

The LOVA Marjan Rens Master's Thesis Award

28 May 2021

The LOVA Marjan Rens Master's Thesis Award is a prize for the best thesis in feminist anthropology in the Netherlands. The prize was first funded by the Marjan Rens Foundation, a foundation that was established in 2000, after the death of Dutch feminist anthropologist and LOVA member Marjan Rens. The first call for submissions was sent in 2004 and in 2005 the award was handed out for the first time. In 2018, the money of the fund was handed over to LOVA, which took it upon itself to ensure the continuation of the award from then on. Ever since the first award was handed out, the award ceremony has become a recurring event that is well known among those interested in gender and anthropology. As such, the award has become one of the main pillars of LOVA. It has also proven to be an excellent way to promote LOVA among students interested in gender and anthropology. This year the prize has been awarded online for the 9th time. The jury was formed out of dr. Fenneke Reysoo (chair) dr. Kathrine van den Bogert and dr. Kim Kim Knibbe (see for details on affiliation below). Beneath you find the speech delivered by dr. Fenneke Reysoo, addressing the prizewinners and providing a clear introduction to their work.

SPEECH BY DR. FENNEKE REYSOO

This year, 2021, 15 MA-theses have been submitted to compete for the LOVA Marjan Rens Master thesis award in feminist anthropology. Kathrine van den Bogert (RU), Kim Knibbe (RUG), and myself (Graduate Institute, Geneva; ANSO & GC) have read them with great pleasure and admiration. We were impressed by the outstanding

quality of the empirical data and the analyses. We have travelled different continents, gained insights in the struggles of various ‘muted groups’, and witnessed the validity of new theoretical frames. The theses under evaluation were situated in a broad range of disciplinary fields, ranging from art & society, to cultural analysis, political science, development studies, and evidently anthropology. They addressed issues of marginalization, exclusion, discrimination, resistance, and agency from various angles.

Notwithstanding, and this shows us that the project of decolonizing the social sciences is still in its incipient phase, the interpretive frames presented a much smaller variety; hardly any of the competitors escaped referencing the ‘fashioned few’, such as Butler, Foucault, Anzaldua, Tsing, Crenshaw, etc. as if - to speak with Guattari and Deleuze - we live in a world marked by a handful of hegemonic legitimate Big Narratives situated in Western/US epistemic frames. Strikingly, the feminist anthropological ‘canon’ of honourable former and current LOVA members, among whom many have marked the advancement of the “field” of feminist anthropology and gender studies, is hardly acknowledged. Do ‘we’ in the Netherlands suffer from a Calimero syndrome? The bright side of this murky observation is that at the conceptual level, the concept of gender has grown out of its 1960s binary straight-jacket; sensitivity to LGTBI+ and queer ways of being-in-the-world has matured and seems to be well integrated in the training curricula of today’s Dutch academia.

Methodologically speaking, almost all students had to adapt their fieldwork to the challenges caused by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. We were impressed by how all of them navigated these challenges. The many methodological solutions that they have found will certainly mark a turning point in the practice of data-collection. In this regard, the use of virtual communication and social media as data-sources have made an everlasting qualitative jump.

Looking back at 40 years of feminist anthropological praxis, I observe other signs of coming of age. Reflections on positionality, situated knowledge, standpoint epistemology and power relations between researched and researcher are 'unavoidables' in all the theses that we read. Intersectionality - both as a methodological and epistemological tool - is also entirely part of the game.

What would Marjan Rens, who was one of those passionate fieldworkers committed to understand the cultural codes and living conditions of women high-up in the Nepalese mountains, have thought of the MA-theses produced in Dutch academia today? I have to admit that with this question in mind and the feeling that Marjan was reading over my shoulder, I assessed the theses submitted to the award that carries her name. Kim Knibbe, Katherine van den Bogert and I have unanimously agreed upon the winning three.



THIRD PRIZE

THE PLATFORMIZATION OF QUEER SOLIDARITY: RE-DEFINING SPACE IN POST-PROTEST LEBANON,

by Sinine Nakhle

MA in Media Studies | University of Leiden

The third prize goes to a thesis that concentrates on two well-mastered and complementary theoretical frames elaborated by Sarah Ahmed's queer phenomenology (2006) and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2016) concepts of "homophily" and "echo-chambers". The author convincingly applies these frames to her rich empirical data. It is easy for the readership to follow the red thread and to walk along with the empirical information to the climax of the argument. The thesis questions the role of digital space to enhance solidarity and activism of the queer community in Beirut, Lebanon.

The data under scrutiny consists of the content and interactions of two queer activist and artistic Instagram accounts. One of the accounts is created by the author herself and makes the study a sort of auto-ethnography. The author also makes excellent fine-grained ethnographic descriptions of the family home, the city of Beirut and its neighbourhoods while linking it to the (dys)functioning of the State's public and security services. In a concise writing style and with very evocative narrations, the readership navigates the spatial embodied challenges encountered by queer people in Beirut as if we were part of them.

In spite of the rather challenging forms of social injustice that the queer people living in Beirut encounter, the conclusive argument that the digital platforms are mobilisations in flux, creative, and imaginative which provide executoires for current as well as future generations. The findings convey hope and optimism. The innovative character of the thesis lies with the analytical mix of art and science. With all this in mind, the jury awards a well-deserved third position to the thesis entitled "The platformization of queer solidarity: Re-defining space in post-protest Lebanon" by Sinine Nakhle, University of Leiden, Faculty of the Humanities. Supervised by Dr. Steinbock.

