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### Writing Artists' Lives Across Nations and Cultures

*Biography, Biofiction and Transnationality*

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## Chapter 1

### Writing Artists' Lives Across Nations and Cultures: Biography, Biofiction and Transnationality

Marleen Rensen and Christopher Wiley

In her novel *How to be both* (2014), Ali Smith entwines two life stories: those of the fictional teenage girl George, living in Cambridge in the twenty-first century, and Francesco del Cossa, a real-life fresco painter in Renaissance Italy. Unusually, the book is published in two editions, one starting with the story of George, the other with that of Cossa. Implicit in this double publication is the suggestion that it does not matter which of the stories you read first, since, one way or the other, they make up one. They converge at the level of the narrative in several ways. George, for instance, studies the biography of Cossa, whose life and works are little known. In his classic *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, the famous Renaissance writer on art, Giorgio Vasari, ignored the School of Ferrara's mural paintings, of which Cossa was an exponent, and even confused him with another artist. In Smith's modern treatment of the same subject, she turns the painter into a living and speaking character, who appears as a ghost in twenty-first-century Britain, following George through the streets of Cambridge and to the National Gallery in London, which displays one of his paintings.

When George discusses her biographical research on Cossa with a friend, they humorously imagine Cossa's commenting on it with the words: 'alas I am being made up really badly by a sixteen-year-old girl who knows fuck all about art and nothing at all about me except that I did some paintings and seem to have died of the plague' (Smith 2015, p. 139). In the part of the novel where the painter takes centre stage and tells his life story, his voice is direct and forceful as a result of Smith's use of the stream of consciousness

technique. In a creative and playful way, her novel thus counters the existing image of Cossa, based on a few biographical sources. She presents the painter as a girl who has dressed up as a man in order to find employment, which may fall within the realm of imagination. At least, art histories do not offer any indications for such a gender shift.

The biographical parallels between Cossa and George —the gender confusion, the premature loss of the mother, the artistic aspiration and the ‘mural art’ (George decorates the walls of her bedroom with pictures)—express connections between the two characters, just as much as does the form of the novel. In a vein similar to fresco painting, where a layer of paint is applied over fresh plaster, this story is layered in such a way that the one portrait shines through the other. This confirms sameness as the central theme of the story, bringing together past and present, life and death, man and woman, fact and fiction, painting and literature, and Britain and Italy. *How to be both* not only fundamentally reveals how art and artists’ lives can speak to us across centuries, cultures and nations, but it also illustrates how they can be re-imagined and re-created in new, experimental ways. As such, it intersects with the issue at the heart of this volume: writing artists’ lives across different nations and cultures. This, in turn, relates to a number of subsidiary themes that will be raised in the course of its chapters, including the cross-cultural representation of artists’ lives, the artist’s interest in the lives of other artists, the re-writing of history and canons, and experiments with new modes of life writing, both in biography and biofiction.

### **Artists’ Lives and the Return of the Author**

Smith’s *How to be both* exemplifies the strong contemporary interest in the biographies of painters, writers, musicians and other artists evidenced in various forms of life writing. Most visible, perhaps, is the burgeoning corpus of biographical fiction, also termed ‘biofiction’, examples of which form the basis of discussion in multiple chapters of this volume.<sup>1</sup> Even

though there is no agreement on the precise definition of biofiction, it can generally be understood as literature that presents hypothetical or imagined lives, relying on real-life stories yet containing a certain degree of creative invention.<sup>2</sup> This can take many different shapes and forms, ranging from realistic tales to postmodernist experiments. Among the diverse types of historical figures that are portrayed in biographical fiction—which includes political leaders, adventurers and migrants—artists are particularly well-represented.

Artemisia Gentilischi, Rembrandt van Rijn, Henry James, Maurice Ravel, Stefan Zweig, Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, Dmitri Shostakovich, Frida Kahlo and Charlotte Salomon are just a few of the artists whose lives have been the subject of literary works of fiction in recent years. Aside from, or parallel to, the proliferation of biofiction, ‘real’ biographies of artists equally enjoy popularity in our time, emblematic of the recent interest in the genre of biography more generally. Such biographies frequently figure on bestselling lists and seem to attract more media attention than ever before (Lee 2009, p. 17).

Writing about the lives of artists, of course, has a long and rich history. Giorgio Vasari’s previously mentioned series of artists’ biographies, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550), often referred to as *Lives* or *Vite*, opened up the subject centuries ago. The classical authors Duris of Samos and Pliny the Elder can arguably be considered the founders of the genre of lives of the artists, yet, while they focused on a variety of ‘great men’, including men of state and military men, Vasari was the first to concentrate on subjects who were visual artists exclusively (Kisters 2017, p. 26). Since Vasari’s time, there has hardly been a change in the basic structure of artists’ biographies, which attributed a mythological status to the figure of the artist through anecdotes relating to their exceptional talent (Kris and Kurz 1979; Soussloff 1997). The genre has flourished particularly since the Romantic era, owing to the rise of the notion of ‘genius’ and the changed appreciation for imagination, originality and artistic freedom. The *Künstlerroman*,

which originates in this period, portrays fictional artists (such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* and the character of Johannes Kreisler in several E.T.A. Hofmann novels), but the genre also epitomises the Romantic cult of the artist, in which actual artistic 'geniuses' became cult figures, set apart from ordinary people not only by virtue of their special gifts, but also by their eccentric personalities and extravagant lifestyles. The study and writing of biographies of real artists have remained popular ever since and expanded into increasingly rich, diverse and complex modes, forms and genres (Hellwig 2005). The present-day interest in artists' lives among literary writers, practising biographers and scholars alike is closely related to two wider developments within and outside academia: the flourishing field of 'life writing' and the 'Return of the Author'.

