

Dialogue between Oral History Projects? Looking back at the "Ongekend Bijzonder Symposium".

Unknown Voices, New Lessons: this was the title of a symposium dedicated to the "Ongekend Bijzonder" (which loosely translates to "Unknowingly Special") oral history project that started on October 1st, 2013. Over the course of two years, twenty-four fieldworkers had collected an impressive 248 oral history interviews in four cities (Amsterdam, Den Haag, Rotterdam and Utrecht) in Netherlands with (former) refugees. The focus of the interviews was placed on these people's arrival to the Netherlands and the way that they have re-shaped their lives after leaving their home countries. The [symposium](#) that I attended on 23 September at the University of Amsterdam was dedicated to an evaluation of the data obtained in the project, accompanied by critical insights and debates on 'the refugee question' in Europe at the present moment. Speakers involved with topics of migration & oral history were invited to give their responses to the project's aims and results – these involved researchers, scholars, curators and professors. The day closed with a plenary in which conclusions from different thematic working groups were presented via Skype to Jet Bussemaker, Dutch Minister for Education, Culture and Science since 2012. The similarities between "Ongekend Bijzonder" and BABE are striking and immediately apparent: oral history projects dedicated to re-map Europe on account of marginalized voices of displaced subjects. Therefore, some of the questions raised and conclusions drawn during the symposium I believe hold an immediate significance for the BABE project, and at a later stage in our work it would be useful to consider how our joint projects might be brought into dialogue with each other (for example, in an exhibition format), especially as one of the concerns raised during the symposium was that oral history projects in Europe abound, but do not necessarily 'speak' to each other. Broadly speaking, I could identify two main themes that dominated the presentations and debates in the symposium. The first one was a serious preoccupation with the discourse and representation surrounding refugees in Europe today, both in political and popular narratives and in the media. Professor Halleh Ghorashi spoke vividly about the static images of refugees, kept in place because of daily repetitions. She sees these images as manifestations of discourses in which refugees are imagined as absolute Others. Such imagery functions as a rhetorical device, and is thus both *powerful* and *taken for granted*, while being subsequently responsible for varying forms of (societal, legal) exclusion. Of course, when Ghorashi mentions images, she is not only speaking about pictures, but a broader rhetoric repertoire through which the refugee emerges *as refugee*. I welcome such observations since my own reflections on fieldwork have been dominated by questions of representation and language. Because of the discursive deadlock laid out above, Ghorashi identifies a productive potential in ethnographic projects such as [Ongekend Bijzonder](#), because they involve "broadening the sociological imagination through narratives." Projects such as ours, in other words, represent counter narratives to the dominant imaginations of Europe. However, and this brings me to the second main theme in the symposium: ethnographic research on its own is not immediately and unproblematically involved in producing counternarratives, because a project's *methods* and *approaches* frame the material in question. Wayne Modest, head of the Research Centre for Material Culture in Leiden, affiliated with the Dutch Tropenmuseum,

the Afrika Museum and the Museum Volkenkunde, spoke frankly about problems of curating, paying attention to processes of inclusion and exclusion that are part of the curating process. He warns of “the marketing logic that museums have come to know” in dealing with complex societal issues (such as the migration crisis in Europe) in easily digestible ways: “We don’t expect museums to deal with difficult topics,” Modest pointed out, emphasizing the need for critical engagement with ethnographic research in all stages of the process. For Modest, the primary question is “How do we engage with the complexity of unbelonging” in “a political moment of anxiety in Europe?” Several answers to this complex question were proposed during the symposium, most of them being connected to alternative methodologies. For example, the fieldwork process in the Ongekend Bijzonder project was re-evaluated and re-assessed on account of several critical audience questions, such as: <<In the process of conducting interviews, is attention being paid to both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ stories? And, in case a story has a negative conclusion, is attention being paid to the structural and systematic obstacles that have stood in the interviewee’s way? - Do we make room for silences and moments of quiet during the interview? Halleh Ghorashi in particular was vocal about ‘the silence’s speaking’ and urged the audience to think about how these can (and should) be included in the interview process. - Which people *want* to be interviewed? Also, what to do with people who do not wish to be addressed with certain terminology (‘refugee’) and who see themselves as falling outside of the research objective?>>. As all the issues that were raised in the symposium stood in some (often direct) relation to my own work in the BABE project, this event was not only useful as a comparative exercise, but a scholarly one as well. It also served as a reminder that “stories must generate a change” so that they do not become merely an academic exercise – and while “change” is often a slow and intangible process, the symposium emphasized the fact that we are working, with ‘newcomers’ and local communities, towards a new European storytelling