

# WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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# 36. Being Beyond—Aesthetics of Resistance

Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach

*Bettina Gockel*

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Annemarie Schwarzenbach (born in 1908) was a professional Swiss writer and photographer from the late 1920s and 1930s until her early death in 1942. Her travels in Europe and to the Far and Near East; to the United States during the Great Depression (where she visited the industrial Northeast and several states in the South, specifically: Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Alabama); and to Africa (where she journeyed to the Belgian Congo and to Morocco) were the basis for her artistic work. They were also deeply shaped by her own understanding of migration and exile in the historical context of European Fascism and worldwide migration. Today, photographs and papers from her estate are available digitally (in part) at: <https://www.nb.admin.ch/snl/en/home/about-us/sla/estates-archives/focus/schwarzenbach.html>.

## Against Her Final Will

Annemarie Schwarzenbach's final will directed that Anita Forrer—a friend who was herself an ambitious writer and correspondent of Rainer Maria Rilke, another modern poet and traveler—take care of her estate. But this proved impossible because the task was jointly assigned to Forrer and Erika Mann, the daughter of Thomas Mann and sister of Klaus Mann—both of whom had been close, beloved, and at times

contentious friends of Schwarzenbach. (Anita Forrer and Erika Mann, however, did not like each other; and more importantly, they were unable to focus their attention on executing Schwarzenbach's will because of their own disparate lives in different countries.) This is why it was only in the 1980s that the impressive writings and photographs left behind by Schwarzenbach after her death first became accessible to researchers worldwide. One of the facts of Schwarzenbach's working life as an artist and of her legacy is that her mother and grandmother largely destroyed her correspondence and diaries, despite knowing about her last will. Both of these women came from families with a storied military history, and both took deep pride in this tradition, including in the male military identity at its core. Schwarzenbach's grandmother, Clara Wille, was even known by the moniker "Frau General Wille", or "Mrs. General Wille"; her mother, Maria Renée Schwarzenbach (1883–1959), was herself a passionate photographer. Military identity and openness to modern media such as photography could thus go hand in hand. For Annemarie Schwarzenbach, though, these two "lines" laid out in her female family could not be linked without problems. Rather, the opposite was the case. Nonetheless, reconstructing the tensions that may have existed between these women is not possible without speculating about the relation between politics, social status, and emotions. And in any case, such speculations would not really contribute to an understanding of Annemarie Schwarzenbach's work as an artist, at least at this historical juncture of newly emerging research into her entire life of creative work and professional ambition.

## Career and Network

Schwarzenbach was successful in her time, publishing three hundred journalistic articles, many with her own photographs (her archive encompasses ca. 7000 photographs and negatives together with her meticulous notes which were obviously meant for future use for publications). She moreover wrote literary novels: *Freunde um Bernard* (Bernard's friends) was her literary debut in 1931. Her voice in this work, as a subject and as an artist, was shaped in part by her sexual identity: the work represented a coming out in several senses. First, as an artist who at times broke with heterosexual norms—though the literature

of her day did not clearly define how subjectivity and sexual identity might be expressed through or in a literary or lyric voice. In her social and professional circles at the time, categories such as homosexual or lesbian were mostly used only furtively or inexplicitly. She nevertheless grew up with social and sexual practices that corresponded to these emerging identities, and this was reflected in her writing. And second, this was a coming out in her desire to live among avant-garde artists such as Erika and Klaus Mann, or the legendary Ruth Landshoff-Yorck and Thea “Mopsa” Sternheim—who later became a fighter for the *résistance* and was interned in the Ravensbrück women’s concentration camp (Figure 1).



Fig. 1 Annemarie Schwarzenbach, Thea “Mopsa” Sternheim, June 1933, Schweizerisches Literaturarchiv, Swiss National Library, Bern, Estate Annemarie Schwarzenbach.

Schwarzenbach’s global network among women was wide and included professional travelers, writers, photographers, and archaeologists such as Gertrude Bell, Marie Alice “Ria” Hackin (a member of the Corps des Volontaires Françaises), the impressively athletic Ella Maillart, and the American writer Carson McCullers, who dedicated her novel *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) to Annemarie Schwarzenbach. In her posthumously published autobiography *Illumination and Night Glare*, McCullers portrays Schwarzenbach (whom she met in Erika Mann’s suite at the Bedford Hotel, the famous New York locale at 118 East 40th

Street that served as home in flux for exiled Europeans at the time) as a rational, hardworking woman with a doctoral degree from the University of Zurich. Both women wrote to each other after Schwarzenbach's return to Europe, and Schwarzenbach urged McCullers not to forget their real vocation, namely creative writing. Interestingly, McCullers does not downplay Schwarzenbach's addiction to morphine, but she does point out the ability of the writer and photographer to work professionally in spite of it. Indeed, Schwarzenbach tried several times herself to get rid of these substances, morphine and "Eukodal". And from 1940 onwards even her truly skeptical family was convinced that she had triumphed over an addiction that was almost cultivated at the time as a habit among artists, intellectuals, and scholars—especially because the full effects of these substances were not really known, and often these opioids were paradoxically even used to treat individuals who had problems with addiction.

