Unhinging the National Framework: Perspectives on Transnational Life-Writing

Symposium Friday, 7 December 2018, 9.30 – 17.00
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

09.30 – 10.00
Welcome with coffee/tea

10.00 – 11.00
Opening keynote address
Prof. dr. Ann Phoenix, University College London
“Changing life stories? The place of intersectionality in narratives of transnational lives”
Introduction: Prof. dr. Sawitri Saharso, University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht; Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Respondent: Dr. Katrine Smiet, Utrecht University
Chair: Prof. dr. Susan Legêne, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

11.00 – 11.30
Research pitches
Prof. dr. Giles Scott-Smith, Leiden University
Yvette Kopijn, University of Amsterdam
Widya Fitria Ningsih, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

11.30 – 12.00
Coffee/tea

12.00 – 13.00
Prof. dr. Ismee Tames, Utrecht University and NIOD Amsterdam, “'For our freedom and yours': Transnational resistance against fascism, 1936-1948”
Respondent: Dr. Marleen Rensen, University of Amsterdam

13.00 – 13.30
Lunch and poster presentations

13.30 – 14.30
Dr. Pia Wiegmink, Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies, University of Mainz: “Mobility, belonging, and antislavery critique in antebellum African American women’s travel accounts”
Respondent: Dr. Marijke Huisman, Utrecht University
14.30 – 15.30  Dr. Leonieke Vermeer, Groningen University: “Little crosses in the margins. Self-censoring in diaries as international practice”

Respondent: Dr. Ernestine Köhne-Hoegen, independent researcher

15.30 – 16.00  Coffee/tea

16.00 – 17.00  Panel Discussion: Transnational Celebrities

Dr. Jaap Kooijman, University of Amsterdam: “Not just a country, but an idea: Bono’s promotion of the American Dream”
Dr. Dennis Kersten, Radboud University: “There’s a place in Beatle biofiction: John Lennon’s Irish odyssey in Kevin Barry’s Beatlebone.”
Dr. Gaston Franssen, University of Amsterdam: “Geert Wilders as a transnational celebrity politician.”

Respondents:
Lonneke Geerlings, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Prof. dr. Maaike Meijer, biographer and emerita professor Maastricht University
Dr. Anneke Ribberink, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Chair: Prof. dr. Diederik Oostdijk, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Venue: OZW Building, De Boelelaan 1109 (the rounded, red-brick building next to the Main Building)
Room 6A01 (6th floor)
Free of charge but please register before 4 December 2018 by sending an e-mail to b.boter@vu.nl
Abstracts

Prof. dr. Ann Phoenix, Professor of Psychosocial Studies, University College London, Institute of Education

“Changing life stories? The place of intersectionality in narratives of transnational lives”

One of the helpful insights of narrative theory is that the ways in which people start telling their life stories, positioning themselves and others in a social and temporal landscape is highly informative. This paper considers the narratives of adults looking back on their lives to make sense of childhoods often considered ‘non-normative’ that have been produced through migration and transnational family experiences. It focuses particularly on the place of retrospective evaluation and shows that this is both inseparable from contemporary life and dependent on the multiple social categories in which speakers/writers are positioned. As a result, the paper shows how biographical emphasis can change over time.

Prof. dr. Ismee Tames, NIOD Amsterdam (Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies), Utrecht University

“For our freedom and yours’: Transnational resistance against fascism, 1936-1948”

This paper explores the transnational experience of resistance against fascism (and Nazism) from the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War up to the closing of the Iron Curtain in 1948. It builds on a book project funded by the Leverhulme Trust and administered by Oxford University. We created a network of more than 20 researchers from Europe, the US and Israel working on various aspects of resistance against fascism. The book will be due in 2019.

Our aim is to open up national discourses about resistance and highlight how for many people resisting fascism was a transnational experience. Think of volunteers from Albania ending up in Spain in 1937, think of Italians who fled Mussolini’s Italy, found a new home in Paris, mobilized again to fight Franco and later on to fight in German occupied France and Italy, think of German communists fleeing Nazi Germany but reorganizing again in neighboring countries, think of Zionist organizations that morphed from organizations preparing young European Jews for settlement in Palestine into illegal rescue networks to bring the persecuted outside Nazi-occupied territory. Or think of Polish nationalists spurring the Warsaw uprising and realizing they were fighting side by side with escaped forced laborers from Western-Europe or even a Nigerian Jazz musician.