Since the early twenty-first century, 'life writing' has become a widely used umbrella term for a broad range of genres and modes of telling stories of one's own, or someone else's, life. As Margaretta Jolly's *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* indicates, life writing encompasses autobiographical forms, such as memoir, diary and autofiction; biographical forms, such as biography and biographical novels; as well as auto/biographical crossovers (Jolly 2001).<sup>3</sup> Even if the term is predominantly used in the Anglo-Saxon world and has different connotations in different countries and disciplinary areas, life writing has undisputedly emerged as a lively area of research and writing practices. It is especially relevant for writing and studying the lives of artists, for, as an open and inclusive field, as well as a fundamentally creative one, it allows us to bring together and explore the two narrative forms that are central to this volume: biography and biographical fiction. It furthermore enables us to take into account experimental forms of writing lives at the intersections of biography and literature, or biography and autobiography, which are prominent in contemporary life writing (Boldrini and Novak 2017, pp. 1–36). This approach, however, by no means suggests that generic distinctions are insignificant.

Even if biography is considered to be at the junction between art and craft, or art and science, it differs markedly from biofiction. Like many literary writers, biographers endeavour to bring to life a historical character, making use of their imagination and storytelling skills—yet they are bound to facts. Biographers are often described as ‘artists under oath’ (Desmond McCarthey, quoted in Parke 2002, p. 28). This illuminates that their creative freedom is restricted: they cannot simply ‘make stuff up’ about their subjects,<sup>4</sup> nor may they change facts, or fill in the gaps of knowledge about their subjects’ lives by inventing a story in the manner that Smith does in *How to be both*. As writer David Lodge stated, in distinguishing biofiction from biography: ‘Respectable biographers regard modern biography as an evidence-based discourse. Everything has to be verifiable’ (quoted in Lackey 2019, p. 119). Critics in biography studies have also emphasised that biography is a ‘scholarly method’ in historical research, one that searches for the truth about the past, and as such, it is distinct from biofiction (Renders, de Haan and Harmsma 2017, p. 4). Undoubtedly, biographers differ among themselves in their understanding of the genre, but no matter how creatively they deal with their biographical material—for example, in extrapolating dialogues based on the evidence of diaries or letters—they are all restricted in their use of the techniques of fiction.

Biofiction is, by definition, a hybrid genre, merging biography and fiction. Even though the term is not widely used until the 1990s, this literary form dates back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century and had an initial flurry around the 1930s, when, for example, Irving Stone published *Lust for Life* (1934), his now classic novel about Vincent van Gogh (Lackey 2019, p. 88), and when Virginia Woolf’s experimental biography *Orlando* (1928), a thinly veiled portrait of Vita Sackville-West, first appeared. Michael Lackey has noted that biofiction, despite its popularity, has long been considered ‘a bastard genre of secondary rate’; being neither a ‘real’ work of art, nor a ‘real’ biography. However, its status has considerably changed, Lackey argues, as biofiction has become ‘a dominant literary form’

in the twenty-first century. The creative impulse towards imagination, and the push back against it, is now considered to be a compelling tension of this aesthetic form, which has the unique capacity to ‘go into the head of characters’ and represent their inner thoughts and feelings (David Lodge in Lackey 2019, pp. 119–20). Moreover, it lends itself well to giving expression to postmodern themes of the elusive self and the uncertainty of biographical knowledge. According to Lackey (2016, 2017), contemporary critics judge the genre on its own terms, looking at the work itself and the kind of truth it reveals.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in recent decades, many biofictions by and about artists have received serious critical attention from literary critics and scholars alike (Lajta-Novak, 2017).

The resurgent popularity of artists’ biofictions runs parallel to the renewed scholarly interest in biography. This fresh attention followed a period during which biographies of artists had lost some of their appeal to scholars since the 1960s, when, under the influence of post-structuralism, the work of art was held to be more important than its creator him- or herself. Roland Barthes famously proclaimed the ‘Death of the Author’, under which the style and subject matter of a work of art was no longer to be interpreted as the expression of the author’s life, character and intentions. Instead, art such as texts, paintings or music compositions were understood to comprise a series of codes and signs that are imbued with meaning by the reader. Since the early 1990s, critics have conversely signalled the ‘Return of the Author’ (Burke 2007).<sup>6</sup> This does not constitute a return to uncritical biographies of isolated artistic geniuses, so much as a revived attention in the artist behind the art, who is approached as a socio-historical being, one who reflects, represents or takes up reflections of society at large relating to ethnicity, gender and class.

Numerous studies illustrate that the biographical genre has survived, reinvented itself and regained academic acceptance in arts research, in the face of the criticism of post-structuralist thought, which has nonetheless had an impact: biography continues to be

disregarded as a valid tool for interpreting works of art (Junod 2010, p. 3). In both biography and scholarly studies on artists' lives, more attention is now paid to the 'historical and social circumstances in which art is produced, as well as to the artist's gender and ethnicity' and (self-)fashioning of public images (Kisters 2017, pp. 10, 66). Some works examine the role of biography in the formation of artistic identities in a certain time period, such as Karen Junod's *Writing the Lives of Painters: Biography and Artistic Identity in Britain, 1760–1810* (2011) and Julie Codell's *The Victorian Artist: Artists' Lifewritings in Britain, ca. 1870–1910* (2003).

