

## **Oral and Visual Memories of Migration: Interdisciplinary Responses and Approaches to the Bodies Across Borders in Europe Project**

**1,5-day seminar in the Netherlands (Utrecht University), Thursday 19 and Friday 20 October 2017**

Milica Trakilovic and Iris van Huis

In order to foster an interdisciplinary exchange between primarily Dutch and Italian scholars in our research project, the Bodies Across Borders in Europe project (BABE) organized a workshop at Utrecht University. For this occasion, we invited scholars who specialize in issues of migration, memory and visibility in relation to Europe to present responses and reflections from their field of expertise on the aims and results of the BABE project. The workshop was funded by CCHR (research focus area Cultures, Citizenship and Human Rights of Utrecht University), since its central aims - producing critically engaged research on citizenship in/and Europe - coincide with the objectives of the BABE project.

In this short paper, we look back on the workshop, drawing on our notes, and reflecting on how it helps us to further our research.

Luisa Passerini and Milica Trakilovic opened the workshop by discussing differences in colonial rule and consequent roles in the European context, focusing specifically on Italy and the Netherlands and comparing both countries' colonial pasts. Italian colonialism not only started much later than the Dutch one, but also had a relatively peripheral role in the global colonial enterprise. Dutch colonialism on the other hand was widespread since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and globally dominant (notably encompassing Indonesia, Suriname, South Africa and the Dutch Antilles). Furthermore, they discussed how European imaginaries have been constructed along a dichotomy separating centres and peripheries, immediate border zones and the more "inward" destinations, and the current migratory processes add to these constructions, while complicating them. Italy (along with other countries like Greece) can in that sense be considered as a place of immediate arrival, while countries like the Netherlands can be considered as a place of continuation of those journeys, which is an important geopolitical tension to pursue.

In her keynote speech Ann Rigney drew on some themes and results of the BABE research and her own research and discussed different forms of memory: material, prosthetic/the dead weight of memory even as it changes and evolves. Rigney also discussed multiple *scales* of memory: the nation has been the most dominant because of the way it institutionalizes memory, but there are other scales as well (for instance, family). She presented cultural memory as a dynamic process that involves remembering and forgetting.

In this respect, she put forward Ann Stoler's notion of colonial aphasia as an inability to 'connect the dots' as relevant for research on memories of migration. The notion shows how an absence of narrative framework that can help understand a certain phenomenon can threaten a sense of Self when the phenomenon is brought up. Paul Beel's work on colonial imagination, the capacity to lift or make visible a story that would not have been seen otherwise, is helpful in this respect, as it shows how changes are made in (non)remembering. On the theme of visibility and memory Rigney's suggestion of Art's capacity to bring together isolated works that begin to resonate with each other and in that way become a larger movement helps us to reassess the role of art and visibility in our research as more than only bearers of (for example political) meaning and to also consider aesthetics as something that compels attention: as instigators of "enchantment", as Rigney suggested. Rigney also emphasized art's capacity to create unscripted linkages (M. Rothberg), small acts of repair (Hirsch), according to the politics of small things (Goldberg).

Continuing on this theme, the first panel discussed Art, Visibility, and Memory. Leslie Hernandez presented visual research material collected from interviews with migrants to Italy with Peruvian backgrounds. Her material included drawings of maps, of mountainous landscapes, of cultural items like dancing clothes, as well as iconic places in Peru, such as Machu Picchu and Lake Titicaca, which she labels as "touristic language", in combination with accounts of how such images are crucial in the memory of place and cultural identity. Iris van Huis presented visual material collected in interviews with refugee migrants who recently migrated from the Middle East to the Netherlands. To this material she added material found through searches on the internet where refugee migrants represent their memories of migration in an attempt to resist harmful stereotypical images and Dutch /European governmentality. Linking up with the presentations by these BABE researchers Rosemarie Buikema presented her work on "revolts" through art, with examples of recent protests through Art in South Africa (see also Buikema 2017). As a response to the two other presentations she helped us further reflect on the use and analysis of diverse types of images in our research, encouraging us to further reflect on fluid distinctions between art and non-art, as well as on our conceptualization of resistance and revolt, the latter she conceptualizes as a process in which knowledge of the past is reconsidered, corrected and redirected rather than overthrown.

