

3 Knowledge, the ‘Moment of Writing’ and the Simulacrum Diaries of Johanna Brandt-Van Warmelo

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Diary-writing is usually defined around assumptions about the temporal and spatial circumstances of writing, which underpin what kind of knowledge diaries are understood to ‘hold’. The epistemological status of diaries is rooted in an assumed ontology, concerning the time/space of their writing and the temporal location of their writer in relation to the ‘entries’ written in them. This paper explores ‘what happens’ to the knowledge a diary is seen to hold when its ontological basis is disturbed by its assumed ‘present-ness’ being shown to be an artful (mis)representation. The case study discussed concerns the published diary *Het Concentratie-Kamp van Irene* [The Irene Concentration Camp] (1905), and also the manuscript diary, and the letters written concurrently with the preparation of the former for publication, of a South African woman, Johanna Van Warmelo (her pre-marriage name). The diary deals with the author’s experiences of six weeks spent as a volunteer worker in Irene concentration camp during the 1899-1902 South African War. In the secondary literature, knowledge-claims about the Van Warmelo diary not only assume referentiality but also the temporal interrelationship of ‘the moment of writing’ with ‘the scene of what is written about’. In particular, the assumption is that the time of its writing, narrative time in a diary-entry, and the temporal location of the writer in relation to the diary-entries, are all ‘of the moment’. However, important temporal disjunctures exist between the manuscript and the published diary. Detailed examples of this are examined by unpacking the ‘moments of writing’ of the manuscript and the published diary, by reference to family letters written by Brandt-Van Warmelo (her post-marriage name) over the period the diary was being prepared for publication. In doing so, we develop the idea of a ‘simulacrum diary’ in thinking about the relationship between the published and manuscript diaries and the complexities of their moments of writing.

Introduction: Diaries, Knowledge and the Moment of Writing

The diary as a genre form is usually defined around assumptions about the temporal and spatial circumstances in which diaries are written. It is this that underpins the epistemological status accorded them and thus the knowledge-claims which diaries can be used to support. Succinctly, this epistemological status of diaries is rooted in their assumed ontology, which rests upon both the time and space of their writing. Certainly the earlier assumption that referentiality characterises what is written about in diaries, that is, that there is a one-to-one relationship between the external 'real world' events and what is written about in diary-entries, has been widely questioned over the last three decades, along with questioning the referentiality of other auto/biographical forms or genres. However, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to the relationship between 'the moment of writing' a diary-entry, and the point in time at which the events in these diary-entries happened, that is, 'the scene of what is written about'.

The complexities of time in the diary-form can be indicated using terms developed by Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988, 2004). There is a mixture of present-present, present-past and present-future in the narrative time within diary-entries, and there is also a complex relationship with contextual time, concerning both the time that the events being written about occurred, and also the time of the 'moment' in which these are written about in a diary-entry. However, while narrative time can range across present-present, present-past and present-future, the 'dailyness' of diary-writing is usually seen to provide a guarantee of almost immediate access to 'the moment of writing' a diary-entry, with 'the scene of what is written about' seen as closely temporally connected with this. That is, time may pass between the moment of writing, and the scene that is written about, but its duration is perceived as short because closed on a daily basis. The 'present-ness' of each of these movements in narrative time is seen as guaranteed by the diary form, treated as relatively free of retrospection and thus more strongly referential than other forms of life-writing. And relatedly, while diary-entries might well involve description of or reflection on things gone by, the assumption is that if there is a temporal gulf between the scene of occurrence, and the moment of writing about it, then this will be made clear in a diary-entry, rather than (mis)represented as having occurred 'at the time'.