Other studies turn specific attention to the biographical image-making of artists in the 'production field' of a commercial and mediatised art world. For instance, Sandra Kisters's *The Lure of the Biographical: On the Self-Representation of Modern Artists* (2017) demonstrates the persistent, even increasing focus on the biographies of individual 'author-artists', both in art history and the art world, where the public's 'desire for the biographical' reigns (pp. 71, 376).<sup>7</sup> Through case studies of Rodin, O'Keeffe and Bacon, she shows that the (self-)representation of their character and life story is pivotal for their public reputation, which affects the way in which the style and subject matter of their artworks is interpreted. An example from literary studies is the volume with the telling title, *Idolizing Authorship* (Franssen and Honings 2017). This contribution to the emerging, interdisciplinary field of 'celebrity studies' analyses the stardom of literary writers, which largely rests on their larger-than-life personalities, excessive lifestyles and outspoken opinions.

These and other studies have revealed aspects of transnationalism in artist's lives and in the writing of these lives. Kisters, for instance, illustrates the importance of Rodin's contacts abroad and shows how biographical publications about the sculptor, within and outside of France, made a crucial contribution to the international cult surrounding the 'solitary genius' (2017, p. 226). She indicates that stereotypical 'life scripts'—prescribing

how to live the life of an artist—were disseminated and ‘enacted’ across Europe and beyond. This kind of transnational dynamics is also revealed in *Idolizing Authorship*, which presents a case study of the Dutch writer Nicholaas Beets, who admired Byron and presented himself as a melancholic poet of the same type (Honings 2017). Analysing celebrity cultures as global phenomena further allows the transnational comparison of artistic identities, whether icons of the nation, or universal geniuses. Nevertheless, the transnational is nowhere addressed explicitly as the focal point of research, which affords us the opportunity in this volume to open up new, interesting avenues in the inquiry into modes and forms of representing artists’ lives. Rather than imposing a prescriptive or rigid definition, the chapters that follow engage with transnationalism in a range of different ways, coexisting with one another in order to generate an enhanced overall understanding of this multi-faceted concept.

### **The turn to transnationalism**

The interest in transnationality, which has been clearly manifested across the humanities for some decades, has only recently gained prominence in the field of biography and life-writing studies. Even if transnationalism has been defined in different ways, it generally refers to a critical angle or approach that challenges the still dominant national framework in biography, which conceives of individual lives as part of a nation’s history (see, for example, Clavin 2005; Schweiger 2012; Iriye 2013). Pioneering studies, such as *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–present* (Deacon, Russell and Woollacott 2010), have drawn attention to those aspects of lives that transcend the borders of the nation-state, for instance through travels, cross-cultural contacts, exchanges and influences from abroad. Instead of the nation, they take ‘mobility’ as their frame of research. Migrants, exiles and expatriates are obvious subjects for such a transnational study, but this new approach may be additionally relevant to many other artists as well. Painters, musicians and writers have

always reached out for inspiration across national borders and many have found an audience outside their home countries. Furthermore, travel is not merely restricted to people and works of art: artistic genres, forms and idioms cross borders as well. Musicological research has, for example, shown that styles and genres, such as opera and jazz, have spread across countries and continents.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, avant-garde art and literature of modernity emerged simultaneously in various parts of Europe, partly as a result of cross-border cultural exchanges.<sup>9</sup> Yet the lives of artists have often been celebrated within, and presented from, a primarily national perspective and hence been framed within such a context.

This tendency is deeply rooted in the rich and longstanding historical traditions of the writing and study of artists' lives. Vasari's collection, covering the lives of Florentine painters, was clearly meant to demonstrate the glory of the Renaissance-era Italy in which he lived. As noted, he essentially followed the classical tradition of Pliny and Plutarch, in which memory and biography were already entwined, in the sense that the writing of lives was intended to commemorate the nation's great men. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* in particular may be viewed in the light of transnationalism since it juxtaposes famous Greek and Roman figures to offer exemplary models of behavior, both positive and negative. Critics have argued that 'the strategy of such pairing lends weight to their parallel fates and the transnational nature of such exemplarity' (Fleming 2008, p. 128). Aside from this transnational aspect of his comparative approach, however, Plutarch strove to illustrate how these noble men were rooted in their respective Greek or Roman cultures.

The national perspective became dominant in the nineteenth century, the age of nationalism, in which artists' lives played a vital role in the forging of national identities. Illustrating the paradox that nationalism is actually a transnational phenomenon itself, everywhere in Europe, painters, poets and composers were cast as icons of their associated nations, as they were thought to embody and exemplify the characteristics of their national

culture. To give a few examples: the poet Robert Burns became the national hero of Scotland; Rubens achieved the status of Belgium's national painter; and the composer Dvořák was celebrated as a symbol of Czech culture. Closely linked to the Romantic cult of the genius, artists were venerated as 'cultural saints' in memorial celebrations and monuments across the nations, all of whom aspired to build their own pantheon (Leerssen and Rigney 2014 ; Dović and Helgason 2017). Artists' biographies, which were often written in a form analogous to saints' lives—hagiographies exemplifying national virtues—were inspired by, and fed into discourses about, national character and national styles, schools and legacies. Widespread notions of the 'creative genius' contributed to the construction of male-dominated national canons in literature, visual arts and music alike (Wiley 2003, 2008; Junod 2010).