The experience of resistance is the experience of violence, of being confronted with the unexpected, of being forced to reinvent oneself over and over. It is an experience of movement from one place to the next and taking your own previous skills, experiences, expectations and emotions with you on your trajectories and in your encounters and exchanges with others. We try to explore how these experiences and encounters re-configured identities and shaped the experience of resistance against fascism.
This paper explores the relationship between tropes of (transatlantic) mobility and antislavery critique in two antebellum African American women’s autobiographies, Nancy Prince’s *The Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (published in 1850, 1853 and 1856) and Eliza Potter’s *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* (1859). Before the outbreak of the Civil War, Prince and Potter had already traveled to England, France, Russia, Canada, Jamaica, and to the American South. The aim of this paper is twofold: First, my analysis of black female narratives of travel gives prominence to the heterogeneity of nineteenth-century African American (print) culture and draws attention to works authored by African Americans who were not former slaves or prominent representatives of the abolitionist movement. Second, I am interested in further broadening the canon of African American critiques of slavery by including works that complicate or even defy conventional abolitionist rhetoric, and allow for a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of antislavery literature.

Prince’s and Potter’s travel accounts offer an entry point to establish a dialogue between black women’s life writing and transatlantic antislavery discourses beyond the genre of the slave narrative. Rather than neglecting the issue of slavery, Prince and Potter clearly observe, comment on, and criticize the peculiar institution, albeit in a fashion that defies easy categorization. My paper will examine how Prince and Potter remember and narrate their travels autobiographically, how they perceive their own social as well as geographical mobility as free black women travelers, how they reflect upon this subject position during their travels to Europe and within the U.S., and how they relate their own subject positions to those of enslaved black subjects that they encounter during her travels. Thus, for both women, I will argue, their travels provided them with an extra-national frame of reference from which they were able to see slavery, their own social position as African American women, and their sense of (national) belonging with a fresh pair of eyes.

One of the most international aspects of diaries is paradoxically also the most private facet: symbols, encryptions, codes and self-censoring in order to hide sensitive or highly personal content in diaries. This kind of private language is an important feature of diary practice, regardless of time and place. Many diaries contain ‘silences’ in the form of crossed out lines, deleted parts and symbols that signal the absence of language, such as dots, dashes and crosses. How should one give meaning to these acts of concealing in autobiographical writing? Susan Sontag convincingly argued that ‘silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech.’ It is important to approach silences as an element in narrative, not as an absence of narrative. In my lecture, I will focus on the way ‘silences as narrative’ in diaries from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century can enhance our knowledge on the history of the body and the function of life writing in this respect. It is a topic that offers an
outstanding opportunity to study diaries in a transnational perspective, because the practice of self-censoring including several symbols is not bound to a certain language and refers to discourses that transgress national borders. In that sense, private language is not as private as it seems. Diarists use similar disguising strategies, as can be seen with regard to masturbation; in several diaries from different national contexts appear the same symbols for masturbation, such as tiny crosses in the margins. Finally, I will also discuss the ethical aspect of studying silences: were they not meant to stay private instead of being revealed by historians?

Panel
Dr. Jaap Kooijman, University of Amsterdam: “Not just a country, but an idea: Bono’s promotion of the American Dream”

When Irish rock star Bono was a guest at The Oprah Winfrey Show in 2002, he told the talk show host: “See, there’s the country of America, that you have to defend, but there’s also the idea of America. America is more than just a country. It’s an idea, okay ... an idea that’s supposed to be contagious.” Although unmentioned by Bono, he is paraphrasing his good friend Wim Wenders, the German filmmaker, who once wrote: “AMERICA, always means two things: a country, geographically, the USA, and a concept of this country, its ideal.” That it takes an Irish rock star echoing the words of a German filmmaker on a talk show hosted by America’s most popular television personality to make such a distinction explicit reinforces the notion that America as imagined community transcends the geographical boundaries of the nation-state USA. Bono has repeated his message many times in television appearances, commencement speeches at universities, and live performances of his band U2. More recently, he has used these words to challenge the Trump presidency. In my presentation, I will use Bono as case study to discuss how stars can become embodiments of political ideas that can be empowering on the one hand, yet can turn into cliché’s on the other.

Dr. Dennis Kersten, Radboud University: "There’s a place in Beatle biofiction: John Lennon’s Irish odyssey in Kevin Barry’s Beatlebone (2015)"

Kersten will present a case study of rock life writing and biofiction. In Kevin Barry’s Beatlebone (2015) the New York based character John Lennon returns to the small Irish island which he purchased in 1967. This road-trip seems to “re-Irish” the main character not only because of the Irish setting, but also by constructing Lennon in a text that heavily leans on references to Irish literature. Kersten’s point will be that the novel situates Lennon in a symbolic Irish space, and does more than claiming him for the Irish in a literary nationalist manner.
Dr. Gaston Franssen, University of Amsterdam: “Geert Wilders as a transnational celebrity politician”

Geert Wilders of the PVV is a celebrity politician in the sense that he is a public performer that draws on skills and resources of mass-mediated popular culture. As such, he has an important ‘affective function’ in the organization of political interests and issues. This function, I argue, is subject to a transnational inflection; I demonstrate this by comparing Wilders’ book *Kiezen voor vrijheid* (2005) with his 2012 volume *Marked for Death*, paying particular attention to his biographical self-stylization.