We are interested in 'what happens' in an analytical sense to the knowledge associated with diaries when their ontological basis is disturbed, in this present discussion when the temporal structure or narrative time of a diary comes under question and its apparent 'present-ness' is shown to be an artful (mis)representation. We examine this by confronting the 'moment of writing' in the diary with 'the scene of what is written about' concerning a collection of letters written over the same period of time as a particular diary we use as a

case study, rather than by reference to any putative ‘objective’ external events. This case study involves the published diary, and also the manuscript diary, and the letters written concurrently with the preparation of the former for publication, of a South African woman, Johanna Brandt-Van Warmelo.¹

Knowledge and the Van Warmelo Diary

Het Concentratie-Kamp van Irene (Brandt-Van Warmelo, 1905) is presented as precisely the *diary* of Johanna Van Warmelo, a young woman who worked as a volunteer at Irene concentration camp near Pretoria during a two-month period from mid-May to mid-July 1901, during the South African War and before her marriage to Louis Brandt.² The book claims to be a record of the diarist’s own experiences at Irene camp but also claims to present the experiences of other women too, with Brandt-Van Warmelo declaring that “what stands written up herein is also the experience of thousands of mothers of the South African people.” (Brandt-Van Warmelo, 1905: 123). And she also explains that *Het Concentratie-Kamp...* concerns “my experiences of the two months, when I acted as a Voluntary Nurse in the camp at Irene” and that the publication of her diary would be “received with interest by those who still sympathise with the plight of our country and people, and would be of some value for the history of South Africa.” (Brandt-Van Warmelo, 1905: Foreword).

Also in its Foreword, Brandt-Van Warmelo declares that the book is “my diary, written in the camp itself”, and that the diary is more about herself than she would like, with this resulting from writing a personal diary in which you “pour out your heart” without a thought of future publication (Brandt-Van Warmelo, 1905: Foreword, 11). She adds that, had she known that the diary would later be published, she would have written more fluently and skillfully as well as less personally. These various disclaimers strongly imply that the published diary is exactly the same as the personal, ‘unskillful’ original, although she does add that the published book contains only half the original diary, which contained too much about her own complaints and suffering. Thus one clear implication is that only ‘personal’ material has been removed, and another is that the diary has been *shortened* rather than rewritten and reformulated.

Certainly Brandt-Van Warmelo’s published book has been read and received as ‘my diary written in the camp itself’ - in other words, as ‘the same as’ the manuscript diary. Secondary literature in South Africa has treated *Het Concentratie-Kamp...* as an ‘actual diary’ and also as a source of factual information about the camps.³ Thus, for instance, in his 1954 study, Otto cites *Het Concentratie-Kamp...* as a source of accurate ‘factual’ information on overcrowding in tents in the camps, as for example when he comments that “The Irene camp was not much better [than Springfontein]. In May 1901 there

were also pertinent cases of nineteen and twenty people piled up in a tent”, with this footnoted to “Van Warmelo: ‘Het Concentratie Kamp Van Irene’, p.21” (Otto, 1954: 61). And in her 1999 book on women in the South African War, Pets Marais treats Brandt-Van Warmelo’s diary uncritically and as a repository of ‘facts’ about the camps. Marais repeats claims made in the diary about the unsatisfactory water supply, the poor quality rations and the presence of worms in the rations as unproblematic statements of fact. For example, Marais writes that “The food in the camps was overall poor and bad. Johanna Brandt’s mother took samples of sugar, flour and coffee as ‘curiosity’. In the sugar was the whole head of a lizard’ (Van Warmelo Brandt, *Het Concentratiekamp van Irene*)” (Marais, 1999: 102).

Similarly, Raath draws extensively on *Het Concentratie-Kamp...* as ‘evidence’ in his 2002 book about the camps. For instance he comments on Irene camp that “The food provisions in this camp were bad. Johanna Brandt, who did service in the camp as a nurse, wrote that at the beginning of May the quality of the meat was so bad that it could not even be used to make soup” (Raath, 2002: 121). Raath clearly assumes that *Het Concentratie-Kamp...* and Van Warmelo’s diary are ‘the same’, for example as in his comment that “On 14 May Johanna Brandt wrote in her diary about the big sacks of meal that crawled with worms and how the children played with them” (Raath, 2002: 121), and the endnote referencing this refers to *Het Concentratie-Kamp...*, rather than to the manuscript diary. As a result, the differences between what appears in the manuscript diary and the later rewritten and partial *Het Concentratie-Kamp...*, discuss shortly, are obscured by Raath.

