

Crossing Borders: Transnational Perspectives on Life-Writing and Ego-Documents

University of Southampton | Tuesday 14 April 2026

Centenary Building (Building 100), Highfield Campus

PROGRAMME

Arrival, Coffee & Welcome

Room 8013

From 09:00

Session 1

09:30 – 11:00

Panel 1: Navigating and Narrating Transnationally

Room 8009

Milosz Cybowski | Daniel Renshaw | Niamh Hanrahan

Panel 2: Language and Mediation in Transnational Writing

Room 8011

Matilde Piu | Sarah Newman | Renata Schellenberg

Break

Room 8013

Session 2

11:15 – 12:45

Panel 3: Generational Life Writing and Archival Memory

Room 8009

Alessandro Columbu | Amy Grant

Panel 4: Identity Formation and Life Writing in the Postwar Era

Room 8011

Joanna Bednarska-Rydzewska | Yuri Gomez | Esther Gardei

Lunch

Room 8013

Session 3

13:30 - 15:00

Panel 5: Rescue and Relief in the Holocaust

Room 8009

Bill Edmonds | Iryna Mykhailova | Ewa Splawska

Panel 6: Gendered Dimensions in Transnational Narratives

Room 8011

Christie Margrave | Marie-Christine Alberts | Anna Marion Weber

Break
Room 8013

Session 4
15:15 - 16:45

Panel 7: Life Writing in the Shadow of Empire
Room 8011

Yasmin Akhter | Rehnuma Sazzad | Shweta Deshpande

Keynote Public Lecture

17:30 – 19:00

Room 1001

Chair: Rachel Pistol (University of Southampton)

Éva Kovács (Vienna Wiesenthal Institute)

Challenges, Traps and Dead Ends: Navigating the Labyrinth of Personal Accounts in Holocaust Studies

Panel 1: Navigating and Narrating Transnationally

Room 8009

Chair: Claire Le Foll (University of Southampton)

Milosz Cybowski (Independent)

"The only free one among the nations" – experiences of Polish travellers and exiles in 19th century Britain

Count Władysław Zamoyski was only one of thousands of Polish exiles forced to emigrate from the Kingdom of Poland in the aftermath of the failed anti-Russian November Uprising. Upon arriving in Britain in the 1830s he took particular pleasure in the fact that border officials at Dover did not require him to present a passport. In his diaries he praised Britain as "the only free one among the nations". Letters, memoirs, and diaries of Poles visiting Britain during the long nineteenth century reveal how their perceptions of the country varied according to individual circumstances, social background, and financial situation. By examining a range of examples of ego-writing, including the rarely heard voices of women, this paper has two aims. Firstly, it offers a closer look at the diverse experiences of Polish exiles and travellers whose stories are almost completely unknown outside Polish scholarship. Secondly, it seeks to shed more light on how Britain was perceived by outsiders during that period.

Daniel Renshaw (University of Reading)

Narratives of Migration and Conversion in 'Hebrew Christian' autobiographies before 1914

All of the British churches in the years before the First World War were, to a greater or less degree, proselytising institutions. An especial focus of Christian evangelism between the 1880s to 1914 were the migrant Jewish communities in British cities formed as a result of the great movement from the Pale of Settlement. The ways in which proselytization was attempted were many and varied, from special church services held in Yiddish and Hebrew to soup kitchens and the provision of free medical care. This paper will examine how autobiography, recounting the experiences of individual converts from Judaism to Christianity, was used as a tool by missionary groups in their efforts to win Eastern European Jews over to the Christian gospel. In particular, it will focus on one autobiographical text, Henry L. Hellyer's *From the Rabbis to Christ*, published in 1911. This book-length monograph describes the author's parallel geographical journey from Russia to Britain and finally to America, and spiritual one from Orthodox Judaism to evangelical Christianity. In doing so it offers a lens on the arguments advanced by proselytisers and the tensions that emerged both between Jews and Christians and within Jewish communities as a result of mission work. Hellyer's narrative of his experiences suggests a fundamental difference between 'East' and 'West' not only societally but also in terms of religion – that what was understood to be Christianity in the tsarist empire was not a 'true' form of the faith, which could only be really engaged with and eventually accepted following migration and exposure to Anglo-American Protestantism. Faith becomes transnational, but this paper will argue, the *journey* of the migrant is necessary for final spiritual fulfilment.

