Michael Boyden, Hans Krabbendam and Liselotte Vandenbussche, eds. Tales of Transit: Narrative Migrant Spaces in Atlantic Perspective, 1850-1950.

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Tales of Transit gathers some of the papers presented at the homonymous international conference which took place at the Felix Archive in Antwerp in June 2010. The contributors of the volume meticulously examine the great transatlantic migration movements within the broad time frame of a century (1850-1950), focusing on the pivotal, as well as underrated role, of transit places. The interdisciplinary character of the volume provides readers with the opportunity to consider a, by-now, thoroughly discussed topic, under a new light. Interestingly, instead of approaching the migratory movement from the receiving or the sending societies, as a finite action, the volume places emphasis on the notion of transitoriness as well as “transit zones,” foregrounding obscure migration stories of multiple passages, return and denial of passage.

The volume is divided into three sections, even though, as the editors state, some of the themes are present throughout the book. The three sections are entitled “Rethinking Atlantic Migration,” “Off the Beaten Track,” and “Liminal Spaces” while the introduction that precedes
them explains the idea behind the volume and discusses its theoretical background.

Contrary to the idea of migration being a one-way passage, the first section considers the migratory movement as a series of micro-level decisions that would mean the temporary or permanent return to the home country. In specific, the first essay of this section is Adam Walaszek’s “Central Eastern Europeans in the Euro-Atlantic Migration System Before the First World War.” Walaszek unearths the importance of the connection between the diverse European destinations of migrants. He considers the role of the European railroad network as well as seasonal work movement as a preparation for transatlantic relocation. The author does not regard America as the sole and single arrival point but includes other options, like Argentina, Canada and South Africa, without excluding the possibility of returning home. He finally discusses the case of Jewish migration attributing it mostly to economic and social problems like poverty and urbanization rather than pogroms. That is why Jewish returns were to some extent probable. Yannis Papadopoulos’s “The Floating Homeland: The Ship as a “Connectivity Space” in Greek Migrant and Public Discourse” addresses the issue of Greek migration in relation to the development of local shipping. As the author rightly claims, for Greeks the direct line between Greek posts and America accentuated their sense of national pride. Simultaneously, it facilitated the military plans of politicians who could count on the migrants’ return and recruitment in wars. Furthermore, as Papadopoulos states, the stay on board strengthened local ties among Greeks from the same regions as well as clarified their Greekness as opposed to the “Otherness” they encountered. On a final note, Papadopoulos interestingly sees the Greek ships frequently entering American ports as expressions of Ganz’s “symbolic ethnicity” for immigrants and mostly their American-born children.

In his original essay “A Lasting Transit in Antwerp: Eastern European Jewish Migrants on their Way to the New World (1900-1925),” Frank Caestecker projects migrants as active agents who struggled to overcome the obstacles found en route. Among them, Caestecker mentions the medical examiners that barred immigrants from even leaving Antwerp, thus saving the shipping company the funds for maintenance and repatriation. Further problems for potential immigrants were the quotas imposed and visas.
The author underlines the fact that often many immigrants could be stranded in Antwerp because of poverty, physical and mental illness. In all cases but the latter, immigrants would have to be repatriated. Barely surviving through charity or support by their relatives, the excluded immigrants in Antwerp, would have to wait for years to fulfill their wish to relocate on a new continent. Gur Alroey’s intriguing final essay of this section sheds light on the sea voyage, hardships and routine on board. “The Shtetl on the High Seas: The Jewish Emigration from Eastern Europe and the Cross Oceanic Experience” is based on a gamut of bibliographical sources to unravel the Jewish experience on board the transatlantic vessel. Alroey highlights the fear of the unknown, the strangeness of the sea experience and segregation of the Jews, all parameters that enhanced group cohesion. Comforted by their cultural and religious ties, Jews inevitably preserved the marginalization and condition of the Shtetl they experienced in Eastern Europe. Alroey analyses the shipping company policies and their attitude to Jewish cultural differences and concludes with an interesting remark: Jews on board the Hapag Flagship Imperator in the summer of 1913 constituted the same percentage, 13%, as the one of the Pale of Settlement.

