



Babs Boter, Marleen Rensen, and Giles Scott-Smith (eds.), *Unhinging the National Framework: Perspectives on Transnational Life Writing* (Leiden, Sidestone Press, 2020, ISBN 9789088909764).

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When the novel coronavirus began to spread around the world in early 2020, much was said about the ways the pandemic highlighted global interconnectedness. Given this context, Babs Boter, Marleen Rensen and Giles Scott-Smith's collection *Unhinging the National Framework: Perspectives on Transnational Life Writing* was perhaps auspiciously timed: published in December of 2020, the collection discusses life narratives that cut across national boundaries, emphasising the interconnectedness of global life in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. The editors describe their project as elevating 'the casual border-crossing encounters of everyday life, the building of familial, socio-cultural and professional networks outside of the national sphere, and the travel and translations of life stories as they have been recorded in different media' (9). By focusing on the stories of 'ordinary' individuals—including many from outside the English-speaking world—the editors also aim to unsettle the 'concepts, methodology and standard narratives' traditionally employed by scholars of life writing, emphasising the power of life writing to challenge dominant paradigms (9-10).

In their introduction, editors Boter and Rensen describe the chapters of *Unhinging the National Framework* as case studies, each one discussing a subject whose life transcended national boundaries. These case studies are further organised into four themed sections. The first section, 'Archival Traces,' includes three essays that draw on historical records to discuss the transnational lives of women who lived in Dutch colonies. Using personal sources such as letters and diaries, the essays in this section emphasise how life writing sheds light on the history of 'ordinary' subjects.

Although these personal sources offer only fragmentary accounts of subjects' lives, they are nevertheless generative: as Boter and Rensen write, 'The fact that the "archive" of their beliefs and actions is incomplete only adds to the sense of fragility of human experience, and emphasises the task of the researcher to piece together the traces to recreate each subject' (10). The essays in this section also share concerns around the construction of racial identities. Barbara Henkes' chapter, which analyses the personal writing of a white Dutch woman in 1950s South Africa, represents an illuminating example of these concerns: as she analyses the letters of Wendela Beusekom, Henkes traces the way Beusekom's racial views shifted after she moved to South Africa, becoming more invested in narratives of white supremacy. Henkes' analysis offers a fascinating example of the practice of 'doing race' in colonial spaces, illustrating at an individual level the process through which racist ideas become naturalised. In doing so, Henkes also compellingly demonstrates the value of life writing as a form of micro-history.

The second section, 'Networking,' considers how transnational life narratives are constructed through relational encounters. In contrast to the previous section, each of the authors in this section employs distinct methods. Diederik Oostdijk analyses Adrienne Rich's translations of Dutch poets Martinus Nijhoff, Hendrik de Vries, Gerrit Achterberg, Leo Vroman, and Christiaan Johannes van Geel, arguing that Rich's translations of these poets profoundly influenced her later writing. Oostdijk adopts the metaphor of 'sleepwalking' to describe Rich's approach to translation and argues that questions of translation are essential to discussions of transnational literature. In the section's second chapter, Lonneke Geerlings adopts a 'multi-biographical approach' to analyse W.E.B. Du Bois' visit to the Netherlands in 1958, a method that 'allows her to consider the Netherlands as a contact zone of Black Atlantic networks' (11). Finally, Thomas D'haeninck proposes methods from digital humanities to expand the study of transnational life writing. D'haeninck's chapter analyses a group of letters from Belgian intellectual Emile De Laveleye, using citation analysis to illustrate how De Laveleye's ideas were shaped by his 'evolving conversations' across national boundaries (99). D'haeninck's example, like each of the case studies in this section, suggests that analysis of life writing can be expanded by considering subjects' relational networks. By exploring how lives are lived in conversation with others, D'Haeninck argues, we can develop 'new perspectives on familiar subjects' and further 'unhing[e] the national context of history-writing' (99, 107).