Niamh Hanrahan (University of Manchester)

Writing Across Borders: Jewish Refugee Correspondence Between Japan and Europe During the Holocaust

Personal correspondence functioned as a vital form of communication for Jewish refugees during the Holocaust, capturing experiences of displacement, survival, and connection across borders. One thus far underexplored area within these transnational networks is Japan, where several thousand Jewish refugees settled in the port city of Kobe. Despite their physical separation, refugees continued to exchange correspondence with loved ones and humanitarian agencies in Europe until 1942. Drawing on public and private archival collections, this paper examines letters sent between Japan and Europe as multilingual and transnational ego-documents that mediated migration and refugee knowledge transfer during the Holocaust. These letters reveal refugees' understandings of their own mobility and the 'world of possibilities' (Zalc and Mariot) open to them, as well as how racialised language emerged in refugees' recollections of movement through East Asia – where Jewish refugees could both benefit from and be unsettled by newly encountered racial and imperial hierarchies. This correspondence was also shaped by both government censorship and anticipated self-censorship. Writers performed for multiple audiences at once, often concealing meanings through coded language or omission, and many surviving letters were cut apart by censors. Beyond the multiple languages in which these letters were written, this paper argues that coded expression constituted an additional, situational language produced in response to the expectation of censorship. Read in this way, the letters reveal not only personal experience but also the strategies through which refugees navigated knowledge transfer whilst under surveillance. Through highlighting refugees' active role in sustaining transnational communication networks, this paper challenges narratives that cast refugees as passive subjects of displacement. In doing so, it repositions Japan not as a peripheral refuge but as a key node in the transnational history of Jewish refugee communication during the Holocaust.

Panel 2: Language and Mediation in Transnational Writing

Room 8011

Chair: Monja Stahlberger (University of Reading)

Matilde Piu (University College Cork)

Transnational Selfhood: Life-Writing in L2 Italian in Janek Gorczyca's "Storia di mia vita".

This paper examines *Storia di mia vita* (2024) [Story of My Life], the autobiographical narrative of Polish-born writer Janek Gorczyca, as a transnational ego-document that reconfigures life writing in contemporary Italian literature. Migrated from southeastern Poland to Rome in 1992 and living for decades without stable housing, Gorczyca writes his autobiography in an Italian acquired through everyday urban encounters. The result is a narrative marked by interlanguage features and oral registers that function not as "errors" but as expressive resources for negotiating identity, memory, and multilingual belonging. Drawing on sociolinguistics, life-writing studies, and transnational Italian studies (Mastellotto 2025, Bond, Bonsaver, Faloppa, 2015, Pavlenko 2004), the paper situates *Storia di mia vita* within a growing corpus of autobiographical texts written in L2 Italian. Gorczyca's narrative practices—e.g. blending personal testimony with collective migrant histories, incorporating multilingual markers, and reshaping expectations of narrative voice—demonstrate how life writing in a second language can unsettle established genre conventions. The paper argues that his self-narration articulates a form of "migrant pact," reshaping the autobiographical pact (Lejeune 1989). Through close textual analysis, the paper shows that *Storia di mia vita* contributes to the pluralisation of the contemporary Italian canon by foregrounding an understudied European migrant trajectory often eclipsed by Global South frameworks. As a transnational ego-document, the text reveals how autobiographical writing in L2 Italian becomes a site where language, genre, and identity intersect—expanding Italian life writing beyond nation-bound assumptions and illuminating new forms of selfhood forged across languages.

Sarah Newman (University of Bristol)

Metalinguistic comments in multilingual Holocaust ego-documents

Multilingualism is a key feature of many ego-documents written by victims of the Holocaust. Factors contributing to this phenomenon include the massive displacement of populations across Europe, language policies introduced by the Nazis and sympathetic governments, and the significance of language in terms of national or religious identities. In the context of the Holocaust, language was considered a method of expressing oneself under looming 'de-judification' policies that included linguistic alienation (Gubar, 2004, p. 444). I seek to analyse ego-documents written by victims of the Holocaust to gain a more complete picture of contemporary language use. Approaching language history 'from below' (Elspaß 2005) with a focus on multilingualism will be essential to form an understanding of 'who [spoke] what language to whom and when' (Fishman 1965). In this paper, I will present findings from a quantitative and qualitative analysis of a diverse range of ego-documents written in Germany and Eastern Europe from 1939 to 1945, investigating the use of metalinguistic comments in private diaries and letters. Metalinguistic comments are a rich source of information about a language's status and function and can reveal a writer's attitudes and ideologies towards language (Dorleijn, 2019, p. 196). I will focus on explicit metalinguistic comments, when the authors of these texts directly refer to their language choice. These

choices may allude to the use of language as code, i.e. using a shared language to communicate privately and bypass state censorship, or what Otsuji and Pennycook (2010) term 'metrolingualism' –multilingual individuals using and playing with their languages to negotiate identity, using ego-documents as a creative translanguaging space. My findings will thus provide first insights into explicit metalinguistic comments on multilingual language use in Holocaust ego-documents.