In the wake of feminist and postcolonial criticism, the 'great man' paradigm has been extensively critiqued, just as national canons have been critically evaluated and redefined. Life writing—the new terminology was popularised to make the domain more inclusive (see, for example, Smith and Watson 2010; McCooey 2017)—had an important role in drawing attention to the lives of marginalised artists. Women artists notably take centre stage in life-writing research and life-writing texts (Lajta-Novak 2017). Not only well-known figures, such as Virginia Woolf and Frida Kahlo, but also less famous female artists who have been undervalued, neglected or forgotten, have received renewed interest in both biography and biofiction.<sup>10</sup> Diverse scholars have examined the forms and strategies of writing those subjects' lives as a way not only to make women more visible in history and celebrate their achievements, but also to investigate gender identities and processes of national canon-formation. Recent research has demonstrated how diverse life-writing texts on composers such as Clara Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn counter the male-dominated music history, in which women have often been regarded merely as the 'muses' of male composers, or cast in the subservient role of performers who therefore lack creative genius of their own (Wiley

2015). Elsewhere in the arts, Paula Modersohn-Becker and Gabriele Münter, two figures often considered as muses to associated male geniuses, are both addressed as subjects in their own right in chapters in this volume, by Manet van Montfrans and Suzanne Bode, respectively.

While there is still a tendency, both within academia and society at large, to emphasise the national heritage of specific artists, the critical re-thinking of the nation's artistic canon goes hand in hand with the wider scholarly turn to the transnational. Biographical or life-writing studies that adopt a transnational approach can bring into focus cross-border connections and interactions in the lives and output of individual artists. This is particularly relevant for those many modern artists who frequently travelled, received training abroad, lived in exile or migrated to a different country in the course of their life. It also matters to artists who identify with multiple nations and cultures. For instance, many writers, painters and musicians who lived in the colonies, such as Christopher James, the subject of Marc Röntschi's chapter, identified with the culture of their native country as much as with that of their motherland. As they were often regarded as 'colonial artists' in the motherland, they were marginalised in the national context and, generally, excluded from national canons.

Certain artists' biographies have explicitly shown that their subjects cannot be caught in a national framework. The biography of nineteenth-century writer and critic Heinrich Heine, by Jan-Christoph Hauschild and Michael Werner (1997), can be taken as an example. Drawing on theories of cultural transfer and mediation, these biographers have focused on Heine's role as a mediator between France and Germany, highlighting his multiple identities as a German, European and world citizen. The transnational angle in this book by no means diminishes the importance of Heine's national identity, but shows how it combines and conflicts with other modes of identification. Another pertinent example is Phyllis Birnbaum's biography of the Japanese painter Foujita (2006), which counters dominating national studies that view the artist in the light of Japan's national character. Birnbaum instead portrays

Foujita as ‘the artist caught between East and West’, who travelled extensively and lived and worked at length in France, Latin America and the United States.

Although numerous biographical studies of single writers, painters and musicians have brought out elements that challenge national borders, the full potential of transnational approaches to the study and writing of artists’ lives, across time and artistic domains, has not yet been thoroughly examined. Many questions remain to be explored. For instance, how do biographers deal with cultural otherness, with cultural differences they experience while writing the lives of their subjects, or with analysing their subject’s encounters with other cultures? Another pertinent issue is to what extent a biographer can or should study the international circulation and reception of an artist’s work, given the fact that sources can be dispersed across the globe. Related to this, it is relevant to ask which audience, or audiences, a biographer should strive to address. And finally, as Anna Menyhért discusses in this volume, how does digitalisation, and the advent of online communities, affect the rediscovery and reconstruction of artists’ lives and afterlives, both nationally and transnationally?

Transnational perspectives can also contribute to a greater understanding of how artists’ life stories have themselves ‘travelled’ across the borders of nations and continents, whether during their own lifetime or after their death. Shakespeare, Rembrandt and Beethoven are among the most famous of many internationally renowned artists, supposedly belonging to a supra-national canon, whose lives have been rewritten across Europe and beyond. In many cases, such texts were themselves ‘cross-cultural’ representations,<sup>11</sup> being the product of biographers with national identities different from their subject’s, who were thereby tasked not just with introducing that subject to foreign audiences—such as Edmund Gosse’s writings for Anglophone readers on the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, explored by Suze van der Poll in this volume—but also with shaping their reception and establishing their public image and relevance to new national or supra-national communities.

Thus seen, writing the biographies of foreign artists can be considered a form of transnational mediation.

Like biography, fiction has been an important vehicle for the transnational circulation of an artist's life story. Numerous literary writers have engaged with (historical) artists from abroad, by making them the subjects of biographical portraits, stories and novels. Whether they identify with, or critique, their 'hero', they implicitly or explicitly establish a transnational relationship with that particular artist. From the earliest biographical fictions, it is notable how authors, in a similar manner to Ali Smith, offer representations of artists' lives across cultures and artistic genres. For example, *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) is a fictional biography of the French painter Paul Gauguin, written by the British novelist Somerset Maugham; Irving Stone evokes Vincent Van Gogh, as noted, in *Lust for Life* (1934); and Klaus Mann presents an imaginary re-telling of Tchaikovsky's life in his novel *Symphonie Pathétique* (1935).