Versions: The Published Diary, The Manuscript Diary and The Letters

Otto, Marais and Raath, then, among others draw on the Brandt-Van Warmelo published diary without critically considering its knowledge-claims or its context of writing. As the above examples indicate, their knowledge-claims about the Van Warmelo diary not only assume referentiality and the temporal interrelation of ‘the moment of writing’ with ‘the scene of what is written about’, but also something in an evidential sense even more basic and more ontologically rooted. This is that there *is* a Johanna van Warmelo diary in Malinowski’s ‘strict sense of the term’ (Malinowski, 1967). Certainly a manuscript Johanna van Warmelo diary exists and covers the same period of time as the published diary, *Het Concentratie-Kamp...*; and insofar as its existence has been known about by those working on the South African War and its aftermaths, it has been assumed to be ‘the manuscript of the published diary’. However, important disjunctures exist between the manuscript diary and the published diary, as we show in the following discussion.

Brandt-Van Warmelo's comment about her original diary (which we have referred to as the Van Warmelo diary) being shortened for publication is true. However the published version also contains amendments, additions and omissions from this manuscript not covered by her statement that only her own concerns and sufferings were removed:

The diary that now follows speaks more than I would wish about myself; this is mainly because I had the need to pour out my heart and had one in camp as a confidante, my solace was in pen and ink. Had I in those days thought to later give out my diary, then I would have written more carefully and made my notes more accurate, but then I kept my diary only for my own use, and also wrote far more about my own affairs, my own concerns and suffering than I would otherwise have done. As a result I can give nothing more than the extracts here, which together form about half of my original diary. (Brandt-Van Warmelo, 1905: 11-12)

However, many of the excluded passages in fact relate less to what she describes here as excessive detail of her own hardships and complaints. Indeed, rather the reverse: that is, passages which suggest she lived in some comfort in the camp and also incidents which concern the more the light-hearted aspects of her experiences have been removed. Thus the excisions here include mentions of her own comfort, expressions of political 'apathy', frequent walks in the nearby plantation, her friendships with some of the doctors, visits and presents from her mother, and the card games and entertainment she enjoyed in the evenings with the other volunteers and medical staff. Some specific passages from the manuscript that have been removed in the published book are as follows:

I have seen the Rev. Bosman & had a nice little chat with him ... I took him a cup of tea while he was with Miss M. [Malherbe] & he seemed much surprised – evidently thinks we have nothing to spare for visitors. People don't know how good the nurses' mess is. (VW *Dagboek* IV: 30)

Oh, if only the war came to an end soon! If only the powers would intervene! (VW *Dagboek* IV: 41)

At about 11 we came up to my tent, where the mother [Mrs Van Warmelo] produced some sandwiches & I got three cups of delicious tea & we had a fine old talk. It was perfectly lovely to hear some news & see familiar faces after what seems to me an endless exile (VW *Dagboek* IV: 55)

We have all just come back from the Station – a very jolly party – 5 nurses and Doctor Dandy (as we have nicknamed Dr. N [Neethling] because he is so spick & span & wore a fine buttonhole when he came here) (VW *Dagboek* IV: 67)

Today [12 June] I have been here exactly one month and H. [Hessie] & I celebrated the event by going for a walk through the beautiful plantations, when our work was done this afternoon. We took some books, sweets & cakes (one must eat here at all hours of the day) and had a glorious half hour of perfect quiet
(VW *Dagboek* IV: 119, original emphasis)

Not all of her omissions concern such light-hearted incidents. Thus in commenting on her frustration when her ideas about health and medicine were rejected by Boer women clinging onto their entrenched, old-fashioned medical beliefs, Van Warmelo wrote in the manuscript diary:

I am often impatient, especially when the mothers won't listen & keep the tents tightly closed so that no breath of wind can reach their poor, panting little ones, & when they refuse to give the fever patients a drop of cold water & look horrified at the idea of washing a measles patient. And they are stubborn with the stubbornness of crass ignorance
(VW *Dagboek* IV: 163, original emphasis)

The start of this section appears in *Het Concentratie-Kamp...*, but crucially the last sentence condemning the 'crass ignorance' of some of the Boer women has been excised.