Those who traveled with her—such as Ella Maillart (1903–97), a participant in the Olympic Games in Paris in 1924 and a globetrotter like Schwarzenbach, or the women mentioned above—often belonged to a high-middle-class or upper-class milieu that these representatives of a "jeune fille rangée" (Simone de Beauvoir) transformed into a bohemian existence with an exalted lifestyle. The experience of exile and migration was very present in these circles from the beginning of the 1930s onwards. This not only sometimes hindered their attempts to live a stylish life with a great deal of fun—for instance in Schwarzenbach's case, while driving as one of the first women ever on a field trip to the southern US states, together with the journalist and photographer Barbara Hamilton-Wright (Figure 2), who was employed by the Farm Security Administration and had visited the Highlander Folk School with Schwarzenbach. Moreover, it is possible to see the way in which these women held on to beauty and fashion as an expression of resistance in times of political and cultural-political hardship, comparable to how many Parisian women explicitly maintained an elegant appearance as a sign of moral superiority over the Nazi occupiers. In contrast to these Parisian women, however, Annemarie Schwarzenbach, like many of her German and American friends, preferred androgynous styling—sometimes long trousers and sometimes shorts, combined with stylish blazers, buttoned-up shirts, and a tie.



Fig. 2 Annemarie Schwarzenbach, *Barbara Hamilton-Wright*, n.d. (between 1936 and 1938), Schweizerisches Literaturarchiv, Swiss National Library, Bern, Estate Annemarie Schwarzenbach.

## Working Beyond

Schwarzenbach's literary writing unfolds in a style of stunning hybridity (seen as a weakness by many who have written or who write about her and her work), moving unflinchingly between autobiographical experiences, passages that are documentary in nature or informed by history, the genre of a road movie report, and a kind of lyrical fiction that comes close to an individual form of magical realism. In an American context, I would see her writing of a kind with Joan Didion and John (Jack) Kerouac; they would have appreciated her work and would have enjoyed her company, I imagine. Her photographs go beyond the social documentary photography of her days—she was acquainted with New Vision photography and the works of the F.S.A. photographers—and they are in line with the much later photography of Robert Frank, namely his famous *The Americans* (1958–59).

She seems to have lived so far beyond social and artistic conventions that the way she chose to live her life was almost unbearable for those closest to her, especially her Swiss family. Historians of art, literature, and photography have also found it difficult to include her in scholarly narratives. In fact, there is such a counter-narrative to her persona and

work that even those who write about her in scholarly terms tend to affirm her status as the incarnation of a stereotyped “other”, while simultaneously exposing her “otherness” as something that came to her not only naturally but as a matter of social prestige. She was the daughter of one of the richest families in Switzerland—how could someone with that status claim to challenge the system? It was all a self-flattering existence, wasn’t it? Including a posh bank account, with nothing to worry about. A serious artist—that would have been, and still would be, worrisome. But this worrisomeness that makes Schwarzenbach’s art so interesting has yet to be discovered. It is quite amazing that the very first photography exhibition of her work in a prestigious museum, the Centre Paul Klee in Bern, Switzerland, did not take place until 2020, following a 2008 exhibition in a local museum for literature in Zurich, the Strauhof Museum. Annemarie Schwarzenbach has certainly not “arrived” in the art world, especially not her whole oeuvre. As an artist, her driving force was not arrival—it was the farewell. However, her splendid and faithful archive gives evidence that one should not confuse her migratory existence with her will to create an oeuvre that was meant to be integrated in the system of the arts as a form of visibility for those who migrate, move, travel on, and for those who can do this only in their imagination.

