

Inscribing biographies in Global South History

1 June 2019
Wolfson College | Oxford



OXFORD CENTRE FOR LIFE-WRITING



THE OXFORD RESEARCH CENTRE IN THE HUMANITIES



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

How can life-stories from the Global South enhance our understanding of southern histories, cultures, and lives?

In this colloquium, co-convened by Katherine Collins and Ramon Sarró, we will explore the ethical challenges researchers have encountered in writing Southern lives, as well as the question of how to write a biography in a postcolonial or decolonial context.

We will think through how various theories of the self, of storytelling, and ways of understanding history can be brought to bear on these important questions, to provoke a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of working with individual lives as a way to study the Global South.

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Agenda

1 PM - Supriya Chaudhuri, *Significant Lives: biography, autobiography, gender, and women's history in South Asia*.
Chair, Elleke Boehmer.

**2:15 PM - How to write a southern life:
Ethics and writing practices**

Eduardo Lalo, Elleke Boehmer, Jonny Steinberg, Premilla Nadasen.
Chair, H el ene Neveu Kringelbach.

3:30 PM - Tea and Coffee.

**4:00 PM - Southern Biographies: epistemologies, methodologies,
theoretical perspectives**

Joy Owen, Marcio Goldman, Ramon Sarr o, Santanu Das.
Chair, Thomas Cousins.

5:15 PM - Summary and closing remarks.



Elleke Boehmer is Professor of World Literature in English at the University of Oxford, the Director of the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing, a founding figure in the field of postcolonial literature, and a novelist and short story writer. She is the author of the novels *Screens against the Sky* (1990) and *The Shouting in the Dark* (2015), as well as the short-story collections *Sharmilla and Other Portraits* (2010) and *To the Volcano, and Other Stories* (2019). Other books include the ESSE award-winning *Indian Arrivals: Networks of British Empire* (2015), *Postcolonial Poetics* (2018), and a widely translated biography of Nelson Mandela (2008). She has been awarded a British Academy Senior Research Fellowship 2020 and is Humanities lead on the GCRF-funded Acceleration for Africa's Adolescents hub, based at Oxford and the University of Cape Town.

Supriya Chaudhuri is Professor Emerita in the Department of English, Jadavpur University, India. She has held visiting appointments at the University of Cambridge and the University of Paris-Sorbonne, and lectured at many universities in India and abroad. Her areas of scholarly interest are Renaissance studies, philosophy and critical theory, Indian cultural history, urban studies, sport, travel, translation and modernism. Recent publications include *Commodities and Culture in the Colonial World* (2018); *Reconsidering English Studies in Indian Higher Education* (2015); *Sport, Literature, Society: Cultural Historical Studies* (2013); and chapters in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf* (2016), *Celebrating Shakespeare: Commemoration and Cultural Memory* (2015), and *A History of the English Novel in India* (2015). She has led on many internationally funded research projects, continues to advise on research and higher education policy, and is active in debates on the humanities, gender and intellectual liberty in India.

Santanu Das is Professor of Modern Literature and Culture, University of Oxford. His first book, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (2006), which won a Philip Leverhulme Prize, examined the role of the senses in First World War experience and literature. His recent work has explored the colonial dimensions of war culture and memory through an expanded notion of the 'archive' - artefacts, photographs, paintings, rumours, folksongs and sound-recordings, as well as testimonial, political and literary writings. Having just completed a monograph on India and First World War culture, he is about to begin work on two projects: the *Oxford Book of Colonial Writings of the First World War* and a monograph on the experience and imaginings of sea-voyages in a global context, from Victorian times to now.

Marcio Goldman is Professor in Social Anthropology at the Postgraduate Program in Social Anthropology, National Museum, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, and holds fellowships at the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development and the Foundation for Research Support of the State of Rio de Janeiro. He is the author of several books and articles, including *Como Funciona a Democracia: Uma Teoria Etnográfica da Política*, which was published in Brazil in 2006, and has been translated into English as *How Democracy Works: An Ethnographic Theory of Politics* (2013). Most recently, he has been in the field studying the cosmopolitics of Afro-Brazilian religions in candomblé terreiro in the city of Ilhéus, in the south of Bahia. A book on this subject is in preparation.

Eduardo Lalo is a novelist, essayist, and artist working with a range of mediums from drawing to video, and professor of literature at the University of Puerto Rico. Eduardo Lalo's literary oeuvre is comprised of novels, essays, poetry, graphic art and fascinating hybrids of all of these. Some of his individual works include *Ciudades e islas* (1995), *El deseo del lápiz: castigo, urbanismo, escritura* (2010), *Intervenciones*, and *Los países invisibles* (Invisible Countries, 2008), the latter which won the Juan Gil-Albert Ciutat de Valencia essay award. He is the author of the novels *La inutilidad* (Uselessness, 2004), *Simone* (2015), and *Historia de Yuké*, which has just been published by Ediciones Corregidor in Argentina. For *Simone*, he was awarded the Rómulo Gallegos International Novel prize - an exceptional honour granted to the likes of Gabriel García Márquez for *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1972). *Uselessness* and *Simone* have both been translated to English and published by the University of Chicago Press.