In a similar manner to biographers, writers of biographical fiction thus impact on the international reputation of an artist and help to nurture transnational communities. Yet, arguably more so than biographers, they imagine, reinterpret and reframe the lives of artists, appropriating their subject for the story they want to tell. Analysing the modes and forms of biographical representations, as well as the aesthetic, social and ideological context in which they are created, is therefore important to an understanding of how artists' lives travel and how this affects the public image of an artist. In the case of biofiction especially, this applies to both the author and their biographical subject. New, experimental imaginings of an artist's biography, like Ali Smith's portrayal of Cossa, not only shed new light on the fresco painter and his artistic creations, but also reveal which elements in life and art are presented as transnational (and transhistorical) and how this suggestion is evoked through the techniques of fiction.

It is further relevant to examine the mediation of popular biofictions by film or digital media, which can give an important impetus to the cross-border travel of artists' lives, affecting their public images and creating or reinforcing 'afterlives' transnationally, and future research might seek to explore this area in more detail. For instance, the Hollywood film *The Hours* (2002), based on Michael Cunningham's novel of the same title (1998) (discussed in this volume by Maximiliano Jiménez), has undoubtedly 'encouraged a resurgence of interest' in Virginia Woolf in the popular realm globally, even though scholars have been critical about the way she is portrayed and framed in a modern feminist and queer context (Goldman 2012, pp. 34–5).

\* \* \*

This volume aims to advance research in this field in two directions. Firstly, it collects together and studies practices of writing and researching transnational biographies and lives of artists. Its contributions comprises case studies that explore how one can write the biographies of artists who lived in between cultures, or who can be considered transnational subjects because they participated in an international network or drew on cultural traditions from abroad. Related issues include the ways in which such biographies can or cannot constitute or foster transnational communities; how biographers deal with subjects who belong to a culture and nationality different from their and the reader's own; how they conceive of, and navigate, national traditions in biography; and how they mediate between cultures. Its chapters identify which specific cultural codes, conventions and concepts need explanation or translation for new audiences; and which boundaries are drawn between the 'foreign' and the 'familiar'.

Secondly, this collection of essays examines fictional representations of artists' lives across nations and cultures in order to understand how and why writers engage with the lives of artists from abroad and reach out to an (inter)national audience. It explores how authors

construct their subject's cultural, social, racial, gender or artistic identity in order to generate new interest in the artist concerned, to define their position as an artist and to express their own views on the artistic world or society at large. This relates to an investigation of the literary experiments with modes and forms of narration, bordering on fiction, biography and autobiography, which are used in contemporary literature to breathe life into historical characters and express an artist's identity, causing the reader to experience his or her art anew.

The volume brings together the wide-ranging expertise of scholars from across the humanities, from biography and life-writing studies to history, literature, music and the visual arts, and covering the studies of artists from different nations, cultures and languages within Europe and beyond. Perhaps inevitably given the Eurocentric nature of modern histories of arts subjects, England, France and Germany are particularly well-represented; but the volume equally opens up perspectives on artists from Spain, Norway, Hungary, Russia, North America, South Africa and New Zealand. As it includes studies of both males and females, and of canonical and non-canonical artists, the collective contributions enable us to look closely at gender issues in relation to canon formation and (trans)nationality.

Part I presents studies that critically inspect approaches to, and practices of, national biography by examining the lives and works of artists whose transnationality derives from their being located in between nations and cultures. Maryam Thirriard explores transnationality in relation to a single text, Harold Nicolson's (1886–1968) milestone *The Development of English Biography* (1927), which in practice incorporates aspects of French culture (consonant with the author's strong sympathy with French literature) within its modernist survey of the evolution of the English genre. One core concept that Nicolson cultivated throughout his text was the difference between 'pure' biography, which artfully combines history and literature (and which he considered to adhere to the truth), and 'impure' biography, which is sullied by elements external to these, or by the biographer's subjectivity.

Nicolson was preoccupied with identifying distinctly English features of biography, epitomised by James Boswell's landmark *Life of Johnson*; and he held that 'pure' biography was revitalised, following the age of Victorian hagiography, at the hands of Edmund Gosse and Lytton Strachey. Conversely, he believed that at certain historical junctures, English biography had been impeded by foreign influences, including elements of the European classical revival such as the renewed interest in Plutarch's *Lives* and Theophrastus's *Characters*, as well as cross-pollination with the French genre of memoir and specifically with the saloon character-sketch. It was these influences that he felt had, at times, obstructed English biography's expression of what he considered to be native genius.

Suzanne Bode addresses the partnership between the artists Gabriele Münter (1877–1962) and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), who were at the forefront of developments in modernist art in Germany in the earliest years of the twentieth century (the image on the front cover of this volume is a painting by Kandinsky of Münter, portraiture being a well-known metaphor for life writing). By the time of the earliest biography of Münter, written by her partner Johannes Eichner in 1957, she had been largely forgotten by history, and her reputation needed to be re-established by reasserting her previous association with the internationally renowned Kandinsky and her role in the expressionist art movement in Germany. In portraying Münter as child-like, simple and passive, Eichner presented her as 'other' to the better-known male artist, within the confines of a national biography. This not only set the agenda for the subsequent understanding of Münter, but also obfuscated the cross-pollination between her and Kandinsky, setting them apart as opposites to one another. An important change in her life writing occurred via feminist art criticism in the years around 1990, which yielded greater attention paid to Münter's American heritage in addition to her German nationality. Kandinsky similarly straddled two national cultures, as a Russian expatriate whose artistic theories of the time reflected German philosophical discourse. Life

writing that focusses on a single national identity for each of the two artists therefore overlooks important transnational influences on their abstract art as well as the strong exchange of ideas between them.