### *Androgynous persona*

Contemporaries were stunned by her beauty, an androgynous persona shaped in no small part by portrait photography and her own posture as a melancholic artist. Although Schwarzenbach is not well known internationally, the photographic portrait shot by Marianne Breslauer (1909–2001) in 1931 in Berlin (see Figure 3) has the status of an international icon created to build up a legend even while Schwarzenbach was still alive. Schwarzenbach commented on this photograph, the most famous from the shoot, by noting her mother hated it, because the photograph of her face—half in light, half in shadow—suggests a visual stereotype of a split persona, indeed of a pathological, schizophrenic personality, a diagnosis that was in fact applied to Schwarzenbach. Annemarie Schwarzenbach was clearly an “outsider” among her family and a disturbing authority in her own right as someone who published and who was admired as a counter-figure



by her social “milieu”. But one complicated aspect of the relationship between mother and daughter is that this pathologization played almost no part in the ways her family tried to come to terms with their daughter and sister. In that sense, nobody wanted to lock her away, although she was in fact institutionalized several times (in Switzerland and in the United States—interestingly, in psychiatric clinics far away from the urban centres). But that is another story.



Fig. 3 Marianne Breslauer, *Annemarie Schwarzenbach*, Berlin, 1931, © Walter & Konrad Feilchenfeldt / Courtesy Fotostiftung Schweiz.

## Pathologization

Ironically and with an acute awareness of the practices and discourses that have been used to pathologize modern artists, Schwarzenbach wrote that she looked “crazy” in this photograph, in the sense of that word at the time. (We can, however, be very sure that she was not “crazy”). Photographs showing her at work, for instance in Turkey, or depicting her spending time with her homosexual husband in Iran and Morocco give evidence of a life with moments of joy, relaxation, fun, and concentration shaped by a clear capacity to observe the world with alertness, as well as deep sympathy for the people she met during her tours. Indeed, it is easy to overlook the difference between the artistic mask of coolness and indifference, itself a posture of resistance, and the everyday liveliness and decisiveness of a woman who prepared for

her travels with detailed research, often under contract with magazines to report on her journey. As a trained historian—she finished her dissertation at the age of twenty-three—she routinely prepared for her trips with in-depth research into the history of the countries she was about to visit. While publications about her notoriously insist on her sadness and unhappy fate, the strength and sheer output of her work show that her migrations were very thoughtfully reflected upon, and that they provided her with more enjoyment than we can possibly reconstruct. Looking behind the mask is never easy, but it is worth trying in order to break free from deep-rooted stereotypes.

### Cult Status after Death

After her death, she was long forgotten, not least because friends who wrote about her used fictional names, such as “Christina” in Ella Maillart’s book about their trip to Afghanistan. Klaus Mann referred to her as the “Schweizerkind” (Swiss child); this was a way of infantilizing her, even as she financed his anti-facist literary review journal *Die Sammlung* (a title that might be translated as “anthology”). And when she was mentioned by her actual name, the fact that she was a married member of the Clarac-Schwarzenbach family was suppressed, as if this name alone opened a window into an all-too-complicated life that was impossible to include or integrate in established narratives of a woman’s life.

Rediscovered in the 1980s and 1990s, she gained cult status as a model of lesbian identity and stylishness, and as an example of a woman who tried to free herself from so many different repressions and stereotypes in order to live her life as a woman with homosexual inclinations, as a forerunner of humanist photography, and as an anti-fascist activist—but not least as an artist with a talent for writing and photography. Editions of her literary works, too, are often problematic, as Walter Fähnders rightly pointed out in a short essay on the occasion of her one-hundredth birthday, because they often reflect an attitude of “correcting” her style by eliminating supposed errors. Her montage-like style has yet to be grasped—together with her aesthetic of dissolving narratives and rejecting modes of explanation and logic while also claiming that this precise approach contributed to an understanding of the feelings and existence of human beings during a worldwide crisis.

The state of research is even more challenging when it comes to her photographs. Images that might at first look like failed compositions in fact prove to be successful attempts to reject a purely documentary style, as well as expectations of what travel photography was in her days (see Figure 4). The columns in Persepolis tend to fall to the side; landscapes are represented as spaces of emptiness; the viewer's perspective seems to be high in the air, or digging in the earth.



Fig. 4 Annemarie Schwarzenbach, *Persia, Persepolis: Ruins*, 1935, Schweizerisches Literaturarchiv, Swiss National Library, Bern, Estate Annemarie Schwarzenbach.

And all of this happens in the context of a revealing explanation at the beginning of her novel *Death in Persia*. I quote it here, in the finale of this essay, and provide one of her photographs in place of an interpretation, in order to allow her voice to be heard:

This book will bring little joy to the reader. It will not even comfort him nor raise his spirits [...] But this is not even the worst part—the reader will forgive the author much less for never making it clear why a person should drift as far as Persia only to surrender to nameless conflicts. There is talk more than once of deviations, escape routes and errant ways, and those living in a European country today know how few are able to bear such terrible tension—a tension that comes from the personal conflict between a need of personal calm and a need for decisiveness, or from financial hardship, whether minimal or overpowering, and the most fundamental, most pressing, political questions about our economic, social and cultural future in which no one gets off lightly [...].