Renata Schellenberg (Mount Allison University)
Life Writing and Exile: The Case of Dubravka Ugrešić

This paper investigates the autobiographical writings of Croatian author Dubravka Ugrešić (1949-2023). Ugrešić's post-1990s writings convey her experience of exile and cultural displacement in wake of the rise of nationalism and civil war in her home country Croatia, communicating both a sense of professional loss, but also a stark resilience to her émigré circumstances. This paper argues that these texts should be read as viable ego documents that record her uneasy (and unwanted) transition from feted national cultural figure to disparaged expatriate peripatetic author, reflecting the conditions of someone who wrote without clear state belonging and an identifiable mother tongue. In doing so, Ugrešić exposed the isolation and conundrum of living abroad and maintaining an authorial presence, all the while writing in what she termed "a small language" (Croatian), that was now dependent on translators to be read. Rather importantly, these writings allowed her to reflect on the political circumstances in her home country, affording a dialogic critical remove to assess those responsible for its narrowing intellectual socio-political scope and to call out its worse culprits, an act of resistance that helped Ugrešić formulate new criteria for her own approach to literature. Despite the crushing isolation experienced in exile, she found a manifest intellectual freedom as an émigré writer and in an 'out-of-nation-zone', a space that Ugrešić repeatedly referred to as the "ON ZONE" in her work. Dubravka Ugrešić died in 2023 and is now being officially remembered as a rehabilitated canonical Croatian author. This paper argues that her true contribution rests in the transnational literary domain and assesses her legacy accordingly.

Panel 3: Generational Life Writing and Archival Memory

Room 8009

Chair: Charlie Knight (School of Advanced Study, University of London)

Alessandro Columbu (University of Westminster)

Beyond Syria's borders: Transcultural Memory and Collaborative Life-Writing in Hadi Abdullah's Critical Conditions

This paper explores *Critical Conditions*, the memoir of Syrian reporter and media activist Hadi Abdullah, as a hybrid text shaped by displacement, trauma, and collaborative authorship. I argue that while rooted in the Syrian revolutionary experience, *Critical Conditions* exceeds the limits of national memory. Rather than positioning the self as a representative of the nation, Abdullah centres his account on affective bonds, particularly with comrades lost to war. His testimony weaves together media activism, oral narrative, and confessional reflection, foregrounding grief, survival, and moral commitment over political abstraction. Drawing on Astrid Erll's theory of travelling memory and Susanne Enderwitz's insights into the limits of autobiographical conventions in Arabic literature, I argue that Abdullah's memoir represents a transcultural act of remembering: one that circulates across linguistic, digital, and symbolic borders. The memoir's multilingual and multimodal formation (spoken, transcribed, and translated) calls into question singular models of authorship and highlights the role of mediated memory in contexts of censorship and violence, and challenges traditional notions of autobiography. By situating *Critical Conditions* within debates on cultural memory, life-writing, and post-2011 Arab autobiographical production, this paper contributes to emerging discussions on how memoir writing responds to and reshapes histories of dispossession, repression, and exile.

Amy Grant (University of Reading)

Lives Between Borders: Ugandan Asian Ego-Documents Across Generations

This paper offers a socio-literary investigation of the Ugandan Asian diasporic refugee experience in Britain through a close reading of selected ego-documents, including published memoirs, online posts and personal narratives. It examines how these forms of life-writing articulate transnational subjectivities shaped at the intersection of the colonial histories of the Indian subcontinent, East Africa, and Britain. Focusing on texts produced in the aftermath of the 1972 expulsion of Asians from Uganda (Mahmood Mamdani, 1973) the paper explores how displacement, enforced mobility, and racialisation are narrated from within individual and familial perspectives that complicate nation-centred historical frameworks. Particular attention is paid to the articulation of a "conscious pariah" (Hannah Arendt, 1943) within these ego-documents. The paper argues that personal writings register experiences of exclusion and precarity in ways that both diverge from and complement collective memory practices, especially oral histories that have often dominated accounts of Ugandan Asian displacement. While oral testimony has played a crucial role in preserving communal narratives, ego-documents allow for a more intimate examination of affect, self-fashioning, and linguistic negotiation, revealing how writers position themselves across multiple cultural, social, and political contexts. In addition, the paper considers how later generations of British Ugandans of Asian descent engage with these ego-documents as part of a broader cultural and political project of historical recovery (Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, 2008; Lucy Fulford, 2023). Through processes of reading, curating, and re-narrating personal archives, descendants of the expelled community seek to "take stock" of a shared past and

