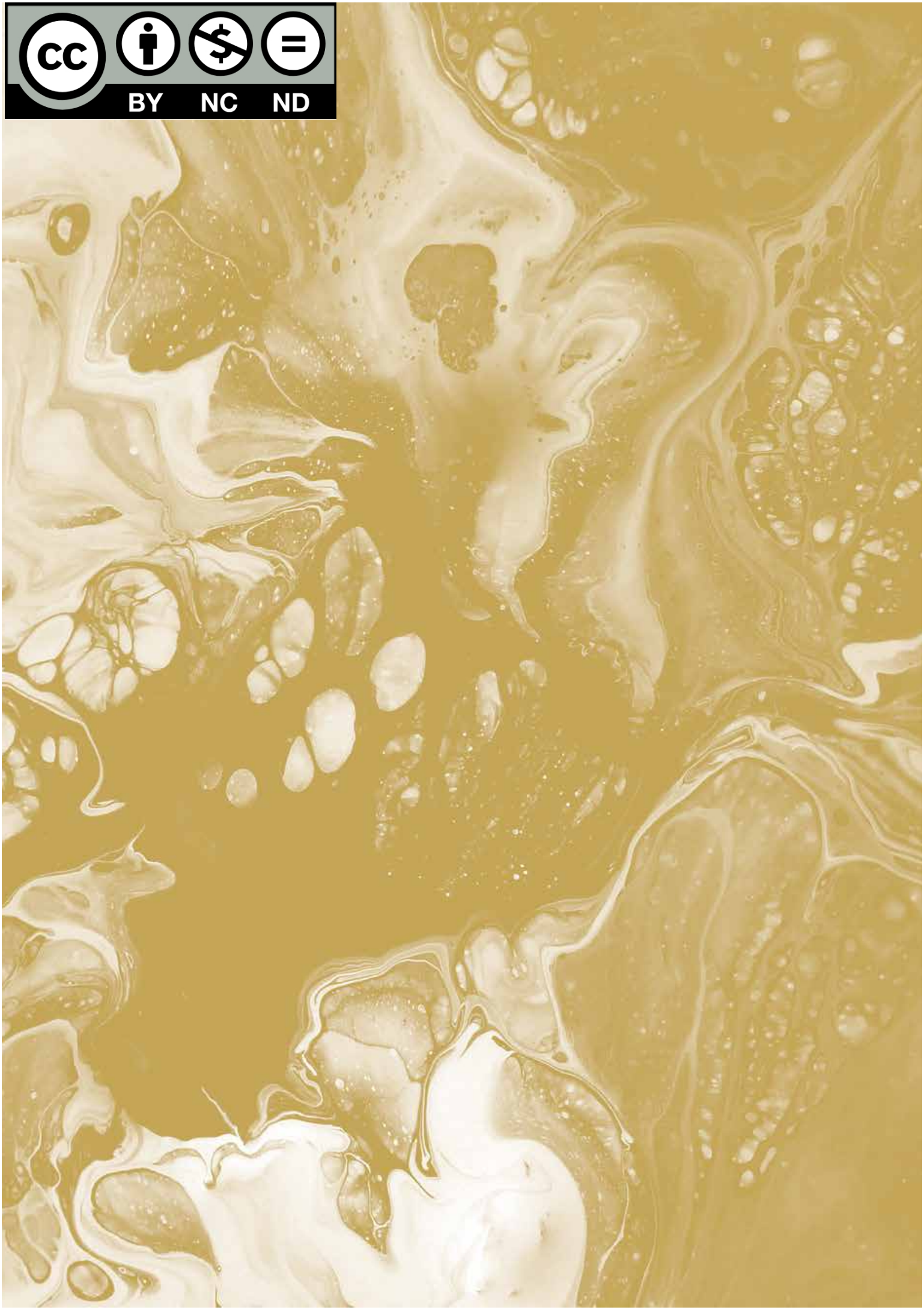
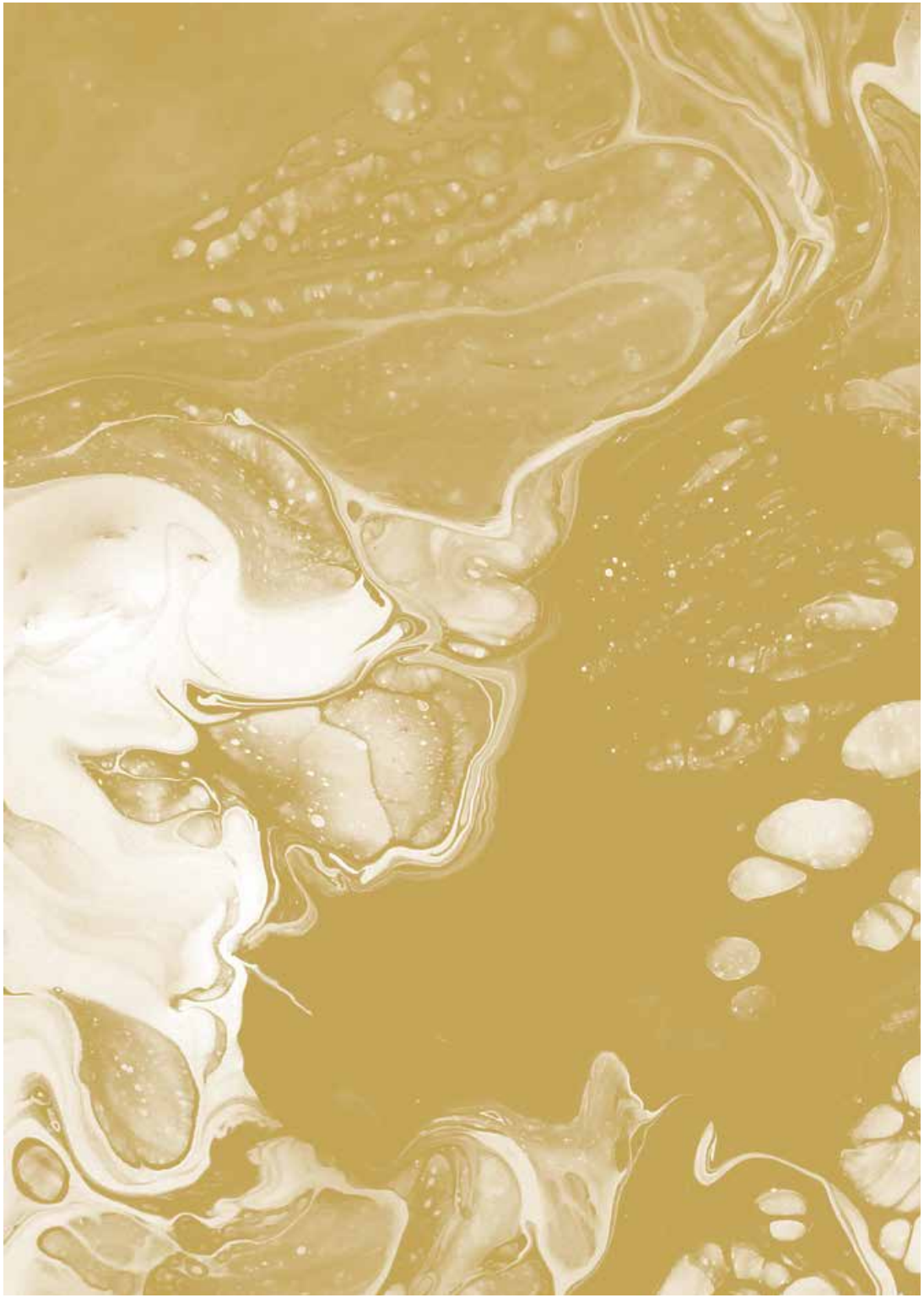


