives and cultural heritage of these Indonesians she uses the figure of Jan Johannes Theodorus Boon (1911-1974), alias Tjalie Robinson. Boon was of Dutch-Indonesian parentage and a prolific writer who in 1958 founded the journal *Tong Tong* in the Netherlands. Thus Seriese offers an innovative, comparative approach to understanding the wider significance of transnational, (post)colonial lives.

The fourth and final section of this volume, "Positionings," includes two studies that stretch the borders of transnational Life Writing, as they point out how transnationalism as a phenomenon can be a matter of fabrication and construction.

Individuals manoeuvre themselves through, within and across different milieus, adapting to and accommodating social norms as a way to survive, to interact, and also to advance. Culture, gender and class differences accentuate these experiences, causing some to create their own hybrid ‘positions’ as a means to allow their characters to flourish and their integrity to remain intact. The two chapters in this section focus on writers who responded to the challenges of being a transnational subject, both playing with and rejecting the expectations that this caused. Monica Soeting’s study of the work of Dutch writer Cissy van Marxveldt centers on one specific meaning of the term transnationalism, namely the cosmopolitan outlook of the higher classes to feel at home in many cultures, classes and countries as a result of their financial means and higher education. Van Marxveldt transgressed, or wished to transgress, social borders in order to be acknowledged as a member of the upper middle class with a cosmopolitan taste, the ability to speak different languages, and a sophisticated knowledge of the international literary canon. For Van Marxveldt transnationality was a status symbol and immaterial value, and an important aspect of her complex practice of self-fashioning as a writer and as a member of the social elite. Van Marxveldt’s cosmopolitanism and social mobility did not only intersect with class but also with gender, as social mobility required adopting the middle class epitome of women as nurturing wives and mothers, despite the cosmopolitan quality of their lives. Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar highlights the ambivalence towards transnational identity in Hafid Bouazza’s autobiographical essay *A Bear in Fur Coat* (2001/2004). In this ironic and playful text Bouazza, an author who was born in Morocco and moved to the Netherlands in the late 1970s, criticizes the labels of ‘Moroccan-Dutch’ or ‘migrant writer’ which have been imposed on him. Moenandar demonstrates how Bouazza finds a home in language as a transnational space which moves beyond the cultural dichotomies of Moroccan-Dutch, barbaric-civilised, rational-irrational, and Muslim-non-Muslim.

Two threads of the volume bind the case studies together. One is its strong connection to the Netherlands. Not all, but the majority of the chapters are in one way or another linked to a country that makes for a particularly well-positioned stepping stone into the transnational arena: the long-winded Dutch involvement in global histories of exploration, slavery, colonisation and decolonisation, international trade and migration constitutes the backdrop, or even the setting, of many of the case studies presented. The second thread running through all chapters is the practice of constructing identities, as carried out by the subjects themselves as well as the researcher. Each case study seeks to tease out and analyse the “various ways transnational settings and dynamics affect the construction, negotiations and reproduction of identities.”¹² How do the subjects engage in self-narration and emplot their life narratives? How do they position themselves vis-à-vis nation states, and their borders? Some may fashion themselves as crossing boundaries easily, as cultural mediators or brokers. Others also present themselves as being implicated in the European colonial project, framed by a colonial discourse that is appropriative and imperialist. The ways in which they present the nation’s others may hint at how inclusive or exclusive their sense of nation is. The subjects may

12 Stephen Vertovec, “Transnationalism and Identity,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27, no. 4 (2001): 573.

embrace a colonial ideology or discourse, but also profess a more progressive view of world citizenship. This suggests that we could detect various national, colonial, and global layers of citizenship, some more progressive than others. This collection therefore offers a diversity of methodologies to analyse sources that were perhaps originally selected, processed, and framed in a national framework, but are now being employed in a much more inventive, comprehensive and creative fashion. As the Afterword by Giles Scott-Smith points out, this produces not only surprising but also challenging results for the practices of history itself, and its potential to subvert ruling paradigms.

In all processes and practices of (self-)narration, of course, class, language, gender, and race and their concomitant discourses play a role. Thus it is not only imperative to look at the subjects' affiliations and loyalties in terms of nation. Subject positions are never just based on (trans)nationality, but are established in an intersectional manner.¹³ The chapters written by Barbara Henkes, Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar, Ciraj Rassool and Monica Soeting especially show that transnationality intersects with gender, class, race and ethnicity. The case studies we present here, of transnationality and its intersections with class, language, gender, race, and other markers of difference, aim to reframe national and literary histories. The life stories, in combination with others, provide an intimate access to narrated experiences – published texts, archives, oral histories – of living through the 19th and 20th centuries, and to complex processes of identity construction. As a collection of life-histories they contribute to a more complicated view of the ambivalent and complex histories in which, paradoxically, national identity has become a dominant discourse in a globalizing world.

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13 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241-1299.

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