(Annemarie Schwarzenbach, *Death in Persia*, translated by Lucy Renner Jones, London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2013, pp. 3–4)

In 1942 she photographed a dog in the harbor of Lisbon as an icon for the manifold dimensions of migration (Figure 5). This is not a dog left behind, as one might think at first sight, nor is it “just” that. By naming this anonymous dog “Tyras”, Schwarzenbach opens up a whole political and personal genealogical history. It was Reichskanzler Bismarck, no less, who was known for introducing a breed of Great Danes known as “Reichshunde”, and for his own personal dogs, Tyras I and Tyras II (the latter a gift from the emperor). Schwarzenbach’s father, Alfred Schwarzenbach, also owned a dog named Tyras and the family had ties to Bismarck’s genealogical line. Two years after the death of her father, facing migration and exile, Schwarzenbach seems to say: What? That poor dog is part of the journey? More questions pose themselves to us: Is this an uncompromising image of things she did not want to take with her on her travels? An image of political turmoil, of power so merciless that it does not hesitate to use innocent creatures for its own purposes? Can horror be staged in the image of a fragile creature? As a warning: stay out, stay away. I still imagine the photographer as an emphatic observer. Annemarie Schwarzenbach was aware of photography’s multi-layered messages. And she represented this dog with her own loving devotion. In that sense, in one single image Annemarie Schwarzenbach expressed what Susan Sontag took decades to understand.

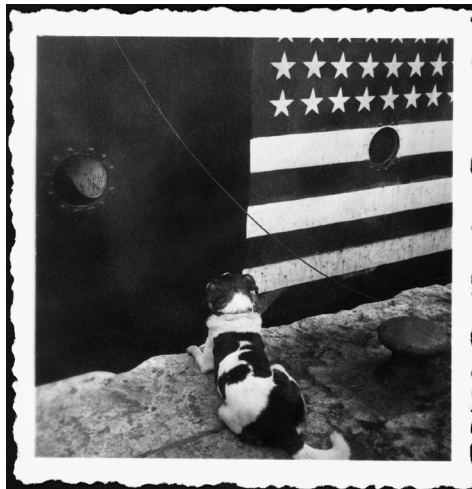


Fig. 5 Annemarie Schwarzenbach, *No Place for Tyras*, May 1941, Schweizerisches Literaturarchiv, Swiss National Library, Bern, Estate Annemarie Schwarzenbach.

## Migrant against Her Will

Historically, it would not have been unexpected for Annemarie Schwarzenbach to leave Switzerland, especially since she received a French passport after her marriage to Claude Clarac and regarded herself as being in exile. Considering that this gave her the status of a migrant when she traveled to the United States, her impulse to return home—literally to her childhood home—was a tragic mistake and an irony of fate. No one welcomed her in Switzerland, especially not her family. At the end of her short life, she came upon the idea of settling in what was known as the Jägerhaus in Sils Baselgia, not far from where Friedrich Nietzsche had lived. This was to be a refuge where she would be able to pursue writing as a form of meditation. However, life there was not as lonely as this ideal notion might have implied, since Thomas Mann liked to visit her for tea. For her, it was to become a hermitage for writing and living, in the Swiss sense of a place far away from one's parental home, but with many friendly guests. Before the purchase of the house (made possible by an inheritance from her paternal grandmother) could be finalized by a notary, Schwarzenbach had a fatal bicycle accident. She ultimately died owing to the resulting injuries to her head and brain. The medical treatment and isolation of this "outsider" who always sought to be included, without wanting to adapt and submit socially, sexually, and intellectually, is from today's perspective an exceptional social, medical, and ethical catastrophe. Previously diagnosed as "schizophrenic", Schwarzenbach was treated for her supposed psychological conditions rather than for the neurological injuries caused by her accident.

But even this tragedy of an early death need not necessarily have led to her artistic work being forgotten. Today, we could have before us a body of work with some seventy years of research and reception—except for the fact that no one in her family or circle was willing to manage her estate and make it available for research. It is to her great nephew, Alexis Schwarzenbach, that we owe credit for having taken on this labor as a family member and trained historian. He wrote the first monograph about her life and work under the title *Auf der Schwelle des Fremden: Das Leben der Annemarie Schwarzenbach* (Collection Rolf Heyne, Munich 2008), drawing from numerous new sources not accessible outside the family. It is also thanks to his

initiative that the photo exhibition in Bern was realized in 2020/21. In this respect, international research on the passionate migrant and cosmopolitan Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach is only now beginning.