assert visibility within British and transnational histories. By foregrounding ego-documents as both historical sources and literary constructions, this paper argues that life-writing functions not only as a record of displacement but also as an active site for the ongoing negotiation of diasporic memory, identity, and belonging across borders.

Panel 4: Identity Formation and Life Writing in the Postwar Era

Room 8011

Chair: Rachel Pistol (University of Southampton)

Joanna Bednarska-Rydzewska (University of Lodz)

“Good Blood” Trauma: Autobiographical Life Writing of Lebensborn Children

This paper explores autobiographical life writing produced by individuals born within or forcibly incorporated into the Nazi organisation Lebensborn e.V. Officially operating as a welfare and charitable association within the SS structures, Lebensborn in practice served the racial policy of the Third Reich by promoting the reproduction of so-called “good blood,” combating abortion, and abducting children—particularly from occupied territories—for the purpose of Germanisation. In cultural memory, Lebensborn is often surrounded by persistent myths, most notably the portrayal of its homes as elite SS brothels or “breeding houses.” Autobiographical and biographically mediated narratives written by Lebensborn children complicate these reductive representations by shifting the focus from sensationalised images to long-term experiences of shame, silence, and fractured identity. These autobiographical texts do not function solely as individual self-narratives. Their authors repeatedly emphasise that they speak from within a shared historical experience and on behalf of a wider group of people whose lives were shaped by Nazi racial ideology. Classified by National Socialism as bearers of “Nordic” or “superior” blood, they occupied a paradoxical position of ideological privilege while simultaneously being subjected to profound biopolitical violence. Adopting a transnational perspective, the paper situates Lebensborn autobiographies at the intersection of forced mobility, border-crossing biographies, and postwar memory cultures. By reading these ego-documents as forms of autobiographical life writing that articulate both individual and collective dimensions of memory, the paper argues that they challenge simplified victim–perpetrator binaries and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of trauma, racialisation, and belonging in twentieth-century European history.

Yuri Gomez (Newcastle University)

Quijano’s Correspondence: Transnational Intellectual Formation and Self-Representation in Postwar Latin America

Ego-documents frequently traverse cross-cultural contexts, raising questions about how narratives of the self are shaped through interpersonal relations. In Latin America, the post-war period marked not only the intensification of social conflict but also the consolidation of a new intellectual profile unleashed by a critical and committed social science. While Anibal Quijano (1930-2018) is widely recognised for formulating the Coloniality of Power –a foundational contribution to the decolonial turn–, his early intellectual trajectory was deeply embedded in this milieu. The post-war conjuncture thus is essential for a deeper understanding of his later oeuvre. Quijano’s unpublished correspondence offers insight into how a generation of Latin American intellectuals lived through the post-war period. The letters map an intellectual network encompassing Latin America, the United States and Europe, through which he shared projects and reflections after returning to Peru following a period in Chile –the cornerstone of the regional Latin Americanisation of social science in the 1960s. Furthermore, these ego-documents shed light on his relations with groups of peers, political and academic environments, and norms of behaviour, revealing the frames that shaped his personhood. Rather than an expression of an autonomous inner account of oneself, the paper draws upon the conceptualisation of ego-documents as sites

of a relational and socially embedded self (Fulbrook and Rublack, 2010). Correspondence is approached as a historically situated practice of subject formation, in which silences, conventions, and modes of addressing certain issues are articulated within specific institutional norms and peer-based frameworks. The paper therefore examines processes of formation and self-representation in the life writing of a Southern intellectual embedded in cross-border networks.

