

## **Introduction:**

### **Worlding Modern Literature in the Low Countries**

Bram Ieven, Hans Demeyer & Lucelle Pardoe

In 2007, the Flemish-Moroccan writer Rachida Lamrabet published her debut novel *Vrouwland*.<sup>1</sup> The main narrative centers around Younes, a Moroccan adolescent who meets Mariam, a Flemish-Moroccan girl who is spending some time in Morocco during the summer. They fall in love and the day before Mariam leaves, Younes asks her to marry him. Jestingly, she agrees. But back in Belgium, she never responds to his letters. Finally, having obtained a university degree but struggling to find decent employment and with several years of unresponded letters sent to Yasmine, Younes decides to travel to Belgium to search for his long lost love and, perhaps, to build a better future for himself. But the boat that transports him is shipwrecked and Younes drowns in his attempt to reach the European mainland. Interwoven with this heartbreaking story of unrequited love, migration and adolescent aspiration for a better life are a myriad of adjacent stories of characters that lead their lives in a world in which Belgium and Morocco, Europe and Africa are not separate entities but closely intertwined worlds.

When Lamrabet's novel was published, it was hailed as a turning point in Belgian Neerlandophone literature addressing the topic of migration in the Low Countries.<sup>2</sup> *Vrouwland* was welcomed as a superb form of migrant literature, a genre that in "Belgian Neerlandophone [literature] ... started to flourish only in the 2000s and has principally been led by second generation Moroccan-origin authors."<sup>3</sup> Lamrabet was seen as part of that new generation addressing the intricacies of migration in Belgium.

Migration obviously plays a crucial role in *Vrouwland*. Yet, what is truly striking about the characters and their stories, is how the world they navigate was a self-explanatory web of multiple regions and ways of life, woven into each other in the way that life, as it unfolds, tends to do. In that sense, rather than allowing itself to be compartmentalized in the literary subgenre of migrant literature, Lamrabet's novel invites us to reflect on outdated compartments like the national framework in which we tend to read and interpret many of the literary works that are

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<sup>1</sup> Lamrabet, *Vrouwland*

<sup>2</sup> Vermeulen, "Cultural Diversity in Contemporary Flemish Fiction", 28. De Mul, "Belated Arrival: Flemish Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Writing", 152

<sup>3</sup> De Mul, "Belated Arrival: Flemish Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Writing", 152.

produced within the Low Countries. Like the characters of *Vrouwland*, the Low Countries is a region that has always already been shaped by different regions, cultures, ways of life. The challenge for modern Neerlandophone literature is perhaps less to subcategorize this insight into a specific literary genre, but to become attentive to the presence of this phenomenon in literature itself. Neerlandophone literature from the Low Countries is thoroughly embedded in a globalized world and when studied up close it provides ample representations of the lingual and cultural superdiversity of the region as well as its enmeshment with global culture. In most Neerlandophone literature we find characters, perspectives and narratives that traverse the globe and offer a global view on culture in the Low Countries; and vice versa, there is a growing body of non-Dutch language literature that, in one way or another, engages with literature and culture from the Low Countries. In sum, neerlandophone literature has always thoroughly been embedded within the world; it has been worlded from its very beginning.

And yet research on this *worldliness* of the Low Countries and Dutch-language literature is still a rather minor fraction of Dutch Studies. In the past two decades scholars like Elisabeth Bekers, Sarah De Mul, Theo D'Haen, Michiel van Kempen, Wim Rutgers, Lisanne Snelders, Saskia Pieterse, Jeroen Dewulf and many others have done important work in providing a historical and literary context in which we can understand the migratory histories of Neerlandophone literature and the way it has been shaped by colonialism and its aftermath. The aim of this issue of *Dutch Crossing* is to further this move toward a worlded understanding of modern Neerlandophone literature. The themed issue has two focal points. On the one hand, this issue aims to address how and to what extent globalization and the cultural superdiversity of the Low Countries is represented in modern Neerlandophone literature, positioning it firmly in a global and post-Eurocentric perspective. On the other hand, this issue aims to reconceptualize this global approach by looking at how literature that is not written in Dutch engages with the (colonial, political or cultural) heritage of the Low Countries. The interplay of these aims might make space for a comparative study of literature in the Low Countries that is no longer so narrowly defined by nationalist, regional or lingual parameters. With the aim of decentring the study of modern Neerlandophone literature from its metropolitan locus, this issue of *Dutch Crossing* contemplates what it would mean to write on modern Neerlandophone literature and on culture from the Low Countries from a global perspective.

To achieve that aim, inevitably choices had to be made. We start with an essay by Hans Demeyer that offers a theoretical and methodological exploration of what worlding might mean in the context of Neerlandophone literature. Providing an overview of several recent efforts to

world the Low Countries, he discusses how worlding may offer a means to move away from the compartmentalisation of neerlandophone literature.

Each of the next four essays focuses on one of the former colonial areas: the Caribbean, the Congo, the East Indies and South Africa. These articles aim to stage an encounter between representations of the Low Countries and the former colonies from the perspective of both loci. Lieselot de Taeye compares one Flemish and one Congolese novel from the second decade of Congolese independence that engage with the missionary activities in mid-century Congo: *Entre les eaux* (1973) by V.Y. Mudimbe and *Het stigma* (1970) by Jacques Bergeyck. With particular attention to threads of colonial and decolonial thought, her transnational approach offers a view on how cross-cultural interactions transform the influential conversion and missionary narratives in a way that moves beyond Eurocentric conceptions of those narratives. Thalia Ostendorf takes the work of Surinamese writers Edgar Cairo and Anton de Kom as a starting point to reflect on spaces that move beyond the plantation and its colonial implications. In the work of both authors, Ostendorf discerns alternative sites, like the hinterland and the backyard. These sites then serve as chronotopes that allow a different conceptualization of Surinam (beyond the plantation and its colonial implication) and also become the site for developing a different relation to the Dutch language for both Cairo and De Kom.

Lucelle Pardoe and Arnoud Arps focus on the former Dutch East Indies. In their article they assess how the Indonesian perspective is (under)represented in recent accounts of neerlandophone literature that engages with the former Dutch East Indies. Moving away from the Western-oriented dynamics in which Indonesia should be given “a voice”, Pardoe and Arps suggest an alternative route: a careful reading of *Gentayangan* by Indonesian writer Intan Paramaditha demonstrates that the voice is already there, quite independent of us; as a result, the memory of the Dutch colonial occupation takes on a very different, haunting feature that is positioned within a global terrain of decolonial thinking.

Finally, Małgorzata Drwal presents us the ‘library’ from the Garment Workers Union: Afrikaans prose texts that were mostly written and read by white, Afrikaner women workers in the 1930s and 1940s. In an overview of the themes and interests of these texts, she discusses how they served the construction of a collective identity that however displays a tension between the nation and white privilege, and a transnational working-class allegiance. Interestingly, Drwal points out how English was the main way through which European and American texts found their way to this class of Afrikaners, meaning that Dutch heritage only offered a source of identification for the Afrikaner middle class and elite.

Other routes into worlding could have been made, and other transnational relations could have been put under scrutiny. We opted to focus on the former colonial areas to both continue the work initiated by postcolonial studies and to address the ongoingness of the effects of colonial relations in our contemporary world.

## **Bibliography**

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