



## Introduction

# On Margins and Contact Zones: 500 Years of Dutch-German Cultural Interaction

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The following articles are based on a two-day seminar held at the annual conference of the German Studies Association that took place from 29 September to 2 October 2016 in San Diego, California, and was organized by Carl Niekerk (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) and Simon Richter (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia). The seminar's goal was to bring together a number of scholars active in the United States, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands who not only perform research in the fields of literary and cultural studies, but also combine an interest in both German and Netherlandic-Flemish studies.

For many years, scholarship and public opinion have tended to focus on the 'national' when it comes to describing Europe's cultural output and accounting for diversity since the late Medieval period. This is particularly the case for periods in which this national identity is perceived to be under threat, because of supranational political entities like the European Union or an alleged endangerment of one's own cultural identity because of immigration from elsewhere. This 'national' paradigm has also long characterized the discourse on smaller nations like Belgium and the Netherlands. Our seminar was interested in the question whether in the case of both Flemish and Netherlandic culture such a 'national' approach is indeed the most appropriate and productive way, since we are dealing here with smaller geographic entities (that in the case of Flanders does not even possess its own national monolingual territory). This question is relevant in particular when we compare Flanders and the Netherlands with the Federal Republic of Germany (and its various predecessors), a much larger political entity, which has long struggled both with its own national identity and its political place in Europe.

The idea underlying the following articles is that in the case of smaller cultural entities like the Netherlands and Flemish-speaking Belgium, a 'national' approach misses an essential aspect of these cultures: their higher level of receptiveness to impulses coming from surrounding cultural traditions. Precisely because of their assumed marginality, such smaller cultures have a meaningful function as meeting places and contact zones. In the case of the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany, we have three distinct but historically, geographically, and linguistically proximate cultures. Over the course of five centuries, discernible patterns of interaction, refraction, and projection have developed—a process that sometimes involved conflicts in a variety of forms while often taking the shape of more peaceful forms of borrowing, mutual appropriation, and collaboration (in its positive and negative meaning). There is a long and varied tradition of artistic, intellectual, and cultural interaction that is not necessarily limited to these three entities, precisely because of their respective ability to be open to impulses from the outside. The following articles offer case studies of these interactions and thus hope to contribute to new models for understanding their patterns.

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