
Dutch historian Barbara Henkes has earned her position in twentieth-century social history by writing on, amongst other topics, German domestic servants in Dutch households between 1920 and 1950. She now takes us to another highly relevant niche of migration studies: family relations across borders after migration to two explicitly racist societies, the Netherlands during the German occupation, and Apartheid South Africa after 1945. Six case studies reflect the many faces of ‘transnational kinship networks’ in times of racism. Three delve into the life histories of German-Dutch couples during the war in the first part of the book, while the second part focuses on three Dutch migrants, individuals or families, who traveled to South Africa in the early 1950s. Except for one chapter on South Africa, all case studies have been published before, in different volumes and journals between 1989 and 2013, and have been reworked for this volume.

A strong Introduction and a concluding Epilogue bring these six cases together. All chapters are constructed upon similar, highly varied, and rich personal source material: published and unpublished letters, memoirs, diaries, photo albums and film shoots from the persons involved. Henkes discusses data from these sources in hindsight in personal meetings with them or their family. Oral history and memory work are thus an integral part of the book. The author does not accept written statements at face value but goes far to question post-date reactions to experiences of war and Apartheid. These histories thus provide clear insight into personal biographies, without being life histories in the proper sense. They maintain focus: negotiating race, albeit in many forms.

The three migrants from Germany all had a good reason to travel in the interwar years: two women married Dutch men, and one Jewish migrant, a German physic and astronomer, fled his country, repeated his studies in the Netherlands and married a Dutch woman. Their reactions were varied. The first German-Dutch wife abhorred Nazism and housed a Jewish boy during the war. ‘Negotiating racial politics’ implied looking for common ground for her German relatives in their letters; it marked silence about difficult topics and ‘safe stories’ in hers. The NSDAP career of her beloved brother was more important than her disgust of antisemitism; like her German grandmother she advised him against a wedding with a part-Jewish woman.

The second German wife, feeling ashamed and guilty about her former compatriots, chose a form of resistance by transporting illegal leaflets in her chil-
dren’s pram, despite her husband’s fears. Her German roots did not evoke any suspicion. The third, the Jewish astronomer without work, without nationality, without a safe place, ‘negotiated’ racial politics in his own family. By marrying a non-Jewish wife (and some luck), he was able to survive the war. He was victim of the virulent antisemitism during the war, which his wife experienced also after the war. All three main characters, however, shared a strong attachment to the ‘other’ Germany.

The stories of the three Dutch migrants to South Africa are less dramatic. One young Dutchman, a carpenter in training, married a South African girl after a letter exchange of years in the early 1950s and remained in South Africa. One young banker’s family went over in the early 1950s and decided to return to the Netherlands, after three years. In the last case study, in 1981 a three generation Dutch family in South Africa was filmed by a young relative about what it meant to live in the country, with consequences for family relations. None of the main characters opposed Apartheid. On the contrary, the inherited ‘cultural archive’ of Dutch colonialism in the former Netherlands-Indies provided new immigrants with the vocabulary to deal with black servants. Fear of the Other would be another easily recognizable attitude. The transnational family communications of these migrants dealt with other problems such as the right Protestant church, the social codes, the rivalry between two white political parties, Unionists and Nationalists, and only in hindsight with Apartheid. Here again, ‘negotiating racism’ towards a more critical country of origin often took the form of silence.

This quick glance of the content illustrates already that there are few consistent patterns to be discerned among the reactions of the main actors in the cases; unity of time and place (and personal character) is lacking. Reactions are as varied as the persons and families themselves. Comparison is not the purpose of the author. She aims at analyzing the many faces of these racial ‘negotiations’ of Gentiles and Whites and to anchor these reactions in a consistent and meaningful theoretical and historical framework.

In the wake of historians Benedict Anderson and John R. Gillis, Henkes considers families as ‘imagined’ social constructions, and as communities we live with and we live by, sharing different common aspects such as forbears and photographs, histories and holidays. We do families. None of the participants in the case studies can ignore racism, although Dutch people in South Africa often seem to do so; they are part of the construction of whiteness. Hence, all are ‘implicated subjects’ to use Michael Rothberg’s term, i.e. implicated in histories that surpass their individual agency. It is this central concept of the book that may prevent blaming its actors for their racism, although the degree of implication/agency may vary and the text leaves room for some moral judgment on occasion.
Henkes pays attention to the national, religious, racial and cultural lines, along which negotiations about racism are formulated; and she puts these in a well-historicized context. Apparently, class has had a lesser impact in these negotiations. She could also have laid more weight on pre-migratory family structures and sphere; the strength of these networks depended first of all on what had existed before migration. This aspect, for instance, determined the behaviour of the German women in her first cases, but is not elaborated.

As it is, we may be very happy with the result. *Negotiating Racial Politics in the Family* offers a wide view of the personal histories, attitudes and positions of different ‘implicated subjects’, from a valuable wider perspective of facts and theories. Its chapters can be read for their own merits and insights and may be useful, for instance in teaching about the daily Apartheid in South Africa. All in all, a rich and well-written book, bringing both these personal histories and their larger historical contexts near to the reader.

*Elsbeth Locher-Scholten*  
Associate Professor in History, Utrecht University (retired)  
and Independent Scholar, Zeist, The Netherlands  
elsbeth.locher@kpnmail.nl