The subject of Samantha Niederman's chapter is the New Zealand expatriate artist Frances Hodgkins (1869–47), who, although based in England for much of her life, has been largely omitted from discussions of British modernist art, while also being disparaged at the time in her native country; in essence, she found herself between nations. Through examining the views of art critics contemporary with Hodgkins, Niederman argues that this exclusion has its roots in the shared understanding of the nature of 'Englishness' and national identity, in connection with British modernism, in the decades immediately following the First World War. Modernist elements in Hodgkins's paintings conversely originate in her periods spent in Continental Europe, particularly France, which exerted a significant influence on her artistic language (while nonetheless continuing to reflect her time working in England). Her works may have been too international in their aesthetic to have been recognised as native English art, which overlooked transnational influences that only started to be acknowledged in the late 1940s and 1950s. Niederman therefore calls for Hodgkins's output to be considered as transcending geographical boundaries rather than fitting neatly and conveniently into a single national school.

Mark Röntsch discusses the composer Christopher James (1952–2008), who identified with several different nationalities: Great Britain, the country of his ancestors and for which he held a passport owing to his English émigré father; Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe), where he grew up on his parents' tobacco farm, while they held on to their British identity; and South Africa, where he received his university education in music and where (excluding a two-year sabbatical in the US) he settled permanently. James's national identity was therefore challenged throughout his life by the combination of British and Southern African elements,

as evidenced in his musical output, which shows strong influences from the art and culture of both geographical areas, notably including sympathy with Nelson Mandela and the post-Apartheid 'New South Africa'. The multi-faceted transnationality that James embodied is particularly apparent in his seven-movement symphonic poem *Paradise Regained* (1997–9) for orchestra and optional choir, named after John Milton's celebrated poem and incorporating an assortment of musical quotations in one of its movements including both British and South African national anthems, emblematic of the composer's dual nationality. The greater understanding of James's life and outlook generated by the exploration of this work demonstrates that music compositions may constitute a valid biographical source capable of yielding a more rounded impression of an artist's transnationality.

The contributors to Part II are all themselves engaged in biographical writing, fictional or non-fictional, and reflect here on the ways in which they have approached the writing of the lives of specific transnational subjects. Jane McVeigh contemplates the nature of the biographer's role in re-creating and reimagining the life of another person, informed by the work undertaken on her forthcoming biography of Richmal Crompton (1890–1969), author of the famous *Just William* stories (1919–69), which have been widely translated, and whose eponymous eleven-year-old has since eclipsed the relatively unknown person who created him. Following Walter Benjamin, McVeigh suggests that the biographer—like the translator—deals with the 'afterlife' rather than the 'life', and that Crompton (in stark contrast to the literary character she created) has not enjoyed much of an afterlife, which it is therefore her function as biographer to re-create. Such a narrative possesses three main strands: writing that re-creates, and animates, the subject within the time and place in which they lived; recreational writing, which prompts emotion and empathy in the reader in consequence of the life story being recounted; and re-creative writing, which proceeds thematically and innovatively, bordering on fiction, by way of revealing specific elements of the subject's life.

Each has implications for transnationality given the popularity of the *Just William* stories in other languages (notably Spanish), in which form they have been differently received as well as differently nuanced by the translators, yielding subtly variant meanings for—and understandings of—the texts themselves.

Tamar Hager discusses her own contribution to writing the life of the pioneering British female photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79), whose claim to transnationality stems from her strong ties with India and Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), having resided in both countries in the course of her life. Taking up photography in middle age, Cameron soon pursued her new-found career with fervent enthusiasm, hoping (even if she was ultimately unsuccessful) to bring her family some income to offset their financial difficulties. Hager visits the same places once frequented by Cameron in a bid to gain an enhanced understanding of her life story, contemplating what it meant for her, whilst living in India, to have sent her six-year-old daughter Juley to be educated in England. She likewise considers Cameron's motivations for seeking to enter the profession of photography, then new, expensive and male-dominated, resisting conventional gender roles since it took time and resources away from her domestic responsibilities, which were inevitably neglected. Thus Cameron prompts comparison with Hager's own situation as a wife and mother intent on pursuing a career as a writer juggling professional and familial duties, leaving her feeling alienated by Cameron's example. While Cameron seems largely to elude Hager, she finds some common ground in Cameron's identification with her subjects, as demonstrated by her ambivalence towards colonial stereotypes in photographing Ceylonese sitters. This leads Hager to conclude that transnational art may take place within such a shared middleground.

Anna Menyhért explores the afterlife of an artist (a notion also developed, as noted, in McVeigh's chapter), referring to the continuing discourse on their life story following their death, particularly in the transnational environment of online digital media. Her discussion

examines the case of the Jewish Hungarian writer Renée Erdős (1879–1956), who achieved success first as a poet in the 1900s, then for her works of fiction from the 1920s onwards; the break in her career was caused by a nervous breakdown following which she was unable to write for some years. As a bestselling novelist, she became a victim of her own popularity, since her writings were therefore not considered worthy of serious literary attention. Menyhért wrote a fictional biography of Erdős in 2016, based partly in fact but also the product of her imagination, filling in lacunae creatively according to the partial picture that had already formed of Erdős's life. The monograph constituted part of Menyhért's broader endeavours to reconstruct largely forgotten traditions of Hungarian women writers through a variety of conventional and digital media. Erdős had been forgotten to history owing to the literary processes that contribute to canonisation, involving both people and institutions, which systematically exclude women writers from discussion. In the digital era, however, transnational online networks offer a more accessible and participatory means for the afterlives of historically marginalised figures to be recovered, remembered and refreshed.