There are also various instances in the manuscript diary of Van Warmelo complaining about the dirt and discomfort of living at Irene, with almost all of these comments excluded from the published book. For example, on 28 May the manuscript entry states:

one does get very dirty here & it is not possible to have a bath every day – as to washing one's hair I have not done it since my arrival. I am getting so burnt that my own Mammie won't know me soon
(VW *Dagboek* IV 28 May 1901: 84)

Remarks of this kind have been routinely and consistently excised from *Het Concentratie-Kamp...*, with the result an emphasis on Van Warmelo's concern for others rather than her concern for own behaviour, appearance or comfort.

There are also additions of various kinds in *Het Concentratie-Kamp...* At several points in the published book, for instance, the phrase "dear diary" (15, 64) appears, which is not used in parallel places in the manuscript diary. In a specific instance, Brandt-Van Warmelo describes camp inhabitants approaching her to reminisce with her about her late father, Rev. N.J. Van Warmelo, whose work as a church minister they remembered. In both the manuscript and published diary she explains that people questioned her about her family and related their memories about her father, but that she seldom had time to stop and talk with them. In the published version, a further sentence has been added that does not appear in the manuscript: "They all said how grateful they were, that he was spared the sight of the suffering of his people, whom he loved more than life itself" (Brandt-Van Warmelo, 1905: 22). This sentence

suggests the generous, selfless nature of the Boer people who are here presented as more concerned that their adored church minister has been spared the upsetting sight of ‘the suffering of his people’ than they are for their own experience of this suffering.

There are thus considerable differences, including many more not detailed here for space reasons, between the manuscript diary and the published book that are not covered by Brandt-Van Warmelo’s statement about simply shortening the original. These disjunctures stem from the book’s context of production and Brandt-Van Warmelo’s related political aims for her book, as we now discuss.

Family letters written by Johanna Brandt-Van Warmelo from Holland during late 1902 and early 1903 shed some light on the context of production of both the manuscript and the published diary, and indicate the temporal gap between the ‘moment of writing’ and the events that formed ‘the scene of what is written about’. Thus on 19 July 1902, not long before her marriage, the then Johanna Van Warmelo wrote from Holland to her mother and sisters that:

I feel my powerlessness here and have decided to do my little best for ‘land en volk’, viz: wield the pen! I am going to write a book, dear friends, on the subject of Irene Camp, & that right soon. Miss Jennie advises me to lose no time and to write as much as possible in diary form, just as I wrote on the spur of the moment at Irene.
(VW to ‘Mother and sisters’, 19 July 1902)

‘Miss Jennie’ here refers to Mrs. De La Rey,⁴ whose own book about the war *A Woman’s Wanderings and Trials* was published in 1903, and it was on her advice that Brandt-Van Warmelo then set about writing her ‘diary’ in later 1902, concerning events that had occurred in 1901. Further letters to her family indicate how this process unfolded, as with the following extracts:

You know I am going to write a book & Lou will translate each chapter as I write it, & if it is a success, I mean to devote the money to all sorts of charitable institutions
(VW to ‘Mother, Sister and Brother’, 5 August 1902)

About the half of my diary is not fit for publication & will have to be left out, but there are lots of other things to put in
(VW to ‘Mother, Liana & Fritz’, 17 August 1902)

My diary is nearly finished now (B-VW to ‘Dearests’, 13 November 1902)

I have all but done my diary now, only a few pages & then I begin with the Blue Books. Lou has translated about the half of my diary already. Ain’t he clever?
(B-VW to ‘dearest relations’, 3 December 1902)

Lou and I work hard at my book every evening when baby is asleep. The translation is finished and next week Lou will take the manuscript to the publisher in Haarlem, but say nothing to nobody (B-VW to Mrs. VW, 29 October 1903)

Two important conclusions can be drawn from this. Firstly, the manuscript and published diaries were written largely concurrently with each other, well after the date of the dated diary-entries, and with the idea of publication centrally in mind. And secondly, while there was a ‘something’ in written form that predated the two now existing diaries, which was used to prepare both of these, this did not exist in a form that Brandt-Van Warmelo deemed suitable to the purposes she had in mind.