Premilla Nadasen is Professor of History at Barnard College, and this year's Fulbright-Oxford-Pembroke Visiting Professor in Politics and International Relations. She researches race, gender, social policy, and organising in US history. Her most recent book, *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women who Built a Movement* (2015), focuses on activism among African American domestic workers in the 1960s and 1970s. Currently, she is writing a biography of South African singer and activist Miriam Makeba and collaborating on the *We Dream in Black* project. In addition, she serves on the advisory committee of the New York Historical Society's Center for Women's History and is President of the National Women's Studies Association. Outside of academia, Nadasen has been involved in social justice work for over 30 years, campaigning on a diverse range of issues from workers' rights to antiapartheid.

Joy Owen heads the Anthropology department at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Prior to her employment at UFS, she was the head of the Anthropology department and the Deputy Dean of Humanities (Teaching and Learning) at Rhodes University (Grahamstown) during the *#feesmustfall* movement in higher education institutions in South Africa. With diverse interests including critical pedagogy, the art of anthropological fieldwork, ethnographic writing, social capital, intersectionality and transnational migration Prof Owen's monograph on Congolese migrants in Muizenberg, Cape Town (2015) explored Congolese transnational social networks and how these supported the 'progress' of individual members. Her more recent research projects consider the decolonial 'project' in higher education in South Africa, motherhood in the academy and the narratives of contemporary 'self-exiled' transmigrant South Africa.

Ramon Sarró is Associate Professor in the Social Anthropology of Africa at the University of Oxford. He has conducted research in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Portugal, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo. He is the author of the award-winning *The Politics of Religious Change on the Upper Guinea Coast: Iconoclasm Done and Undone* (International African Institute 2009) and co-editor, with A. Pedroso de Lima Lima, of *Terrenos Metropolitanos: Desafios Metodológicos* (ICS 2007), with D. Berliner of *Learning Religion: Anthropological Approaches* (Berghahn 2007), and with R. Blanes and M. Balkenhol of *Atlantic Perspectives: Places, Memories and Spirits in Europe, Africa and the Americas*, forthcoming in September 2019.

Jonny Steinberg is Professor of African Studies at the University of Oxford. He is the author of *A Man of Good Hope* (2015), the critically acclaimed *Three Letter Plague* (2008), as well as *Midlands* (2002) and *The Number* (2004), both of which won South Africa's premier nonfiction literary award, the Sunday Times Alan Paton Prize. Steinberg was also a recipient of one of the inaugural Windham Campbell Prizes. He has worked as a journalist at a South African national daily newspaper, written scripts for television drama, and has been a consultant to the South African government on criminal justice policy. His work explores South Africa in the wake of the country's transition to democracy. The institutions he has written about include the prison, the farm, the police and the clinic. He has also written on Liberia's recent civil war and some of the questions it has raised about migration, exile and transitional justice, and on the Somali diaspora.

Hélène Neveu Kringelbach is Associate Professor in African Studies at University College London. She has carried out fieldwork in Senegal, France and the UK. Her study of social mobility in Dakar, as seen through the lives and work of dancers and musicians, was published in 2013 as a prize-winning monograph, *Dance Circles: Movement, Morality and Self-Fashioning in Urban Senegal*. She is currently working on an ethnographic study of binational and transnational families between Senegal and Europe. Her research is concerned with the ways in which immigration policies and social change affect these families' trajectories and the affective relationships they maintain across space and time. Her dance research highlighted the transformation of social hierarchies through changes in performing practices in urban Senegal. The work she is developing extends this idea by using a family focus to look at the transformation of social hierarchies through migration and the reconfiguration of 'relatedness'.

Thomas Cousins joined the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Oxford in 2018. He studied at the University of Cape Town and Johns Hopkins University, and previously taught at Stellenbosch University. He is an anthropologist of southern Africa with a particular interest in health, labour, and kinship, especially nutrition and pharmaceuticals and their attendant forms of value and life. His fieldwork to date has been in South Africa. His doctoral work (Johns Hopkins, 2012) focused on timber plantation labourers in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and the substances and concepts of health, strength, and life that are constituted in the production of value.

Katherine Collins is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at Oxford's Department of Education. She is currently researching a biography of three scholars – Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals-Borda, and Muhammad Anisur Rahman – with particular attention to the ways in which their lived experiences of activist education and scholarship informed their theoretical contributions. Her research interests include the creative and critical practices involved in the writing of marginalised and activist lives, issues such as the politics and poetics of life-writing, testimonial cultures and witnessing, and autobiographies of resistance.



Aida
Edemariam

Learning to
Listen

Ondaatje prize-winning biography *The Wife's Tale* tells the story of Aida's grandmother, Yetemegnu, through her marriage to a cleric and poet two decades older than her, fascist occupation, and the rise and fall of Haile Selassie. In this talk at the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing, Aida will speak about *The Wife's Tale* and explore the question of one can record the life in English of a woman who did not speak English.

10 June, 5:30-7pm, Wolfson College