The second panel was on Europe, Postcoloniality and Memory. Gabriele Proglia discussed the production of time, temporalities, memories and subjectivities, as well as the role of empathy in research. He presented his experience of interviewing as involving two subjectivities and gazes and sharing of emotions, and as an "act of remembering together", which is only possible "if interviewee's emotions reverberate in the interviewer's subjectivity". More specifically, Proglia, through visual material and interview fragments from a respondent with an Italo-Somali background, showed how reflection on the past and on identity in an interview is an emotional creative process in which new images and ways

of seeing are produced. Milica Trakilovic offered a detailed discussion of the use of labels like migrant and refugee, based on her interviews with refugees, in which respondents explicitly reflected on such labels. The premise of this discussion, grounded in other research (for example Luman & Vuoristo 2015), is that the way we conceptualize and talk about migration has direct consequences to how governmentality deals with migrants and refugees, to what extent and in what way integration policies are enforced and integration is made possible, and vice versa. Therefore, it should be taken into account that the lived realities of migration are far more complex and contradictory than the popular/legal/political terms “migrant” or “refugee” allow and they call for both to a destabilization as well as a nuancing of the terms in question. In her response to the two BABE researchers, Milena Marchesi first presented her research on neighbourhood projects for disadvantaged residents of Milan, of whom many with migrant backgrounds, leading up to the question on the use of labels in research.

On the second day Maria Hlavajova, director of BAK (Basis voor Actuele Kunst in Utrecht), responded to the role of art in our research and to two more presentations by Liliana Ellena and Luisa Passerini. Passerini reflected on the previous day and how terminology is continually under contestation in the BABE project. Especially the issue of and the combination of visibility and art, which are quite different but overlapping categories. Passerini reminded us that from a postcolonial theory perspective dividing up museums between anthropology and art museums is a colonial move – and that we cannot accept this division any more. She reflected on the idea of art as knowledge and knowledge as art, and the fact that the epistemological value of art is not always recognized in the academic world. In the BABE research there has been reflection on whether there are other ways of transmitting history which is not simply the written essay, which has resulted in presenting our collected visual material in an exhibition: “Can art teach us to introduce a performative dimension in our expression (in the construction of history and knowledge)? What about the producers/subjects of all this visual material (that we have collected)?” At the same time as researchers we work within disciplinary traditions which need to be taken into account. Considered should also be the link between a visual product and an audience: Who is recognized by whom and how? Ellena discussed the exhibition which the BABE project created in 2017. The constitution of the exhibition involved problems which we would like to avoid for the next exhibition in April 2018. Issues concerned the homogenizing presentation and limited contextualization of images. Ellena states that we would like to improve the relationship between content and exhibition design, as well as the possibility of involving the “voices” of interviewees in the exhibition (literally as well as figuratively speaking: in order to represent agency). On these issues she asked Hlavajova’s advice.

Hlavajova responded by presenting her work in BAK and showing links to our research asking important questions that are relevant to both projects and generally when working with migrants and art. She showed a strong sense of reflexivity, including on her work as

director of an art centre. She for example stated that naming a place a centre is already perpetuating a colonialist narrative. Therefore, the centre (BAK) is supposed to circumvent that, as a meeting place for precarious classes. She stated that as a critical postcolonial practice everything needs to be rethought, in theory and in practice. Therefore: “We don’t work FOR migrants, we work WITH. This doesn’t qualify them as artists but also not as NOT artists”. She explained that in BAK there is currently a project with undocumented asylum seekers, who make art and educate themselves within the centre, renamed an “academy” (In the Netherlands the duty to deport is individualized “deport yourselves.” People who do not do that go into illegality. Unofficial estimates are 70.000). This academy would not exist without being conceptualized as an artwork/art project, otherwise it would be illegal. It shows a fluidity of the concept of Art. Hlavajova calls the strategy “loopholing as an art practice”: finding a spot within the existing infrastructure that wouldn’t have been possible otherwise. It is a small scale revolt, rather than the idea of destroying the system (comparable with Buikema’s conceptualization of revolt versus revolution). As part of the project a film is created, entitled “Bedspaces”, which is being premiered in the van Abbe museum. The academy, including the gaining of certificates, and the creation of art-works are the migrants’ ways of collecting documents. Critical questions Hlavajova asked, also in relation to our research were: “Whom do we want to be in dialogue with? Who are they for us? Producers of knowledge, data subjects, other?” Concluding she stated that: “For us, art is not a space of commodity circulation, art is the space that allows entry into political life.” Connecting this to the question of the final exhibition in the project, Hlavajova suggests that it can be conceptualized as part of the research process, rather than a presenting a final ‘product.

Resuming, the workshop has helped us to reflect on crucial concepts in our research and reassess the links between and different positionalities of the two countries. It foremost helped increase an awareness that concepts and labels need to be continuously rethought and reassessed and that the way visuals are presented and interpreted in written papers as well as in an exhibition are part of this need for reflexivity, and has prompted us to anticipate more concretely questions and topics that may arise during the final leg of the BABE project, notably the final exhibition and the final conference, both of which will be held in April 2018.