The volume's Part III concerns artists on artists: distinguished writers who have taken as their subject the lives of transnational artists with a nationality different from their own. Suze van der Poll discusses Edmund Gosse's (1849–1928) biography of Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), published in 1907, the same year as Gosse's more famous biography *Father and Son*. It therefore encourages parallels and contrasts to be drawn between Gosse's life writing on the Norwegian dramatist and that on his own father, which evidently prompted the author to rethink his views on Ibsen's works such as his play *The Wild Duck* (1884). Gosse had originally been drawn to Ibsen in his endeavours to identify a subject that had not already been covered by others in order to launch his own career in literary criticism, and he published widely on the playwright in the 1870s. His biography of Ibsen was the first to offer a complete picture of the subject up to his death, benefitting from the insights into his

personal life given by his letters published just a few years earlier as well as offering rich analyses of the plays, all set against the backdrop of European culture. Gosse's biography of Ibsen constructed the playwright as a major European author and transnational subject, albeit one alienated from both his family and artistic communities, with the notable exception of his compatriot and rival, the writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910).

Maria Razumovskaya's subject is the Soviet writer Boris Pasternak (1890–1960), best known for the scandalous novel *Doctor Zhivago* (1957), which was rejected in his home country during a deeply challenging period of history in which writers were a particular target for censorship and condemnation. Within this sociopolitical climate, (auto)biography became a key agent of indoctrination and the enforcing of the ideal of the new transnational Soviet Man, a move of which Pasternak personally despaired, and which he publicly opposed through the Union of Soviet Writers in the 1930s and subsequently through *Doctor Zhivago*, leading to the work's suppression. *Doctor Zhivago* was largely sketched around 1932, at a time when Pasternak—who earlier in his life had aspired to become a composer—had developed a close friendship with the pianist Heinrich Neuhaus and his wife that led to his affair with (and ultimately marriage to) the latter, events he explored in his autobiographical literary cycle *Second Birth* (1932). As an acclaimed interpreter of the music of Fryderyk Chopin, Neuhaus also fuelled Pasternak's passion for the Polish composer, by whom he had been inspired in his search for an alternative transnational identity as early as his 1928 poem 'Ballade', and whose spirit he further evoked in *Second Birth*, in writing of the love triangle in which he had become embroiled. By illustrating competing notions of transnational identity, this case study critically reflects on the tendency to conceive of transnationalism as a typical product of modern Western society.

Josiane Ranguin discusses the influence of the African-American writer James Baldwin (1924–1987) on the Anglo-Caribbean writer Caryl Phillips (1958–) and the response

to systemic racism in his literary works, particularly evident in Phillips's essay collection *The European Tribe* (1987) and his earlier play *The Shelter* (1984). Phillips, who became acquainted with Baldwin's writings in the late 1970s, first met Baldwin in 1983 and perceived a transnational dimension in his life and work: Baldwin had been forced to relocate to France as a young man owing to racism experienced in the US, moving first to Paris and then living in Saint Paul de Vence in Southern France for 17 years from 1970. He became a spokesperson for equal rights at the expense, Phillips believed, of the quality of his literary output. Baldwin was also a homosexual whose writings engaged with homosexual topics in advance of the advent of queer studies as a distinct academic field, and in that respect he was effectively doubly exiled. He felt the burden of the responsibility of the writer in bearing witness to marginalised groups, and publicly challenged expressions of white supremacy.

Manet van Montfrans's chapter concerns French novelist Marie Darrieussecq's *Vie de Paula M[odersohn] Becker* (2016), a life of the German expressionist painter that continues a flourishing tradition of contemporary authors writing lives of artists in which the biographer has an explicit textual presence and the portrayal of the subject is consequently a deeply personal one. Inspired by Becker's painting 'Reclining Mother-and-Child Nude' (1906), Darrieussecq recreates Becker's life by drawing on her substantial body of artwork, as well as her published letters and diaries, availing herself of the opportunities to provide her own perspectives when faced with conflicting documentary evidence. As she does so, Darrieussecq explores key themes that are shared with her novels, including motherhood (and its depiction through Becker's paintings), the tension between family life and the pursuit of art, male domination and the place of women within the arts, and Becker's own untimely death following childbirth at the age of 31. Darrieussecq champions Becker as a painter whose works challenged long-standing artistic representations of the female body, resonating with

her own feminist outlook as an author: much as self-portraits were an important component of Becker's output, Darrieussecq's text is at the same time a self-portrait of the biographer.

Part IV of the volume crystallises around fictional representations of artists' lives across nations, through the medium that would today be recognised as biofiction. The subject of Sander Bax's chapter is the Dutch writer K. Schippers (1936–), who was preoccupied throughout his career with the visual arts, and whose 2015 book *Niet verder vertellen* (*Don't Tell Anyone*) elides geographical and historical boundaries by creatively bringing together his own mother Dientje, Dutch artist George Hendrik Breitner, Italian painter Alberto Giacometti, Schippers himself as narrator, and another twenty-first-century character, his travelling companion Simone. It therefore combines art history, life writing and fiction, as well as taking a transnational approach in which modern-day Stampa, Switzerland (Giacometti's home town) is connected with the Amsterdam of Schippers' young mother, thereby blending the stories of historical artists with aspects of the author's own biography. In the second half of *Don't Tell Anyone*, Schippers' use of fictional techniques become more prominent, as he gives his characters an agency beyond that typical of conventional historical writing, assigning them thoughts and feelings to yield an intimate portrait of his mother. At certain points in the book, indeed, the biographer himself appears as a character who has fictional encounters both with the narrator and with Dientje, calling into question whether authorial power in this instance lies with the biographer, as one might expect, or with the narrator.