Esther Gardej (Technische Universität Berlin)

Autobiographical Writing and Musical Self-Narration in German-Jewish Exile: Fritz Wolf (1908-2006)

My paper examines the writings and musical compositions of Fritz Wolf (1908–2006), a German-Jewish émigré from Heilbronn who settled in Mandatory Palestine. I treat these works as 'ego-documents' that articulate a transnational experience. Focusing on his unpublished *Lesebuch für meinen Enkel* (1995) and the autobiographical musical revue *Die Nahariyade* (1938), I explore how personal narratives address themes such as displacement, cultural rupture and belonging. This is achieved through both autobiographical reflection and Wolf's careful preservation and description of contrasting German and Palestinian/Israeli objects, spaces and everyday practices. Close analysis reveals that Wolf's 'ego-documents' juxtapose the structured order of bourgeois German-Jewish life with the improvised, agrarian realities of exile in Palestine. However, they linguistically preserve this contrast between the old and new worlds and their respective orders. Wolf's writing is characterised by a consistent preoccupation with the destruction of 'worlds' in the most literal sense: descriptions and references to the Earth, digging up soil, cultivating fields, and burying his mother, who passed away en route back to Germany in 1938, following Fritz's wedding, on a Greek island (either Rhodes or Cyprus) etc. Written in German and addressed to a future generation ('Enkel'), Wolf's texts negotiate multiple cultural and political frameworks, including bourgeois German-Jewish life before 1933, the precarious realities of agricultural settlement in Nahariya and the retrospective positioning of these experiences within Israeli society. Examining Wolf's materials reveals how such 'ego-documents' challenge uniform accounts of German-Jewish history in Israel. Rather than reinforcing singular or simplified narratives, these writings highlight the presence of hybridity, but also a concrete „German-Jewish despair“ in everyday life.

Panel 5: Rescue and Relief in the Holocaust

Room 8009

Chair: Tony Kushner (University of Southampton)

Bill Edmonds (Royal Holloway, University of London)

Writing Across Borders: The Correspondence of Margarethe Lachmund and Transnational Aid and Friendships in Wartime Germany

Before the deportation of 800 Jews from Vorpommern to occupied Poland beginning in 1940, the German Quaker Margarethe Lachmund had already forged meaningful relationships with many Jewish individuals locally. These friendships did not end at the moment of forced removal. Instead, they continued—however precariously—across borders, censorship regimes, and shifting wartime geographies. This paper examines the surviving correspondence between Lachmund and several deported German Jews, exploring how bonds of friendship, aid, and moral witness were maintained and re-imagined across distance during the Second World War. Focusing on three case studies—Frau A.G., Clara Grunwald, and the couple Erich and Cläre Silbermann—this paper analyses what ego-documents reveal about the lived experiences of deportees, as well as the responses, anxieties, and ethical commitments of their non-Jewish friends within the Altreich. The letters under study illuminate the ways deported Jews navigated new cultural and linguistic contexts, how information travelled across shifting borders, and how emotional and material support operated within the severe constraints of Nazi surveillance and wartime postal systems. By foregrounding correspondence as both a record and an instrument of transnational connection, this paper argues that letters did not merely reflect Jewish life under Nazism; they actively shaped it. They reveal networks of care that crossed political and territorial boundaries, demonstrating that forms of aid—whether parcels, information, or emotional solidarity—continued despite the regime’s efforts to isolate and dehumanise deported Jews. This paper further proposes that friendship and letter-writing themselves can be understood as a category of aid, expanding traditional understandings of relief beyond the material to include affective and relational support. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions of transnational life-writing, border-crossing personal narratives, and the ethical possibilities revealed in ego-documents produced under extreme constraint.

Iryna Mykhailova (University of Göttingen)

Between Emotions and Reason: Correspondences of German-Jewish Exiles and Their Rescuers (Based on Findings from the Harlow Shapley Archive)

Harlow Shapley (1885–1972) is best known as the Harvard astronomer who estimated the size of the Milky Way. Far less acknowledged, however, is his substantial role in rescuing European intellectuals persecuted in their homelands and seeking to emigrate to the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. For several years, the rescue campaign he initiated through his extensive academic networks dominated his life, at times overshadowing his astronomical work. Shapley attempted to assist hundreds of individuals across Europe – many of them German-Jewish scientists and scholars – and each case required him to navigate numerous legal, institutional, and financial obstacles. Drawing on the letters of German-Jewish exile philosophers, Harlow Shapley, and other American professors and organizations involved in the rescue efforts, this paper examines the emotional labor embedded in humanitarian assistance. The ego-documents preserved in Shapley’s archive