SECOND PRIZE

**'IT'S LIKE A KNIFE IS PLUNGED INTO ME':
HOW GOOD CARE IS DONE FOR CHRONICALLY PAINFUL VULVAS**

by Maya Lane

MSc Medical Anthropology and Sociology | University of Amsterdam

The second thesis studies a chronic painful disease among women and persons with vulva, vulvodynia. The disease called vulvodynia is invisible and socially silenced. It is impairing the persons who suffer from it and as of today, it is incurable. The interviews and

self-reflections provide insights into the daily and mundane practices of care to plan or anticipate pain flares, to process these, and to learn to relax and interact with others in relationships and society (partners, family, workplace, public space). Although data-collection was challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic, the author has succeeded in contacting and exchanging with a number of interlocutors. She is reflexive, situating her 'self in pain' as one of the selves in her fieldwork, beside the 'anthropological self'.

Although the topic could have been framed in many ways, the author has opted to question the practices of care (in a broad understanding from biomedical treatments to self-care). She uses a materialist semiotic approach and builds on feminist Science and Technology Studies. It is a seamless going back and forth between her data, the literature, and a systematization of her findings. The theoretical gain from this study is to understand how technologies of the self are omnipresent, invading as well as liberating. The thesis provides insights into ideas of the plurality and messiness of life and hence shows how "doing care" is situational, relational, complex, contingent, and constantly moving. Beyond the theoretical interpretations of how chronic pain impacts on individual lives, it also helps to understand how a 'self' struck by chronic (vulva) pain manages to live a liveable and enjoyable life. The thesis also has a militant dimension to trigger a discussion and reflection on 'good care' for persons suffering from vulvodynia and proposes improvements of (bio)medical attendance of people suffering from this disease: if the treatments cannot be perfect at least they should become "the best way", is the author's conclusion.

With these appreciations in mind, the jury awards a well-deserved second position to the thesis entitled "'It's like a knife is plunged into me': How good care is done for chronically painful vulvas", By Maya Lane, Medical Anthropology and Sociology, University of Amsterdam, supervised by Dr Ibanez Martin and Prof. Pols.



FIRST PRIZE

'I AM A WOMAN. BUT IN ADDITION, I AM A MOTHER': WOMEN NAVIGATING POLITICS, CONFLICT AND UNCERTAINTY IN ZANZIBAR

by Hannah Schild

MA in African Studies | Leiden University

The winning thesis questions the role of women in the polarized and highly sensitive political landscape of Zanzibar. Inspired by the expression uttered by one of her informants: “I am a woman. But in addition, I am a mother”, the author challenges mainstream and androcentric approaches in political science to explain the absence of female voices in politics. Building on feminist scholarship of ‘motherhood’, mothering, and maternal thinking, she thoroughly discusses feminist controversies in Western feminisms and elaborates the counter-reactions in African feminisms. Creatively, the author coins the concept of ‘maternal navigation’, inspired by scholars who have elaborated the concept of social navigation – especially of youth in environments characterized by economic, political, and social uncertainties. Women, as mothers, not only struggle to get by and get on, but they also navigate their daily lives ‘on behalf of and through others’. These maternal practices and strategies by Zanzibari mothers are captured by the Swahili term ‘kuhangaika-activities’ (‘to roam about and struggle’).

Conducting her anthropological field research was not self-evident. The fieldwork evolved in challenging conditions due to strict surveillance of her whereabouts by the government: officials at different levels tried to control whom she talked to and tried to get hold of her interview transcripts. In this context of mistrust, silences, and evasive responses, she succeeded to collect rich ethnographic data, which she seamlessly analysed and reconnected to historical, reflexive and theoretical dimensions. ‘Thinking through ethnography’ really applies to this thesis. The thesis is novel in shifting attention to ‘maternal navigations’ in relation to politics. She argues that maternal

thinking is a political resource in a context of uncertainty and political violence. The author keenly demonstrates how maternal subjectivities are part of the political thinking of women and how motherhood is used as a resource to add legitimacy to political demands and claims, among them youth unemployment and the promotion of peace. We thus gain insights in how women's political activities (or the absence thereof), their critique on the current regime's policies and on the discourses about peace and radical change are anchored in their subjectivities of women as mothers.

Overall, this thesis is a very exhaustive multidisciplinary scholarly work, based on intensive fieldwork, gaining trust from interlocutors who were basically mistrustful. Proficiency in Swahili helped her to approach people whom she otherwise would probably not have encountered. Eventually, a rather long period for analysis – often underestimated – has contributed to the outstanding final result. The thesis entitled: “I am a woman. But in addition, I am a mother.: Women navigating politics, conflict and uncertainty in Zanzibar”, By Hannah Schild, Leiden University, African Studies Supervised by Prof. Abbink and Dr. Kaag, is the well-deserved winner of the 9th LOVA-Marjan Rens Master Thesis Award.

The Members of the Jury

Fenneke Reysoo, PhD (chair), Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, and Gender Centre.

Dr. Kathrine van den Bogert, Postdoctoral researcher, Radboud Social Cultural Research Gender and Diversity Studies, Anthropology and Development Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen.

Kim Knibbe, PhD, Associate Professor Sociology and Anthropology of Religion, Director of the Graduate School Theology and Religious Studies at the Department of Comparative Study of Religion.