Maximiliano Jiménez explores the transnational engagement between Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998; film adaptation, 2002), a literary homage that sees Cunningham transpose Woolf's characters—including the eponymous heroine, now renamed Clarissa Vaughan—from 1920s London to late twentieth-century New York. For example, Cunningham's novel reimagines British monarchs as illustrious Hollywood actresses, thereby inviting comparison between the current cultural

power of the global film industry and the historical political force of British imperialism. Cunningham also incorporates in his story a dramatisation of a reader of Woolf's novel, Laura Brown, located in post-World War 2 suburban Los Angeles, as well as the fictionalised character of Woolf herself—thereby obfuscating the boundaries between fact and fiction in a manner that may be traced back to Woolf's own writings, as well as raising questions about literature's capacity to represent the real world. In doing so, Cunningham establishes a number of distinct 'worlds' for his characters, in terms of their relationships with the constructed surroundings within which they are confined as well as their motivations for writing and reading *Mrs Dalloway* as a means of seeking entry to other such worlds.

Finally, Christopher Wiley investigates the three *Dodo* novels by E.F. Benson (1867–1940) as the earliest iterations of a diverse tradition of artistic representations of the composer Dame Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) that extends to the present time. Benson's original *Dodo* (1893) introduces the character of Edith Staines, a thinly veiled portrait of Smyth (a close friend of the Benson family) who, like the real-life figure on which she is based, had composed a Mass, and customarily gave performances of her music at the piano. Its sequels, *Dodo's Daughter* (1913) and *Dodo Wonders* (1921), extend the parallels between the two: Edith, like Smyth, has had her songs performed at Queen's Hall in London, and has written a string quartet, giving concerts of her music in Germany as well as enjoying games of golf. Benson's sensational and immensely successful novels, which were published in the UK and US (and, in the case of the second instalment, appeared in America in the year prior to the British publication), constitute transnational writing that placed before reading communities not just a fictionalised version of Smyth, but also the very notion of a woman composer of large-scale works, at a time in which this was highly unusual.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume demonstrate the relevance of life writing to the making and unmaking of artistic identities transnationally in the past and present. The

nature of transnationality, and of the lives and works of artists who straddle different nations and cultures or who cannot be conveniently located within the boundaries of a single country, is investigated through a wide-ranging series of case studies encompassing biographies and biofictions, the study and writing of subjects' lives, as well as artists writing about one another. The resulting, much-needed scrutiny of transnationality in relation to life writing will, we hope, lay solid foundations for further study in these constituent areas and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Lackey refers to the present proliferation of biographical novels in his edited book *Conversations with Biographical Novelists* (2019), p. 49. Biofiction has gained further attention in the scholarly world in recent years, evidenced by the increasing number of journal special issues, conferences and conference proceedings devoted to the topic.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Lackey, for instance, defines biofiction as 'literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure' (2016, p. 3; see also Lackey 2017). Others, though, define this literary form in more general terms. See, for example, the recent call for papers for the

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conference ‘Biofiction as World Literature’ at <https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/biofiction-as-world-literature/call-for-papers> (accessed 28 January 2020). In some studies, the term

‘biofiction’ is explained within the broader framework of ‘autofiction’, ‘biografiction’ or ‘historiographic metafiction’; see, for example, Saunders 2010, p. 15 and, for a discussion on the term in relation to life writing, Boldrini and Novak 2017, pp. 9–12.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Michael Lackey separates biofiction from the category of ‘life writing’ as he conceives biofiction as a non-referential genre in which (some) facts are altered, whereas life writing, in his view, is referential, as it aims to represent actual historical lives accurately and truthfully (2017, pp. 8, 12). This view is, however, different from the generally accepted understanding of life writing as described in Jolly’s *Encyclopedia* and in other foundational studies in the field, such as Smith and Watson (2010).

<sup>4</sup> These are the words used by George’s friend, Helen, in Smith’s *How to be both* (2015, p. 139).

<sup>5</sup> According to Georg Lukács, who conceived of the historical novel as a literary work with fictional characters ‘typical’ of the larger social and cultural patterns in a certain age, the biographical novel was too much focused on the life of one single individual to be historically representative. Yet, by the standards of biography, the handling of facts in biofiction was deemed to be too loose and imaginative.

<sup>6</sup> Kisters (2017) refers to Fastert, Joachimides and Krieger’s edited *Die Wiederkehr des Künstlers* (2011).

<sup>7</sup> Another example is *The Mediatization of the Artist*, edited by Rachel Esner and Sandra Kisters (2017).

<sup>8</sup> *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (Iriye and Saunier 2009) offers several entries that highlight the relevance of a transnational approach to the history of music. See also Golovlev 2018.

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<sup>9</sup> For the study of literary modernism in a transnational context, see, for example, Hart 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Lajta-Novak mentions the proliferation of biographical novels about women artists (2017, p. 223).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Keller uses the German term 'gekreuzte Biographie' for studies in which biographer and biographical subject do not belong to the same culture (2013, p. 143).