BY NC ND





The Characters

✧ ✧ ✧

THIS BOOK HAS BEEN PRINTED IN 300 COPIES.

COPY Nº ..... / 300





CHARACTER #V

Bertha Bolette Boyd 1900—1985

The Buthan Trilogy

✧ ✧ ✧

Who is Bertha Bolette Boyd?

BY STEPHANIE VON SPRETER

BBB — Bertha Bolette Boyd — is a strong and courageous woman travelling in Bhutan between 1931 and 1933. Apparently untouched and closed-off, BBB climbs Himalayan territories far away from the tumultuous times raging in other parts of the world: the Great Depression and mass unemployment, hyperinflation and political extremism and eventually, another world war. Meanwhile in Bhutan it looks like time and space have stood still, detached from worldly matters. Is it there where BBB finds an escape? We can only speculate. Thus we wonder: what were BBB's motivations for exploring these hidden territories? Who is BBB? Which paths did this woman lay out and whose footsteps did she follow? What are the traces that she left?

Taking Bertha Bolette Boyd's initials as a starting point for such investigation might appear paradoxical, since this would presumably further obscure the character of BBB. But it can also lead us to some unexplored and unexpected paths. Loosely inspired by Donna Haraway's use of SF—two initial-like letters evoking, through its abbreviation, the interchangeable meanings of "Science Fiction", "Speculative Fabulation", "String Figures", "Speculative Feminism, "Science Fact" or "So Far"[1]—also the abbreviation BBB can point to different elements and personae making up Tonje Bøe Birkeland's character.