reveal that rescue work was far from the linear narrative of heroism and gratitude often suggested by public memory or by Hollywood films. Instead, the letters depict a demanding and often exhausting human process marked by frustration and emotional strain. The German-Jewish philosophers discussed here – many trained in the continental tradition and preoccupied with metaphysical questions – formed a distinct group within the American intellectual landscape. Their professional identities, shaped within the German university system, frequently clashed with the analytical orientation that dominated American philosophy departments. Their difficulties in securing positions and gaining recognition stand in stark contrast to the trajectories of figures such as Theodor Adorno or Hannah Arendt, whose work attracted greater attention and ultimately brought them international renown. By examining the ego-documents of the philosophers from Shapley archive, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the intellectual and emotional realities of German-Jewish exiles and highlights their ambivalent position within the American academic environment.

Ewa Splawska (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań)
Jewish Deportees Writing to Power: Petitionary Ego-Documents from the Zbąszyń Transit Camp (1938-1939)

This paper examines petitionary and notarial ego-documents produced by Jewish deportees interned in the Zbąszyń transit camp following the Polenaktion of October 1938. Abruptly expelled from Nazi Germany and stranded at the Polish–German border, deportees were compelled to articulate their lives, identities, and future prospects through written appeals addressed to state authorities and legal institutions. The analysed corpus consists of first-person documents, including petitions requesting permission to leave the camp, temporary passes outside Zbąszyń, consent for medical treatment, applications for family reunification, and correspondence with customs offices. It also includes notarial documents written in the first person, such as powers of attorney authorising the liquidation of property in Germany, the obtaining of civil documents and certificates, the collection of money or assets, parental consent for the emigration of children (including Kindertransport cases). Methodologically, the paper approaches these materials as administrative ego-documents: texts produced within legal and bureaucratic frameworks that nonetheless function as acts of self-narration under constraint. Combining methods from life-writing studies, social and legal history, and transnational history, the paper analyses how deportees strategically shaped first-person narratives to make themselves legible to multiple authorities across borders. Written in German, Polish, the documents demonstrate the strategic adaptation of language to shifting administrative contexts and address multiple imagined audiences. These include correspondence directed to the Polish Committee for the Assistance of Jewish Refugees from Germany and, after 31 January 1939, to the Delegate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, alongside Jewish organisations and relatives abroad. By situating Zbąszyń as a space of transnational suspension, the paper argues that these ego-documents capture a pre-Holocaust moment of radical uncertainty, when deportees remained suspended between states, legal systems, and possible futures. In doing so, it expands the scope of life-writing scholarship and highlights the analytical value of bureaucratic self-narration for transnational Jewish history.

Panel 6: Gendered Dimensions in Transnational Narratives

Room 8011

Chair: Anoushka Alexander-Rose (Heidelberg University)

Christie Margrave (Cardiff University)

Reproductive medical tourism: Crossing borders for fertility treatment in the life writing of French Solo Mothers by Choice

Choosing to pursue Solo Motherhood is an increasingly popular decision in France, in part because 2021 saw a change in French law, which finally permitted single and homosexual women to access reproductive treatments at clinics within France itself for the first time (Boufigi, 2022; Boistault, 2022). However, even prior to this law change, the number of French single women choosing to pursue solo motherhood was nonetheless growing, as women travelled abroad (commonly to neighbouring Belgium or Spain) to seek treatment in foreign clinics (Mother Stories, n.d.; Rateau, 2024; Agence France Presse, 2015). Despite the growing number of memoirs published by French Solo Mothers By Choice who have sought treatment abroad (10 as of the end of 2025), there has, as yet, been no attempt to analyse these memoirs or the transnational experiences of the medical journeys therein. This paper aims to rectify this omission, shedding light on women's movement across national borders and between societies, whose varying laws allow them the fertility treatment they seek, but cause them multiple other difficulties. These can be related to travel, language, administrative problems, choosing donor gametes from foreign sperm (sometimes also egg) banks, trying to register the birth of a child with no father upon return to their homeland, and experiences of different healthcare systems. This paper recognises how realising the desire to become a mother without a partner becomes a truly global phenomenon.