It seems likely that the manuscript diary was based partly on the workbook that Van Warmelo had kept in the camp itself to help her keep track of the people under her care, and partly on the letters she wrote to her mother while she worked at Irene, which bear strong similarities in content and wording to the manuscript diary. Brandt-Van Warmelo was also later in correspondence with Emily Hobhouse, the British humanitarian worker who had helped draw public attention to the epidemics and deaths in the camps during the war.⁵ Indeed, a statement by Van Warmelo about Irene camp was initially published in Hobhouse’s mid-1902 *The Brunt of the War*, and subsequently Hobhouse offered advice to Brandt-Van Warmelo about writing her ‘diary’ and selecting a publisher. Thus while Brandt-Van Warmelo had initially planned to have her book published in English, she was advised by Hobhouse that there was a glut of books in English about the war at that time and so there would be no market for her book.

While Brandt-Van Warmelo wrote up her diary in English, her husband Louis Brandt with her close involvement translated the book into Dutch in sections as she wrote the English version, with the resultant book in Dutch being eventually published in 1905 in Amsterdam. However, that the manuscript diary is written in *English*, and that the published book is therefore a *translation*, is not acknowledged at any point *Het Concentratie-Kamp...* There are interesting factors at work here. Acknowledging this would have undermined Brandt-Van Warmelo’s claims about the published book being ‘my diary written in the camp itself’; but also language choice at this time was becoming highly politicised, with the active decision to use Dutch, or later Afrikaans, denoting political allegiance to the (proto-) nationalist cause. Thus to reveal that the diary was initially written in English would have clashed with Brandt-Van Warmelo’s political intentions, reflected in her statement about wanting to do her ‘little best’ for ‘land en volk’ – land and people or country and nation.

Given the openness with which Brandt-Van Warmelo’s plans and progress are rehearsed in family letters, the ‘fabrication’ of her manuscript and published diaries cannot straightforwardly be viewed as misrepresentation

under false pretences of ‘the moment of writing’ and its temporal relationship with ‘the scene of what is written about’. It is clear that neither she nor her correspondents, including De La Rey and Hobhouse, saw anything untoward with her planned book ‘becoming’ a diary, indeed with Mrs De La Rey initiating this as a publication strategy. It seems in fact part of an ambiguity about the nature of the autobiographical and testimonial form itself, which is never an unproblematic direct representation of ‘real reality’ and always and necessarily draws on both the example of other writing genres and of ‘fictive devices’ (Eakin, 1985) in self-expression. Consequently we think what happened is better understood as the construction of a ‘simulacrum diary’, as we go on to discuss.

Concluding Thoughts and Questions

The idea of the simulacrum invokes what Baudrillard (1988: 170; see also 1981/1983) has commented on as “the murderous capacity of images: murderers of the real”, wherein good faith is pinned to the conviction that there is a real painting, sculpture, photograph, DVD recording, diary, but in a context – an ‘age of mechanical reproduction’, as Benjamin (1973, orig 1936) has termed it - in which it is possible to produce something which is so faithful a copy that it cannot by ordinary means be told apart. Indeed, more than this, the simulacrum disputes notions of the real – a simulacrum is neither un/real nor a mis/representation but rather a replication of the thing itself, a kind of representational doppelganger. Johanna Brandt-Van Warmelo’s manuscript and published diary have precisely such simulacrum characteristics – they are both a diary and not a diary; and both a real and an unreal representation of the events that are written about and concerning which the diary-entries claim knowledge. So what are some of the implications of thinking about her diary around ideas about simulacrum forms?

The ‘something’ that Johanna Van Warmelo had written at the time in Irene – probably her case workbook hastily written in as she talked with people about their illnesses and needs on a daily basis⁶ – was perhaps deemed by her to be insufficient to convey to readers post-war what she considered to be the ‘real reality’ of what had occurred. Therefore a writing form that contained the ‘really real’ was needed, one which did this in a way that would impact emotively on readers and convince them of the justice of the cause she was representing through her writing. Thus the creation of a simulacrum diary, which ‘borrowed’ the referentiality associated with diaries by manipulating time and the moment of writing. Her simulacrum diary from 1902 in Holland mimics and indeed in a sense it actually possesses the ‘present-ness’ and temporal immediacy of diaries written immediately after the time of the events they describe.

