

Lova Marjan Rens Master's Thesis Award 2023

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Marina de Regt

Today is the tenth time that Lova hands out the Lova Marjan Rens Master's Thesis Award. For those of you who don't know the background of this award I will give a bit of background information. Marjan Rens was a feminist anthropologist who was also an active member of Lova. She studied anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, where I met her in 1984 (almost 40 years ago!) when we both started our studies and became close friends. We revived the Women's Network that had been established at the University of Amsterdam in line with the informal women's groups at other universities, that were the foundation for Lova. Marjan was a very engaged, passionate and critical student, whose interests ranged from the anthropology of gender to changing the way in which we were taught students and selected academic staff. Thematically she was mainly interested in the lives of women in rural areas, in particular in Latin America. She wanted to do fieldwork in Peru but because of the political instability in the country (where the guerilla movement Sendero Luminoso was active) she went to Ecuador, where she spent eleven months in 1989 (yes, in those days it was still possible to stay away such a long time for fieldwork). Marjan was a perfectionist, not easily satisfied with her work, and writing up her findings was a big challenge. However, her Master's thesis was graded with a 9 and published by Het Spinhuis, a publishing house at the University of Amsterdam. The title of the book was: *De Helft van de Wereld: Vrouwen, Identiteit en Symboliek in Ecuador (Half of the World: Women, Identity and Symbolism in Ecuador)*. This was a major

achievement for a student and shows what a good scholar she was. The book was even published in Spanish a few years later and published in Ecuador.

Marjan would have loved to continue her academic work but it was difficult to find a PhD position and she started working in development. She first worked for the Dutch NGO ICCO responsible for projects in Latin America, and then obtained a job for SNV in Nepal, another Dutch NGO. Marjan was very passionate about her work; she learned Nepalese and did participatory projects with women and men in a very remote area. After 1,5 year she accepted a position in the SNV headquarters in Kathmandu, but she never really started this position as she died suddenly during a two weeks hike in the mountains, which was a sort of farewell trip from the region where she had spent so much time. Marjan died on 3 October 1999. It was a complete shock to all of us. She was only 39 years old and in the midst of her life, with many future plans ahead of her. Marjan's partner, her sister and a few friends decided to continue Marjan's work by starting a foundation that aimed to improve the situation of highland women globally: The Marjan Rens Foundation, which supported students working on feminist anthropological topics but also women's initiatives in highland areas. A few years later, Lorraine Nencil, a friend of Marjan and also a Lova member, came up with the idea that a thesis prize would be a great activity to be taken up by both organisations together. And this was the start of the Lova Marjan Rens Master's Thesis Award. The first award was handed out in 2005 and today we hand out the tenth award.

Before I turn to the award speech of the jury, I want to say something about the connection between Marjan and Karin Willemse who we commemorate today; two contemporaries, although Marjan was a bit older than Karin. They both studied in the 1980s and were members of Lova. They also knew each other even though they did not interact with each other. But I vividly remember a Lova Study Day in Leiden, organised by Karin and others. It was one of the first Lova Study Days

for Marjan and me, and our fellow “Vrouwenoverleg” members, and we were excited and listened with great admiration to the people presenting. I did not have the time to look up when this exactly was (although I am sure I can find it in one of my agendas or Lova Journals). Karin gave a presentation, and maybe she was already a PhD student at that time. Her Master's thesis was also published, just like Marjan's: *Werken Maakt Sterk – Een Antropologische Studie naar de Mate van Autonomie van Fur-vrouwen in Jebel Marra, Darfur (West-Soedan) (Labour Provides Strength. An Anthropological Study into the Degree of Autonomy of Fur-Women in Jebel Marra, Darfur, West-Sudan)*. It shows that both were great young scholars, very good anthropologists, and they were also both perfectionists who asked a lot of themselves and were not easily satisfied. With the death of Karin we have lost another outstanding and beloved Lova member.

REPORT OF THE JURY

I am now going to read the speech of the jury, which consisted of Fenneke Reysoo (former Graduate Institute, Geneva), Kim Knibbe (RUG), and Lenie Brouwer (former VU). Unfortunately none of them could be present today.

This year, twelve Master's theses have been submitted to compete for the Lova Marjan Rens Master's Thesis Award. We have read them with pleasure and admiration. We were impressed by the outstanding quality of the empirical data and the analyses. We have been travelling different countries (e.g. Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Germany, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands), gained insights in the struggles of women, migrants, female scientists, non-cisgender persons, transgender persons and queer women, and we witnessed the validity of new theoretical frames. The theses under evaluation were situated in a broad range of disciplinary fields (ranging from Sport and Sport Management, to African Studies, Political Science, Medical Anthropology, Visual Anthropology and evidently Cultural and Social Anthropology). They addressed issues of marginalisation, exclusion, discrimination,

resistance and agency from various angles. At the conceptual level, the concept of gender has grown out of its 1960s binary straight-jacket; sensitivity to LGBTI+ 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.