Marie-Christine Alberts (University of Freiburg)

Multilayered Perspectives: Esther Gad's Letters from Her Stay in England and Portugal

In 1801/1802, Esther Gad, granddaughter of the renowned rabbi and kabbalist Jonathan Eibeschütz (1690–1764), travelled through England and Portugal. Shortly before her departure from Germany, she was baptised by a member of the Protestant clergy and adopted the name Lucie. Had it not been for Wilhelm Friedrich Domeier (1763–1815), the divorced mother of two would probably not have undertaken this open-ended journey. Domeier, whom Esther Gad had first encountered in Berlin, worked as the personal physician to Prince Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex (1773–1843), and accompanied him to Portugal, where the prince resided for health-related reasons in 1801/1802. After a brief stay in London, Esther Gad followed Wilhelm Friedrich Domeier with her children to Lisbon. After their return to England, Domeier and Gad were married in London in the summer of 1802. In the same year, Esther Gad published a book consisting of letters written during her stay in England and Portugal, followed by a second volume in 1803. The letters reveal a multilayered perspective on both countries, shaped by Gad's multiple identities as a Jewish-born woman who was later baptised and divorced, had received a comparatively extensive education, and became one of the first women to publicly advocate for women's rights and education. Against this background, my paper aims to illustrate the identities that shape Gad's perception not only of England and Portugal but also of her home country, Germany, as reflected in her travel letters.

Anna Marion Weber (Kings College London)

Autobiography after Exile: Gender, Jewishness, and the Politics of Life Writing in Postwar West Germany

My proposed paper presents findings from my dissertation research on the autobiographies, diaries, and correspondence of three exiled German-Jewish authors: Gina Kaus (1893–1985), Gabriele Tergit (1894–1982), and Salka Viertel (1889–1978). Written between the 1950s and 1970s in post-exile the United States and the United Kingdom, their autobiographies were published in West Germany. Contrary to expectations that these texts would be received as historically significant testimonies at a time when West German society was increasingly confronting the crimes of National Socialism, my research shows that all three authors encountered substantial resistance in their dealings with publishers, editors, and other stakeholders in the production process. Persistent negative feedback and editorial pressure prompted significant adaptations of their autobiographical texts, particularly with regard to the representation of Jewishness, exile, and gender. By foregrounding these often invisible negotiations, the paper highlights a politically significant yet still under-researched dimension of postwar German literary history: the constraints placed on German-Jewish women's life writing by the West German literary market. Methodologically, the paper demonstrates how an archive-based approach – drawing on diaries, letters, and draft materials – can illuminate the production contexts of autobiographical texts and reveal how external pressures shape the representation of lived experience. In doing so, the paper speaks to three thematic fields outlined in the CfP: German-Jewish ego-documents and cultural identity; women's life writing and gendered voices across borders; and migration narratives within transcontinental archival constellations.

Panel 7: Life Writing in the Shadow of Empire

Room 8011

Chair: Pritipuspa Mishra (University of Southampton)

Yasmin Akhter (University of Edinburgh)

Life-Writing Between Empires: Emily Ruete and the Transimperial Nineteenth Century

This paper reflects on the methodological challenges of reading and researching cross-border life-writing narratives by drawing attention to the ego-documents of Emily Ruete / Sayyida Salme's (1844-1924). Living in exile in late-nineteenth century Hamburg, Ruete published *Memoiren einer arabischen Prinzessin* in 1886 as a document of her early life in the Sultanate of Zanzibar as well as her cultural observations between Europe and 'the Orient'. Lesser known are her private notes which record her life as a racialised cultural alien in Germany, kept in a notebook entitled *Briefe Nach der Heimat* and translated into English as recently as 1993. So far, critics have focussed primarily on *Memoiren* to highlight Ruete's forging of knowledge flows between Germany and Zanzibar and her aestheticisations of migration and cultural hybridity. But, to do so—as this paper argues—is to neglect the dynamic interrelationship between *Memoiren* and *Briefe* and Ruete's use of multiple modes, perspectives, and forms of life-writing to capture the rhizomatic subjectivity of the cross-border migrant. In this paper, I show how 'transnational' is a limited framework for analysing *Memoiren* and *Briefe* since it implicitly locates Zanzibar and Germany as the geographic foci of Ruete's life and writings. I demonstrate Ruete's own ambivalence to national borders and her attachments to spaces and spatial images, which span the intimate sphere of the family home to the epic breadth of the Indian Ocean. The paper maps out the plural locations of Ruete's life-writing; it argues that 'transimperial' is a more useful interpretive lens for reading the remarkable life of an Arab-African woman situated between Omani, German, and British empires in the global nineteenth century.