It is clear that time is a central component of diary-writing and the knowledge-claims that diaries are seen to support. However, it is interesting to consider how long a lapse in time between events and writing is permissible while still retaining the diary's claim to referential knowledge. Regarding Brandt-Van Warmelo's *Het Concentratie-Kamp...*, the lapse was of at least a year, almost certainly in excess of what most readers would consider an acceptable temporal gap. In the case of this simulacrum diary, which both is and is not 'of the time' of writing, then, there are implications for the implicit claim Brandt-Van Warmelo makes about its status as the embodiment of direct first-hand facts and knowledge.

However, the production of the two simulacrum diaries was not a misrepresentation in the usual sense of the word, but rather a representation that brought into being something which was seen as more real than what had been inscribed and represented in the original moment of writing, more real than 'real reality'. In this sense, Johanna Brandt-Van Warmelo's simulacrum diaries not only dispute notions of the real, but also replace the real with something seen as more real because more true to the *meaning* of events. And they accomplish this in a triple move: moving from the merely real 'something' that preceded both, her case workbook, to the manuscript diary in English which existed in the private space of the unpublished, and then to the published diary in Dutch and the public space of certified knowledge about the war and the camps.

Misrepresentation of events and bad faith on the part or in the person of the writer are perceived as the 'usual exceptions' to the perceived rules of diary-writing. Our argument may be accepted that Johanna Brandt-Van Warmelo's simulacrum diaries are neither misrepresentations in the usual sense of the word, nor result from bad faith in any simple sense, but this does not mean they are diaries 'in the strict sense of the term'. From this, two further interesting questions arise. The first is, what 'are' they in a form or genre sense, mixing as they do elements of a number of writing-genres? The second is, what implications are there here concerning notions of knowledge formulated in relation to diary-writing 'in the strict sense' when the temporal order complexly separates out the 'moment of writing' and 'the scene of what is written about'? These are important questions, not least because they have implications for thinking about diaries 'in the strict sense of the term', which also have these characteristics albeit in a usually more muted form. The case of the Brandt-Van Warmelo diary is interesting to think with because it raises them in a more extreme way, but the questions themselves can and should be asked of all diaries.

Endnotes

1. Johanna Brandt-Van Warmelo (1876–1964) came from the elite NHK Transvaal Van Warmelo family and her brother Dietlof was a well-known commando fighter and author of an account of commando life (Van Warmelo, 1901a, 1901b). Postwar she had a high profile career both as one of the key cultural entrepreneurs of proto-nationalism (Stanley and Dampier, forthcoming) and as a novelist and writer on medical topics. Her political involvements included the South African Women's Federation and also as the founder of two local women's nationalist parties in 1904 and 1907, and also the founder and one of the presidents of the combined women's National Party founded in 1915.
2. The research drawn on here stems from various events connected with the South African or Boer War of 1899-1902, provoked by Britain against the Boer Republics as part of its imperialist expansionist project within Southern Africa. As a result of the 'scorched earth' phase of the war, the British military formed camps along the main rail routes where these people were 'concentrated' in camps of tents. Because of virulent epidemics of measles, pneumonia, typhoid and enteritis, and also sometimes tainted water supplies and problems in dealing with human sewage, in a short period of around four months mortality rates soared. Subsequently, 26,370 deaths of women and children in the 'white' camps were later commemorated by emergent Afrikaner nationalism. See Dampier 2005, Stanley and Dampier 2005, Stanley 2006.
3. This is part of a more general process of political mythologizing discussed in Stanley and Dampier 2005.
4. Mrs de Le Rey was married to one of the key generals of the South African War, and through her *A Woman's Wanderings...* (De La Rey 1903a, 1903b) was a key figure in the Boer women's testimony literature.
5. See Stanley 2005.
6. Thus in her letters to her mother she comments on her case workbook and that this had been lost or mislaid, or possibly left at home during an interlude from volunteering in the camp.

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