BBB is a mountaineer and writer travelling Bhutan in the early twentieth century. Her life evokes those of other strong female adventurers travelling the world at the time, such as American traveller Louise Arner Boyd (1887—1972) or the Swiss writer, journalist, activist and traveller Annemarie Schwarzenbach (1908—1942). Louise Arner Boyd indeed acted as an eponym for parts of Bertha Bolette Boyd's name. Both (Louise Arner) Boyd's and Annemarie Schwarzenbach's personalities were marked by a free spirit, breaking away from the rules and constraints of their bourgeois upbringing, travelling the world in the constant quest for experience and discovery. But

it was not only that. It was their desire to deeply engage with their surroundings, leaving behind social conventions and what was to be expected from a woman of such status. We imagine that there is a deep desire to move away from a constrained society, and breathe in a different air, reaching out to become entangled in different lives and territories, moving back and forth in space and time, like string figures that have the capacity to continuously transform themselves.

Haraway writes: "I think of SF and string figures in a triple sense of figuring. First, promiscuously plucking out fibers in clotted and dense events and practices, I try to follow the threads where they lead in order to track them and find their tangles and patterns crucial for staying with the trouble in real and particular places and times. In that sense, SF is a method of tracing, of following a thread in the dark, in a dangerous true tale of adventure, where who lives and who dies and how might become clearer for the cultivating of multispecies justice. Second, the string figure is not the tracking, but rather the actual thing, the pattern and assembly that solicits response, the thing that is not oneself but with which one must go on. Third, string figuring is passing on and receiving, making and unmaking, picking up threads and dropping them. SF is practice and process; it is becoming-with each other in surprising relays; it is a figure for ongoingness in the Chthulucene."[2]

Haraway's string figures emerge from a feminist perspective (in addition to an antiracist, anticolonial, anticapitalist and proqueer feminist of every colour), advocating sexual and reproductive freedom and rights, trumping the demands of patriarchy or any other system.[3] It leads us to BBB's second initial, B for Bolette.

Bolette Berg (1872-1944) was a photographer who ran a photo studio together with her companion Marie Høeg (1866-1949) in Horten, Norway around the turn of the 20th century. Berg & Høeg Fotoatelier, as it was called, "…took portraits and views of Horten and surroundings and lived on the proceeds from sales. Horten was a naval base with the main shipyard for the Norwegian navy and had a strong flow of people who needed photographs for celebration and recollection. Perhaps that is how the two photographers understood by the very process of portraiture how important it is to stage oneself and to what a large degree that contributes to how we are perceived."[4] Significantly, Berg's partner Marie Høeg was a leading figure in women's rights movements in Norway and an initiator of associations such as the "Horten Ledd av Landskvinnestemmerettforeningen" (The Horten Branch of the National Association for Women's Right to Vote) or the "Horten Kvinneråd tilknyttet Norske Kvinners Nasjonalråd" (The Horten Women's Council linked to the National Norwegian Women's Council). Although Bolette Berg seems to have been more in the background, she was surely prominent as an independent woman and partner of Marie Høeg, not least by jointly running the photography studio. The Preus Museum, Norway's National Museum of Photography, owns a large part of the glass negatives deriving from Berg & Høeg's studio. In the 1980s museum staff discovered a box marked "private", which contained a series of staged photographs picturing Berg and Høeg themselves in their photo studio.[5] On the photographs we either see the woman photographers individually or as couples, parodying and commenting on existing gender roles and portraiture genres of the time. In one photograph Marie Høeg is dressed in a sealskin fur, portrayed in the typical pose and setup of the male polar hero, like their compatriot Roald Amundsen.[6] In another photograph, Bolette Berg is dressed up as a Vestal, a powerful female priest of ancient Rome freed from the usual social obligations to marry and bear children in order to oversee the state's rituals (while in reality they had no choice, their destiny to become a Vestal was laid out by the patriarchal society). Another photograph depicts Bolette Berg and Marie Høeg sitting in a boat reminiscent of an Impressionistic boating scene by the likes of Édouard Manet, though the idyllic scene is "disturbed" by the two women smoking cigarettes in a supposedly "unladylike" manner. The discovery of these type of photographs elevated Bolette Berg and Marie Høeg to prominence again almost ninety years later, revealing them as strong advocates of women's self-determination. However, little has been written about their work[7] and Berg & Høeg still remain largely unknown to an international audience. Nevertheless, since the mid-1990s their photographs did become more accessible within Norway through various exhibitions, in which above all their "private" photographs were publicly shown.[8] It is presumably also here that Tonje Bøe Birkeland became aware of the photographs.