The second section of the volume revolves around less studied areas of migration and is based on personal accounts of the immigrants, their problems of relocation as well as their contact with the country of origin. Cecilia Alvstad’s essay entitled “The Transatlantic Voyage as a Translational Process: What Migrant Letters Can Tell Us” pores over the letters of two early 20th century Swedish immigrants to Argentina. It, therefore, successfully brings to the fore the interconnections between transit, translation and migration. The author introduces the notion of drawing borders between the emigrants and the Other, at first, and, later through the gradual change of self-identification, between themselves and their distant families. Eric Mellberg and Axel Lundberg’s epistles are probed both as linguistic and cultural translations. Supported by a host of translation theories, Alvstad insightfully follows the translational processes as they are altered with the passage of time: while the foreign and the known blend for the immigrants, their temporal and spatial distance from the homeland increases and their borders between family and new acquaintances are constantly reset. Through this
interdisciplinary essay, the contributor underscores a wealth of information available for translation studies, even in non-literary materials like similar epistolary practices of immigrants. Elisabeth Vik’s “Decisions in Transit: The Case of Scandinavian Immigrants to Argentina” acknowledges the decision to migrate as a continuous process that is reformed and reshaped according to the contemporary data. Through the stories and letters of three Norwegians in Argentina, Oscar, Otto and Solveig, the author shows the crucial role of social networks, human relationships as well as the parameter of luck in decision making for migration. In her analysis, Vik also mentions places of transit (like churches, clubs and associations) and, in particular, the Norwegian Seamen’s Church in Buenos Aires as well as the Norwegian Association in Oslo and their contribution for bond keeping between Norway and Argentina. Vik’s employment of three unique stories of Norwegians in Argentina comes as a reminder of the often neglected personal testimony promoting multivocality. The third contribution entitled “German Colonists in Southern Brazil: Navigating Multiple Identities on the Brazilian Frontier” brings to light the case of German Brazilians through the books of the Stutzer family. As the author Ute Ritz-Deutch unravels, living in the German colony of Blumenau in Southern Brazil, the pastor Gustav Stutzer promoted migration in Brazil while lecturing for the preservation of German identity. Moreover, his wife’s, Therese’s, writing confesses her sense of alienation in a foreign and “uncultured land.” The Stutzers’ narratives are utilized by Ritz-Deutch to pinpoint the course of German immigrants in Brazil: the cultural shock and the lack of modern amenities, the clash of mentalities and the strenuous existence in untamed wilderness as well as the skepticism on the part of Luso-Brazilians. Ritz-Deutch also outlines the development of the German community with the creation of schools and the respect to ancestral heritage. The final contribution of this section, An Van Hecke’s “Travelling Between Languages and Literatures: A Spatial Analysis of The Family Tree by Margo Glantz attempts a close reading of Glantz’s memoir that traces her family’s flight from Moldova to Mexico in 1925. Van Hecke’s approach sees the work in question not only as autobiographical but also as fictional whereby Federico Ortiz’s transculturation seems to be a vital notion, oscillating between Russian, Spanish, Yiddish and Jewish cultural discourses. The multiple languages present in the text stand as proof of the author’s
multicultural background as well as Glantz’s confusion. What is more, Van Hecke interprets cafés and restaurants in Glantz’s narrative as Soja’s “thirddspace.”

The final section of this volume is initiated with Ron Geaves’ contribution “Steamships, Hospitals, and Funerals: Liminal Spaces in Nineteenth-Century Liverpool’s Narratives of Transit.” Geaves’ topic is the undocumented Lascars, the Muslim sailors of South Asia and Africa. He unfolds the interesting story of William Henry Abdullah Quilliam, a lawyer who converted to Islam to defend Lascars and act as their priest, representative and spokesperson. Through Quilliam’s life story Geaves highlights the liminal position of the Lascars, who stayed hidden below deck, doing low-paid jobs. Quilliam’s religious practices, according to Geaves, helped them obtain a sense of security and identity. Moreover, Babs Boter’s contribution “Heavenly Sensations and Communal Celebrations: Experiences of Liminality in Transatlantic Journeys” deals with the life on board transatlantic ships of mostly Dutch emigrants and travelers. Social stratification on the vessel appears to be one of the most crucial characteristics distinguishing between the diverse classes and ethnic groups. Boter interestingly comments on the writings of first-class passengers: there was an immense range of feelings from haughty thoughts on the sheer magic of the ocean to curiosity and abhorrence towards the lower decks. Drawing the line between fictional and literary representations of the long voyage, Boter even remarks the intensification of discrimination. However, there were also cases where the first class passengers, driven by the desire to know more about the Other, would willingly visit and play anthropologist. In his comparative approach, Sostene Massimo Zangari offers an insightful and well-phrased paper on the Lower-East Side as depicted through Abraham Cahan’s The Rise of David Levinsky and Michael Gold’s Jews Without Money. Zangari reminds us of the transformation of the Lower East Side with its recognition in the 1960s as a site of remembrance of Jewish history, adding the thriving of festivities, museums and other sites and activities commemorating Jewish past often to the detriment of other ethnic stories. The author discerns the role of the two novels into the shaping of American ethnic identity. On the one hand, Cahan’s Jewish rags-to-riches story turns him into an American at the cost of severing his ethnic roots. On the other, Gold’s ghetto is teeming with
desperate immigrants who are denied a better fate and an exit from their bleak surroundings. With their American Dream shattered and capitalist promises castigated, Gold’s workers hope for a revolution to free them from their pains. Zangari’s thoughtful essay concludes by noting the close relation between neighborhood and history in both novels. Incorporating and processing diverse literary forms and vocabulary, as Cahan does, and molding together local experiences, the way Gold does, result in unique ethnic novels. The final essay of the volume is Nancy K. Miller’s “Kishinev Redux: Pogrom, Purim, Patrimony,” whereby the author returns to her ancestral home in Moldova. Miller’s contribution comes at the end of the volume to bring up nostalgia, return and the personal quest of identity as a common denominator among the essays. She accounts her vain labors to dispel the oblivion brought about by time and trauma, and uncover the truth about her grandparents’ flight after the 1903 pogrom. Assisted by technology and her historical background, Miller visits her ancestral heath twice, as soon as she realizes she failed to see all the exhibits at the local museum. Her personal quest for identification painfully reveals the need for emotional besides the cognitive involvement when on the quest. However, as Miller poignantly notes without negating the necessity of the trip to the roots, in essence its destination seems elusive. As she asks herself “How can you return to a place you have never been before?”

All in all, Tales of Transit is an important contribution to the exploration of transatlantic migration with a special emphasis on the obscure role of transit places and the state of being transit that numerous immigrants experienced. The interdisciplinary character of the volume brings together fields diverse as well as interconnected. Simultaneously, it succeeds in highlighting new and challenging points of interest for American Studies. The twelve essays in the volume, to different degrees, offer us insights into unknown waters of transatlantic migratory movements and pinpoint new inroads for research and reflection.
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