The collection's final two sections expand definitions of transnational life writing. The third section, 'Circulation,' broadens the collection's focus by considering how

objects, not just people, lead transnational lives. Marijke Huisman's chapter in this section is especially thought-provoking, asking readers to consider whether life writing requires a human subject, or if we could instead consider the 'life' of a text—in this case, Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, which circulated globally and became a touchstone within the Dutch anti-colonialism movement. By analysing the 'life' of Washington's autobiographical text, Huisman encourages us to consider how global capitalism produces transnational engagement even when subjects cannot physically cross borders. The fourth and final section, 'Positionings,' troubles definitions even further. Monica Soeting's chapter considers the writings of Cissy van Marxveldt, an author who did not herself live a transnational life, but who explored transnational experiences by writing fictional stories with cosmopolitan heroines. Through her analysis, Soeting suggests that definitions of 'transnational' may need to be expanded. In the collection's final chapter, Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar similarly suggests that scholars may need to 'unhinge' transnational as well as national frameworks. Moenandar takes as a case study the writing of Hafid Bouazza, a Moroccan-Dutch author who explicitly rejects transnationalism as a framework for his writing and experience. Rather than representing himself as a transnational subject, Bouazza claims a fully Dutch identity and criticises as essentialist those readers who attribute an Arab sensibility to his writing. Interestingly, Moenandar suggests, Bouazza instead understands language as a transnational space, conceptualising it as a 'means to transcend confining boundaries' even as he rejects a transnational identity for himself (202). By exploring this example, Moenandar productively outlines ways transnationalism could be reimagined.

Overall, the collection's case study structure is effective, allowing the authors to cover a wide range of topics while also illuminating connections between them. In fact, there are several commonalities linking these diverse chapters. Most obviously (and perhaps somewhat ironically), nearly all the case studies share some connection to the Netherlands, a commonality that indicates the endurance of national frameworks even within attempts to define their limitations. As editors Boter and Rensen note in their introduction, no subject exists entirely 'outside a national paradigm'; instead, national and transnational identities intersect and overlap (10). In addition to this national connection, the case studies are united by shared values and theoretical concerns, especially through their interest in the history of 'ordinary' subjects. As editor Giles Scott-Smith explains in his afterword, one strength of life writing is its ability to 'redirect the practice of history into the reconstruction of the everyday life of the everyday peoples of this world' (207). In addition to the benefits this redirection offers for knowledge production, Scott-Smith also contends that

attention to life writing can promote justice, allowing scholars to uplift the voices of marginalised subjects who have traditionally been ‘written out’ of history.

With its focus on life writing as a form of ‘ordinary’ history, *Unhinging the National Framework* is likely to be most useful for scholars working in historical and archival research. For these scholars, the collection offers a variety of productive questions that expand the study of everyday lives that cross boundaries. The collection’s emphasis on unpublished personal writing is especially useful in this regard, as is its recommendation of new methods, including the digital methods outlined by D’Haeninck. The book may be somewhat less useful for scholars working in literary studies: although some chapters engage with literary texts, they primarily do so through biographical and reception criticism, using subjects’ personal documents to examine their positions in global history. Although illuminating, these discussions mostly lack the close attention to published texts that is typical of analyses of life writing in literary studies. Even so, the collection as a whole explores a fascinating range of topics, and scholars from many disciplines are likely to find this diversity of perspectives worthwhile. Especially compelling is the authors’ shared belief in life writing’s ability to portray the intricacies of transnational lives and, in doing so, unsettle systems of power. As Scott-Smith observes, ‘Life writing can thus be the non-sanitised version, the confrontational “awkward uncle” at the family party, the lines of text long deleted. Life is jagged, not smooth, and so should it be recorded’ (208).

Ultimately, this recognition of life’s jaggedness represents a great strength of the collection. As they trace the trajectories of various lives, the authors of *Unhinging the National Framework* illustrate the unavoidable complexities of life in an era of globalisation. These complexities are likely to endure: in fact, the twenty-first century may well be marked as an era of transnational challenges that will need to be addressed through global cooperation. As such, the perspectives included in this collection are even more timely and vital. As they emphasise the significance and ubiquity of transnational lives, the authors remind us that ‘all lives are remarkable, in their own uniqueness and intricate detail,’ encouraging us to imagine the lives of others as inextricably linked with our own (208).