Berg & Høeg's "private" photographs were taken between 1895 and 1903, during an era marked by imperial expansion (including Polar exploration), heightened industrial capitalism and scientific advancements, national-building processes (prominently in Norway, becoming independent in 1905) and, visible through Marie Høeg's activities, women's rights movements (women received the voting right in Norway in 1913). It was

also the period marked by the rise of the mass media, with new printing techniques (halftone process) making it possible to reproduce photographs in printed matter on a large scale. By the 1900s newspapers began using this technique, which became also an important element for the (visual) dissemination of exploration narratives (amongst other news). Within the context of exploration narratives, the growing importance of print media with its increasing distribution network not only meant that armchair travellers could follow the footsteps of explorers. The media would now also contribute to making those explorers prominent public persons and in turn increasing the likelihood of financial support for future expeditions to undiscovered and unconquered territories.

The Norwegian News Agency NTB (Norsk Telegrambyrå), founded in 1867, became an important player in the dissemination of news to various print media, and, being aware of the importance of visual imagery, established a separate photography department early on (turned into a separate legal entity in 1932). This leads us to the first B in the initials of Birkeland's character, standing for Bertha. According to Tonje Bøe Birkeland, Bertha was the first name of Birkeland's great grandmother, Bertha Marie Lohmann.[9] Lohmann was the first woman employed at The Norwegian News Agency and later became editor-in-chief of the Norwegian newspaper Fiskaren. Bertha Marie Lohmann's active working period would fall into BBB's travel period, establishing yet another connection with the character. But most importantly, it is Tonje Bøe Birkeland herself who weaves those histories together. Staging BBB while being TBB or staging TBB while being BBB, the character becomes entangled in different leaps in time, simultaneously embodying different personae. Through the act of storytelling, Birkeland fuses different spatial and temporal dimensions and characteristics: an explorer, a discoverer, a writer, a mountaineer, a wanderer, a (walking) artist, a photographer, a documentarist, a storyteller, an inventor of worlds where different horizons meet and merge. Ghosts from the past emerge in the contemporary photographic representations of a strong female character travelling the mountains of Bhutan. BBB travels through time, captures something that is eerily both now and then. We are refrained from separating one from the other. And why should we? We all live with our past in the present, we all carry history within us. "Our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard."

✧ ✧ ✧

Endnotes

1—Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, North Carolina; London, England: Duke University Press, 2016). p.2
2—Ibid., p.5
3—Ibid., p.11
4—"BOLETTE BERG AND MARIE HØEG," accessed 03.02.2020, *https://www.preusmuseum.no/eng/Discover-the-Collections/Fotografer/Bolette-Berg-and-Marie-Hoeeg.* 5—Ibid.
6—See for example the chapter "Helteportretter" (Portraits of Heroes) in Harald Ø Lund, Siv Frøydis Berg, and Nasjonalbiblioteket, Norske polarheltbilder: 1888-1928 (Oslo: Nasjonalbiblioteket Press, 2011). pp. 18-47
7—Ibid.
8— In academic publishing, apart from Norske Polarheltbilder, Berg & Høeg's work and Høeg's political activism is discussed in Brit Connie Stuksrud, Marie Høeg: et politisk portrett (Oslo: Unipub, 2009). See also Anja Petersen, "På visit i verkligheten: fotografi och kön i slutet av 1800-talet" (Brutus Östlings bokförlag Symposion, 2007). An unpublished Master thesis entitled Berg og Høeg: Iscenesettelse og lek med kjønnsidentitet i norsk fotografi omkring 1900 (University of Oslo, 2002) also analyzes their work.
9—Interview conducted with Tonje Bøe Birkeland in November 2019
10—IHans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, ed. Joel and Donald G. Marshall Weinsheimer, Bloomsbury Revelations, (London, England: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). p.252

References

"Bolette Berg and Marie Høeg." accessed 03.02.2020, https://www.preusmuseum.no/eng/Discover-the-Collections/Fotografer/Bolette-Berg-and-Marie-Hoeeg.
Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method. Bloomsbury Revelations.* Edited by Joel and Donald G. Marshall Weinsheimer. London, England: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble : Making Kin in the Chthulucene.* Durham, North Carolina; London, England: Duke University Press, 2016.
Lund, Harald Ø, Siv Frøydis Berg, and Nasjonalbiblioteket. Norske Polarheltbilder: 1888-1928. Oslo: Nasjonalbiblioteket Press, 2011.
Petersen, Anja. *På Visit I Verkligheten: Fotografi Och Kön I Slutet Av 1800-Talet.* Brutus Östlings bokförlag Symposion, 2007.
Stuksrud, Brit Connie. Marie Høeg: *Et Politisk Portrett.* Oslo: Unipub, 2009.