Rehnuma Sazzad (School of Advanced Study, University of London)

Exploding the Myth of the Unified Subject: Transnational Perspectives in Assia Djebar's *Fantasia*: An Algerian Cavalcade

My paper follows the framework proposed by Fiona Paisley and Pamela Scully in *Writing Transnational History* (2019), where they define transnationalism as a means of revealing marginalized spaces, subjects, and the fractured nature of historical events. For the writers, a central question of the emerging field is, therefore, how to highlight the operations, negotiations, and resistances of power that shaped transnational subjects' lives. I read Djebar's *Fantasia* ([1985]1993) as a key example of this proposition. Djebar's genre-defying narrative is viewed as a seminal 'ego document' and a work of transnational historical recovery, which is characterized by the following features: A Polyphonic Structure, a Conflict of Language, and a Quest for Knowledge. I elaborate the Polyphonic Structure by illustrating how the autobiographical writing interweaves a revisionist history of French colonization, oral testimonies of Algerian peasant women from the War of Independence (1954-1962), and a dialogue between personal and national voices. Secondly, this case study highlights the Conflict of Language by showing that Djebar portrays French both as the 'language of the enemy' and a 'gateway to freedom,' a source of transnationalism and a tool for subversion. Therefore, her endeavor to translate Algerian women's oral histories into French is fraught with the danger of neo-colonial appropriation, and yet it is necessary for their recuperation. Finally, I interpret *Fantasia* as Djebar's Quest for Knowledge through seizing a complex

Algerian female identity from the writer's Arabo-Berber origins and Franco-European education. The outcome is not a unified, liberated self, but a constantly renegotiated, polyphonic, and fragmented subjectivity. Djébar's work charts a 'different way of being' by exemplifying transnational history that recovers subjectivities across various borders of belonging. It turns the political quest for identity into a poetics of conflict, using the colonizer's language to resurrect subaltern voices and forge a new, albeit agonistic postcolonial selfhood.

Shweta Deshpande (Manipal Academy of Higher Education)

Construction of the Self in French Colonial India: Interpreting the Diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai as an Ego Narrative

French colonial rule in India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was shaped primarily through the commercial activities of the French East India Company which sought to expand French commercial and political influence in the Indian subcontinent. Faced initially with stiff competition from British and Dutch companies which were already well established, the Company had to first create "enclaves" for trading purposes and to that end, gradually established the (former) comptoirs of Pondicherry, Chandernagore, Karaikal, Mahé and Yanaon. The Company ensured the operation and protection of its commercial domain with a smaller number of Europeans but had to principally rely on indigenous personnel to achieve its goal. The courtier was one such figure who predominantly handled the Company's administrative and commercial affairs but donned many other hats – that of representative to the Governor, intermediary (between employees and different ranks), interpreter, underwriter of contracts, expert and guarantor. On the Malabar and Coromandel coasts in South India, the courtier was also known as modéliar or dobachi. One such pivotal individual was Ananda Ranga Pillai who was hired as a Dubash or translator by the then Governor-General Joseph-Francois Dupleix. Ranga Pillai recorded his political, social and personal interactions with the French in the form of twelve-volume personal journals which he maintained between 1736 and 1761. Focusing on entries made between January 1760 and January 1761, this paper demonstrates the ways in which Ranga Pillai's diary might be discerned as a form of ego document that does not merely chronicle external events in French-occupied Pondicherry but also demonstrates how Pillai witnessed those events from Indian eyes, juggling French power and Indian rhetorics of economic and social structures and caste and class. Pillai's diary thus becomes a crucial text that asserts his agency through his self-positioning and self-representation, thereby foregrounding personal perspectives over detached narration.

Keynote Public Lecture

17:30 – 19:00

Room 1001

Chair: Rachel Pistol (University of Southampton)

Éva Kovács (Vienna Wiesenthal Institute)

Challenges, Traps and Dead Ends: Navigating the Labyrinth of Personal Accounts in Holocaust Studies

Organised by Dr Monja Stahlberger (University of Reading), Dr Charlie Knight (University of London / University of Southampton), Dr Rachel Pistol (University of Southampton), with the financial support of the German History Society, the Modern Humanities Research Association, and the Leo Baeck Institute London.



PARKES INSTITUTE
FOR THE STUDY OF
JEWISH/NON-JEWISH RELATIONS



INSTITUTE OF
LANGUAGES
CULTURES AND
SOCIETIES

SCHOOL OF
ADVANCED STUDY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON