

Babs Boter, Marleen Rensen and Giles Scott-Smith, *Unhinging the national framework: Perspectives on transnational life writing* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2020, 210 pp., ISBN 9789088909740).

What do a Dutch housewife emigrating to South Africa in the 1950s, a late-nineteenth-century Belgian social reformer, a book about slavery written around 1900 and a recently deceased Dutch-Moroccan author have in common? These four examples testify to the variety of ways in which the authors of the volume *Unhinging the national framework. Perspectives on transnational life writing* show us transnational perspectives in the field of life writing. This collection of essays, edited by Babs Boter, Marleen Rensen and Giles Scott-Smith, is published under the auspices of the international expert group ‘Unhinging the National Framework: Platform for Life-Writing and Transnationalism’, convened by Boter. The researchers within this network come from various disciplinary backgrounds and investigate the lives of men and women ‘whose life-work, including the building of socio-cultural and professional networks, questioned and transgressed the national boundaries that existed or emerged during the twentieth century’.¹ In the introduction of the volume, Boter and Rensen state that their aim is to ‘unhinge’ that national frame because the scholarly field of life writing is still too much locked in a national framework (10). For this book they drew inspiration from an edited volume published in 2010, *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700-present*, which focused on the ways the national identities of primarily eighteenth-century English-speaking subjects were destabilised by the transnational perspective.² The editors wish ‘to move on’ by focusing on a different period, from the late nineteenth century onwards, as well as looking at ‘non-English-speaking subjects’ who were living in or visiting the Netherlands, the (former) Dutch colonies in present Indonesia and Surinam, as well as Belgium and South Africa (8).

The diversity in subjects, disciplines and methods that is so characteristic of this field is reflected in the ways the transnational theme is translated in the different essays. Next to the more classical historical, biographical essays, one can find an essay on teaching, three dealing with literature or poetry, two in which the contributors explicitly use digital history tools to prove their point, and a biographical account of a non-human subject. The concept of transnationality can be taken quite literally, for example when a subject travels from one country to another, but it is also understood in different ways, for instance when a person uses or plays with transnational aspects in his or her personal narratives or work.

The editors chose to divide this volume into four sections: archival traces (three essays), networking (three essays), circulation (four essays) and positioning (two essays). The first section is the most traditional and homogenous. The three essays deal with the lives of women based upon archival traces, primarily letters. These women crossed several boundaries – between countries but also between class, gender and race. By a close reading of the archival traces the authors Eveline Buchheim, Ernestine Hoegen and Barbara Henkes show how these women were living a transnational life, moving around and ‘doing’ class, gender and/or race by adopting or rebutting certain narratives and ideologies.

In the second section about networking two of the three authors used digital tools to show the networks of their protagonists. Thomas D’Haenick maps the changes in topics and correspondents over several decades when analysing the letters of Belgian social reformer Emile de Laveleye in the nineteenth century, whereas Lonneke Geerlings examines the changes at a fixed moment in time in her essay on the Dutch contacts of the American *black sociologist* W. E. B. Du Bois during his visit to the Netherlands in the late 1950s. D’Haenick’s conclusion is twofold and somewhat predictable. Firstly he concludes he could track the changes over time in the discussed topics through the use of digital tools, and through this he discovered a new subject of correspondence: the importance of religion and religious reform. Secondly he stresses that digitisation opens up new horizons for biographers and historians, meaning access to relevant geographically dispersed sources but also the opening up of large datasets (106-107). The added value of Geerlings’ contribution lies in her use of previously undisclosed security archives in which the Dutch contacts of Du Bois are viewed through a different lens. This essay provides an insight into the visit of Du Bois and his wife Shirley Graham to the Netherlands, but also shows how gender and ethnicity play a role in the profiling by the intelligence service. The Dutch women the Du Bois met were not considered to be a political threat because they were women. The only white man in the party was omitted from the reports as well, which led Geerlings to conclude this must be due to his skin tone. In the third essay of this section author Diederik Oostdijk, who is a professor of English Literature, uses the translations of Dutch poetry by the well-known American poet Adrienne Rich to show how translating could be considered as a form of transnationality. Compared to the two more historical contributions

1 As stated on the website of Free University of Amsterdam. See: ‘Unhinging the National Framework: Platform for the Study of Life-Writing and Transnationalism’, *Free University of Amsterdam*, <https://www.clue.vu.nl/en/projects/Unhinging-the-National-Framework/index.aspx>. Retrieved 30 May 2021.

2 Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott (eds.), *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700-present*. Palgrave Macmillan Transnational History Series (London 2010). DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.1057/9780230277472>.

in this section however, this literary approach to a biographical subject's life is the odd one out. Oostdijk states that translating helped Rich to 'wake up' and to realise that she should stop 'sleepwalking' through life (78), which referred to her coming out as a lesbian feminist activist in the early 1970s. This conclusion is a rather speculative one for historians. Nevertheless it is a very interesting and readable essay in which a different light is shown on the concept of transnationality as well as on the famous poet Rich.

The section on circulation is the most diverse in topics as well as the most elaborate section of this volume. Marijke Huisman's elegant account of the 'life' of the book *Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Washington and its Dutch translation is the most surprising essay of the entire volume. Huisman shows how Dutch protestants during the twentieth century used and re-used Washington's account on slavery for their own cause. She shows how the book transcends the limits of space and time, but she still interconnects the author and his life with the book and its readers. In the meantime she proves another point: 'things' like the book *Up from Slavery* have biographies too. The most theoretical essay of this volume can be found in this section as well. In his contribution, Ciraj Rassool sheds light on current South African biographical practices, where contestation provides the framework for a rethinking of South African political biography. Life writing helps this genre to move on from the masculine frames of nationalist narration and triumphal celebration (138). Nancy Mykoff, who teaches History of Women and Gender at University College Roosevelt to primarily Dutch students, stays much closer to home. She uses her Dutch classroom as an example to prove the power of storytelling in teaching life writing, gender and history. In the fourth essay of the section Edy Seriese connects the life and writings of one individual, the famous Dutch-Indonesian writer Tjalie Robinson (pseudonym of Jan Johannes Theodorus Boon), with the lives of many in the Indies diaspora from the 1950s onwards. The last section of this volume contains only two essays dealing with two totally different writers. Monica Soeting shows how the Dutch writer Cissy van Marxveldt portrayed herself in a subtle way as a cosmopolitan at the beginning of the twentieth century, and Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar argues that almost one century later the late author Hafid Bouazza should be considered to be a post-national writer.

With a multitude of subjects and diverse interpretations of the concept of transnationality as well as disciplines involved, the question of coherence lingers over this volume. Maybe the conclusion should be that the diversity of subjects, methods and interpretations is both its strength and weakness. Nevertheless the national frame is definitely unhinged by this book and hopefully it will invite life writers and others to draw inspiration from this volume to 'move on' from the national frame.