Unhinging the National Framework: Platform for the Study of Transnational Life Writing

Fifth Annual Symposium

Friday 4 December 2020 9.00 – 17.00

Location: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam Main Building 5A00 + online via Zoom Webinar


Program

Keynote speakers:

Prof. dr. Halleh Ghorashi, Professor of Diversity and Integration, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Dr. Anna Poletti, Associate Professor Comparative Literature, Utrecht University
Prof. dr. Gloria Wekker, Professor Emerita, Gender and Ethnicity, Utrecht University

Speakers:

Dr. Vera Alexander, Senior Lecturer in European Cultures and Literatures, Groningen University
Prof. dr. Susan Legêne, Professor of Political History, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Dr. Vilan van de Loo, independent writer and researcher.
Prof. dr. Giles Scott-Smith, Professor of Diplomatic History, Leiden University

Speakers and abstracts (in order of appearance)

Anna Poletti, Associate Professor Comparative Literature, Utrecht University

Autobiography, mediation and transnationalism: Behrouz Boochani’s No Friend But the Mountains

Behrouz Boochani’s award-winning No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison is a hybrid work of life writing, composed on illicit mobile phones and secretly transmitted to a team of translators and supporters via WhatsApp. Documenting and theorizing the violence of Australia’s indefinite mandatory detention in camps on remote Pacific nations of people seeking asylum, No Friend But the Mountains is a uniquely transnational intellectual and aesthetic project. Its composition was enabled by digitally networked technologies that were able to evade the blanket of censorship imposed on Australia’s offshore detention centres by Government policies that limited access to the prisons by journalists, human rights organizations, and international monitors. The book’s title—a Kurdish saying
that refers to the powerful connection between the Kurdish people and the mountains of their homelands—signals that the writing and thinking of the book is imbedded in and enabled by Boochani’s identity as a Kurdish journalist forced to flee Iran. At the same time, *No Friend But the Mountains* is a work of theory and life writing that is profoundly transnational; it responds to and seeks to understand the logics of the nation state, citizenship and border policing as techniques of power that produce new forms of violence which transcend national boundaries and jurisdictions, creating complex networks of implication, responsibility, and hierarchies.

Drawing on my arguments about autobiography and mediation in my recent book (*Stories of the Self* (NYU Press, 2020)), a forthcoming collection of essays I commissioned on *No Friend But the Mountains* for *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, and my experience teaching the book in an international classroom in the Netherlands, I will examine *No Friend But the Mountains* as a work that exemplifies the role of media technologies in the act of living—and the emergence of—transnational life.

**Vera Alexander, Senior Lecturer in European Cultures and Literatures, Groningen University**

*Figures of Mobility and the Crisis of Connection*

In this presentation I locate life stories of mobility in an ongoing crisis of connection and connectivity. I read figures of mobility such as the visitor, the tourist and the refugee as ambivalent signifiers of place and belonging that problematise any simple dichotomy of Self versus Other and Here versus There. Making reference to contemporary poetic travel writings by Warsan Shire and Kapka Kassabova as well as photography and other media, I argue that the relational nature of life narratives needs to be considered not only in binary terms of social connections between human beings, but as a triad that embraces the precarious relationship that connects human beings to place as well as notions of time and duration. Place relations are subject to utopian idealisation and polarised affective projections as they are constitutive of identity construction. Since these are subject to constant change and reconfiguration, the notion of mobility and its obverse, stagnation, need to be reconceptualised as fundamental dynamic aspects of belonging.

**Giles Scott-Smith, Professor of Diplomatic History, Leiden University**

*Between Colonial and Post-Colonial? Ivan Kats and the Perils of Cultural Diplomacy in Cold War Indonesia*

Is it possible to overcome colonial legacies if you promote post-independence cultural autonomy? Ivan Kats was a Flemish/American cultural entrepreneur who developed a profound interest in Indonesia and the development of its national cultural identity. From the 1960s to the 1990s he pursued a book publishing project through his Obor Foundation, that looked to bridge the ethical gap between the resources of Western cultural imperialism and the poverty of the post-colonial culture industry. This presentation places Kats as a ‘double personage’ (Bourdieu) between different worlds, to explore both his projects and motivations.
Gloria Wekker, Professor Emerita, Gender and Ethnicity, Utrecht University

Families navigating Empire

In my presentation I will present excerpts from recent, autobiographical work, which emphatically is work - in - progress. These excerpts will eventually become part of a mixed genre work, based on historical and anthropological knowledge, on non-fiction and fiction. This type of work is currently understood under several different headings, among which “critical fabulation” is prominent. It is a term used by Saidiya Hartman, signifying a writing methodology that combines historical and archival research with critical theory and fictional narrative. Central in my presentation will be different migrations within my multi-ethnic Surinamese family, which encompasses enslaved people, Jewish plantation owners, Native Surinamese. I will talk about transnational, geographical migrations but also about migrations of the heart, where individuals overstepped ethnic boundaries which had long been understood as foundational to empire, to plural societies, which needed to be governed as if the boundaries around different ethnic groups were “natural”. Concretely I will read prose and poetry and reflect on the nature of “critical fabulation”.

Dr. Vilan van de Loo, independent writer and researcher

Exploring the New Political Correct: Colonial Violence in Aceh

Central in my presentation is the possibility of creating a transnational understanding of heroism. To answer this question I will focus on the military Aceh expedition of 1904.

Nowadays the Dutch East Indies seems to be reduced to a narrative of military violence during the process of decolonisation, although there is an awareness of the tradition of colonial violence as well, especially in Aceh. The framing of both histories of violence is the same: the officers of the KNIL were more or less war criminals, and the Acehnese were helpless victims. This leads to a postcolonial self-image of superiority among the Dutch: ‘look how good we are to be able to see how bad we have been’. With the exploration of contemporary sources and with the use of a specific military view, the original framing is now fading. My presentation will focus on a new way of looking at the history of the military Aceh expedition of 1904, commanded by Frits van Daalen (1863-1930). I will place this new approach in the context of the early twentieth century’s national need for colonial heroes—from which the Acehnese were excluded. I will also discuss how this related to the making of a civil servant (Van Daalen became governor of Aceh) and take a look at the vulnerable position of Van Daalen. As the highest-ranking Indo-European officer he stood out. What do we see, if we look at the expedition through his eyes, and what does that mean in the way the colonial past is judged? Would it be possible to create a transnational understanding of heroism during this expedition?

Halleh Ghorashi, Professor of Diversity and Integration, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

BLM: A transnational movement that changed the Dutch landscape

In this lecture I will discuss how Black Lives Matter, as a transnational movement, has changed the Dutch landscape regarding the existence of institutional racism and cross-racial solidarities. In the last 25 years,
I have been engaging with the life experiences of refugee and migrant women (through various forms of narratives methodology). In these studies, these women narrate a strong presence of exclusionary mechanisms (both blatant and subtle) within the Dutch context. Yet, until recently, the existing implicit and growing explicit forms of racism in the Dutch public space had not led to a public recognition of the existence of structural forms of racism in the Netherlands. In an earlier work, I showed the historical and societal reasons behind the denial of racism in the Dutch context despite the fact that racist acts and statements in the public space had gained a strong presence. I argued that this was partly based on the historically rooted idea of the superiority of Dutch culture in the Dutch migration discourse (which Wekker conceptualized as cultural archive) and its link to the categorical framing of migrants as ‘a problem’ in Dutch society. This history together with a positive self-image of the Dutch as progressive had made it almost impossible for people to accept the notion that racism was part of the Dutch self-image. But something shifted with the arrival of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the Netherlands. I argue that Dutch society can take advantage of this momentum to transform its non-reflective progressive image into critical self-reflection and actions aimed at the inclusion of diverse groups by addressing institutional racism beyond “good intentions”.