



Book Review

A Review of Negotiating Racial Politics in the Family: Transnational Histories touched by National Socialism and Apartheid

Barbara Henkes

E-book (PDF) ISBN 978-90-04-40160-0

Brill, Boston, 2020

Reviewed by

Marisa Lombard

University of Pretoria

Pretoria, South Africa

marisa.lombard@up.ac.za

I must confess that I am not familiar with Henkes's prior work, but I have familiarized myself with whiteness on an autoethnographic level in my short academic career. One thing that irks me in literary works about whiteness is how authors sometimes distance themselves from their racial and socio-economic anthropology when conducting research. However, this was not the case when reading *Negotiating Racial Politics in the Family* (NRPF). Henkes writes with authenticity and transparency that gives her readers a glimpse into the inner workings of her mind and personality. The latter may seem insignificant from a purely academic perspective. Still, relatability may be the key that authors of whiteness need to bridge the gap white fragility can create between their work and its readers. The casual writing style makes the stories told emotionally and intellectually accessible without undermining the complex academic themes of race, family, and nation.

The focus of NRPF is soundly enveloped in the theoretical and conceptual parameters of the kinship network concept, which emphasizes the flexible nature of family and nation as imagined communities in the contexts of World War II (WW II) Europe and apartheid South Africa. This flexibility is evident in the analysis of the families' letters, diary entries,

photographs, film, and archival sources. In-depth narrative analysis of detailed and complex experiences provides intimate details that help better our understanding of people's thinking, beliefs, and behaviour in terms of race and nationalism. Thus, it is essential to place the narratives of interest within a rich socio-historical context to avoid losing perspective. Henkes maintains a balanced approach by providing a thorough background of WW II and apartheid's broader contexts from the introductory chapter throughout Parts I and II of the book. Part I analyses the discourse between members of three German families as well as the discourse between couples with members who migrated to the Netherlands during WW II. Part II is the analysis of the discourse between three Dutch families with members who migrated to South Africa at the beginning of apartheid.

The complex nature of national and familial kinship is explored in relation to the various loyalties and ethical responsibilities a person holds toward society and their family, specifically in the context of migration from one country to another. Part I shows how individuals who migrated from Germany to the Netherlands identified with both national identities. Their attempts to navigate a sense of belonging in their German families, while harmoniously disagreeing with German nationalism. Family members implemented strategies like sugar-coating or outright avoiding political topics in letters. Other times frustration, denial, and indifference slipped through the cracks of kinship attempts, reminding us of how fragile or strong kinship bonds can be depending on where one's loyalty lies. Examples of divided consciousness and racial othering associated with whiteness are highlighted in the analysis of the six European families. Examples of racial othering and divided consciousness are more evident in the family histories explored in Part II of NRPF. I noticed that Henkes uses the terms 'Whites' and 'Blacks' when referring to issues of whiteness, which I also did in past writings. However, these terms do have a dehumanizing tone to them. My suggestion to all whiteness authors is to refer to these groups as 'white people' and 'black people' in future literary works.

Some may feel that the navigations during WW II are more theatrical than the family histories analysed during the early phases of apartheid South Africa¹. However, the intimate nature of the family narratives studied reminded me that we should never minimize the suffering and racial othering of others, no matter the context. The apartheid system was implemented because people thought segregation was a harmless solution.

1 E Locher-Scholten, "Negotiating racial politics in the family: transnational histories touched by national socialism and apartheid, by Barbara Henkes", *Fascism*, 11 (1), 2022, pp. 149-151.

Micro-aggressions play a significant part in keeping modern systems of oppression and racism in place². Part II demonstrates how nationalist propaganda alongside white privilege (attained because of apartheid) motivated the cultivation of ethnocentric white identities in the Dutch migrants studied. Henkes effectively highlights how seemingly innocent or non-violent action or even passiveness and silence sustain ethnocentric belief and, by extension, systems of oppression. NRPF, in this regard, is a needed contribution to the international study of whiteness due to its insistence on highlighting the experiences of the individual, which was previously deemed mundane in whiteness studies and history.

NRPF is a relatable and accessible work of literature that does not shy away from the controversial and previously overlooked. Henkes's emphasis on kinship's flexibility in a familial and national sense shows that change and transformation are possible. However, introspection, reflection, and historical study are needed to challenge our perceptions about the 'other' within a bigger context. NRPF is a valuable tool for any academic or curious individual that wishes to broaden their understanding of white identities in socio-historical contexts of oppression. We are reminded of how important it is to break the silences that uphold oppressive practices, even if we risk rejection by our families or nation. White racial identities cannot develop or change if they are constantly surrounded by like-minded people and ideas³. The stories shared through the distant, yet relatable experiences of the families studied show that honesty is the first step we need to take if we want to stop racial othering and history from repeating itself.

2 CC Levchak, "Microaggressions, macroaggressions, and modern racism", CC Levchak, *Microaggressions and modern racism* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 13-69.

3 JE Helms, *Black and white racial identity: theory, research, and practice* (Greenwood Press, New York, 1990).