Looking back at more than 40 years of feminist anthropological praxis, we 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 living conditions of women high-up in the Nepalese mountains, have thought of the Master's theses produced in Dutch academia today? With this question in mind and the feeling that Marjan was reading over our shoulders, we assessed the theses submitted to the award that carries her name. It was very difficult to make a choice, because of the high quality of the theses, but finally we have unanimously agreed upon the winning three:



THIRD PRIZE

**I AM NOT ASHAMED ANYMORE, BUT...
NORMATIVE PLURALISM
AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN ITALY**

by Agnese Bardelli

MSc Social and Cultural Anthropology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

The third prize is a thesis that delves deeply into the ways normative pluralism informs feelings of shame in women who have been subjected to intimate partner violence. The author shows convincingly how women navigate the paradoxical and often contrary demands

of the two normative systems they relate to: that of everyday expectations around honour, and the new expectations, embedded in law and policy, of feminism. Within the first system, everyday forms of violence are accepted to ensure that women do not bring shame on themselves by their behaviour or dress. Intimate partner violence is thus simply an escalation of normalised violence and as such reinforces the feeling that women have brought this violence onto themselves. Within the second system, they are ashamed of being victims, instead of powerful women who take charge of their lives in line with liberal versions of feminism. In this well-written and well composed thesis the author evokes powerfully how the chilling, isolating and traumatising effects of intimate partner violence linger through these feelings of shame. With all this in mind, the jury awards a well-deserved third position to the thesis entitled: *I am not ashamed anymore, but... Normative Pluralism and Intimate Partner Violence in Italy*. Written by **Agnese Bardelli**, MSc Social and Cultural Anthropology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Supervisor: Dr. Eva van Roekel. bij titel vooraan?

SECOND PRIZE

F*CK ENDO

A STUDY ABOUT/WITH WOMEN HAVING ENDOMETRIOSIS

by Wilke Geurds

MA Visual Anthropology, Leiden University

We award the second prize to a thesis that builds on an explicit feminist theoretical framing and can be considered as a political project. It documents, in a written text and by a film documentary, the daily experiences of four women suffering from endometriosis. Severe menstruation pain is often normalised by society, but this can be a sign of endometriosis, a condition that affects people with a uterus, where endometrial tissue grows outside the uterus. Endometriosis is frequently diagnosed late and impairs “normal” social functioning. Medication and surgery may help to relieve,

but they do not end the disease. Despite the fact that one in ten people with a uterus have endometriosis, there is little attention for or understanding of this condition. The research is based on data-collection among four women who have endometriosis by following them during one year, including three months of fieldwork. Many methods have been applied: interviews, WhatsApp messages, Instagram, staying overnight (to make observations), participant observation, and audio-visual methods. The stories and description of everyday impairment and suffering unveil the moments of deep suffering from pain, incomprehension, denial, banalisation, and endless medical interventions.

By placing her research topic in a larger anthropological framing of illness experiences, endometriosis is problematised as a social construction. The ethnographic fieldwork descriptions in the thesis and the documentary focus on the power dynamics between the anthropologist and its subjects, inherent in a collaborative approach. With all these appreciations in mind, the jury awards a well-deserved second position to the thesis entitled: *F*ck Endo. A Study about/with Women Having Endometriosis*. Written by **Wilke Geurds**, MA Visual Anthropology, Leiden University. Supervisor: Dr. Sander Hölsgens.



FIRST PRIZE

BEYOND HUMAN EYES

A SOCIOMATERIAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE DIGITALISATION OF WORKPLACE SURVEILLANCE IN THE CLEANING BUSINESS

by Bente Janssen

MSc Organisaties, Verandering en Management, Utrecht University

The winning prize goes to a very interesting thesis on digital surveillance tools in the cleaning sector in the Netherlands. This research is based on experiences of cleaners and the practice of surveillance by collecting data through a range of ethnographic techniques. The author did three months of participant observation as a cleaner at three different locations: a holiday home park, a public

transport company and an airport. The author presents interesting reflections on her immersion in the field and the rapport that she has been able to build.

She applies a socio-material perspective that assumes that people (as social actors) interact with technologies and mutually influence each other; cleaners, management, and technologies are intertwined. Theoretically, the author wants to go further than a human-centred classical panopticon analysis, in which technologies are not assigned agency. In other words, people assign meaning to technologies, but technologies also exert agency on people. Her approach provides a refreshing and innovative look at the control of employees in the cleaning sector in the digital surveillance era. Employee control is strengthened, the administrative burden on cleaners has increased, and guests of holiday parks and airports, who press feedback smileys, add to the control of the cleaners. Ultimately, managers become more demanding and more powerful, while the vulnerable employees become even more vulnerable. However, this does not mean that so-called dirt workers are defenseless victims, they also know how to manipulate digital tools and find tricks to “sabotage” the control of these tools. They try to use their agency to regain their autonomy and control over their activities. The thesis entitled: *Beyond Human Eyes. Een sociomateriële visie op de digitalisering van workplace surveillance in de schoonmaakpraktijk (Beyond Human Eyes. A Sociomaterial Perspective on the Digitalisation of Workplace Surveillance in the Cleaning Business)* is the well-deserved winner of the tenth Lova Marjan Rens Master's Thesis Award. Written by **Bente Janssen**, MSc Organisaties, Verandering en Management, Utrecht University. Supervisor: Dr. Noortje van Amsterdam. Congratulations!