

RE TRACING HISTORY



(Re-)Tracing History: New Methodologies for Making the Past Tangible, Palpable and Negotiable

This document provides an enriched summary of the (Re-)Tracing History symposium in
Utrecht, 22/09/2022

This project is partly funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) through the Living
History route of the Dutch National Research Agenda (NWA).

Welcome and opening by moderator Lema Salah

(Re-)tracing History: three projects in one

Subprojects: [Stories in Motion](#), [Feeling the Traces](#) and [Virtual Agora](#).

Introduction by Hester Dibbits

The project (Re-)Tracing History took place within the context of the 'Living History' route of the Dutch National Research Agenda (NWA). On behalf of the route management, Hester Dibbits sketched how over the years, a community has grown within this funding route.

The route is arranged around three themes, or 'game changers': sustainability, citizen science and contested heritage. (Re-)Tracing History was selected by the Living History community for funding by NWO under the call for NWA Small Project 2021/22. Some specific questions that informed the (Re-)Tracing History projects included: How do we work with the past in the long term? How do we ensure accessibility of (re)sources and manage issues related to diversity and inclusion? How can we include citizens as experts and make scientists/researchers more aware of citizen expertise? How do we take contestation into consideration as researchers? Who decides what traces of the past are relevant?

The three projects

[Stories in Motion](#) – presented by [Norah Karrouche](#), [Anouk van Mil](#) and [Alice Fortes](#)

Norah Karrouche led the presentation of the project during the symposium. An audio trailer compiled by Anouk van Mil was played at the start. One could hear parts of conversations between interviewers and interviewees in the 'Gerse Vrouwen' oral history project, the case study in [Stories in Motion](#), which focuses on the history of women's emancipation in Rotterdam from the 1970s onwards. 'Gers(e)' is local slang for 'cool' or 'great'. 'Gerse vrouwen' started as a community archive project when a huge collection of archival material of women's organizations was found.

The main question of the project was: How can we make community oral history data tangible, sustainable and reusable in public archives? The aim of the project was twofold: to analyse requirements among interviewers and partners, and to produce a workflow guide that can be used by others. The workflow consists of a 3-phase cycle that includes the different steps that need to be taken to collect, curate and deposit oral history as data for reuse. No prior knowledge is needed to use the workflow.

Alice Fortes is both an interviewer and interviewee, as well as a co-creator of the workflow in the [Stories in Motion](#) project. Alice reflected on her life story and participation in 'Gerse Vrouwen'.

The moderator made a comment on how privileged we are to have the opportunity to talk about our histories compared to many other people in the world.

Virtual Agora - Shahin Nazar, Simon Dirks and Toine Pieters

The Virtual Agora is connected to the celebration of 900 years of Utrecht and was developed as part of Utrecht Time Machine (UTM), a platform that makes countless historical artefacts and data available, accessible, and educational for everyone by using innovative web technologies. The Virtual Agora contributes to UTM's overall objective to stimulate cultural and historical literacy. Unique about the Virtual Agora project is its ability to fulfil these aims through a distinct pedagogical approach: facilitating public negotiation about contested heritage using digital means.

The team showcased the latest iteration of the Virtual Agora. Three moral traces of the past and present were presented: freedom of religion, freedom of migration, and sexual freedom. Themes were represented by different personas (played by actors) in three separate video clips. These clips included an open-ended question on the theme, followed by a round of statements that participants could answer (agree/disagree/unsure) and then engage in an anonymized dialogue with other participants by submitting their own statements about migration, sexuality, and migration, which others could vote on using the Pol.is interface via a QR code/URL on their mobile phones.

Some results of the dialogue were shown as graphs by Shahin Nazar and Simon Dirks. In the next iteration, the VA team will implement how visualizations of an anonymized debate could assist a follow-up negotiation about the answers that were given in different types of (educational) settings. Different outcomes require different negotiation interventions. Eventually, such negotiation could be used to get people to talk about contested heritage subjects and reach consensus.

There were some comments and questions from the audience about the Pol.is application. Some thought that it worked well and is a good way to get people to think about some contested subjects. However, some criticized the application, e.g., they would answer the questions impulsively because of the short amount of time available to them, and perhaps this would mean that the answers are not representative of their potentially more nuanced responses. We acknowledge the fact that the historical context and goal of the tolerance carousel, co-producing a new Union of Utrecht treaty in 2029 (celebrating the 1579 treaty) could have been explained better in the introduction. We will do so during the final iteration at the Utrecht History Night (08-10-2022) in the public library theatre, De Neude.

Feeling the traces (of the Colonial Past) – Liedeke Plate, Vicky Fisher, and Farida Nabibaks

Liedeke Plate introduced the project's aims and approach, starting from the question: How can dance function as a methodology for evoking emotions associated with the Dutch colonial and slavery past? The research involved three field labs which were held at Castle Cannenburgh, in Gelderland. Participants watched a performance, joined-in a guided movement workshop and took part in group discussions. A diverse group of people participated. There were follow up interviews with 25% of the participants.

To provide insight into the content and methodology of the research, a twenty minute excerpt of *Radiant Shadow (part 1): Margaretha*, was performed live. The audience first participated in a mindfulness exercise, led by Vicky Fisher, to bring attention to the present moment. Afterwards, the audience members were asked to close their eyes again and attend to how the performance made them feel, emotionally and physically. They were guided to explore a movement that epitomised one feeling that was evoked that stuck with them. Farida asked the audience which movement this was and what it meant to them personally and in relation to the performance.

To conclude, Liedeke Plate presented the key research findings and project outcomes, which are summarised in the Action Framework.



Photo: Dance-theatre performance *Radiant Shadow (part 1), Margaretha*, of Reframing HERstory Art Foundation. Names of the performers: Arne Blonski, Yara van Fraeijenhove, Bjoey, Farida Nabibaks, Fernando Linares Correa, Jeremy Bass

Q&A/Discussion

#1 Question from the audience: How can this work be extended into educational spaces?

[Feeling the Traces](#) - Liedeke Plate

A small part of *Radiant Shadow* (by Farida Nabibaks) was shown during the presentation. A longer (three-part) performance is being developed. The dance and additional programme consisting of an aftertalk and/or movement workshops, can be performed at schools and museums or hired by anyone. Farida is specifically interested in exploring and revealing the traces of the colonial past in Gelderland, as well as in what these embodied experiences about this topic can do in heritage and community contexts, as a tool to help individuals and communities to heal. Liedeke also has additional interests which lie more generally with embodied experiences in academic, heritage and community contexts. Watching a performance, exploring themes and ideas in movement, and talking about it afterwards is demonstrated to be a way in which people can start a conversation that otherwise is not happening.

Stories in Motion - Norah Karrouche

Stories in Motion is informative for archivists or individual researchers. It is also easily transferable to educational settings. Norah is teaching a course called 'Oral history and biography' at the Vrije University, Amsterdam. She will train 25 students how to conduct and annotate interviews. She chose a specific theme: the experiences first generation Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Turkish students of the Vrije Universiteit since the 1980's. Norah wants to use and apply the workflow manual in a classroom setting and see how to move on from there.

#2 Question of moderator: Is it difficult to find participants who are open to sharing their stories?

Stories in Motion - Norah Karrouche

Our project set in motion all kinds of projects with oral history. Such a project can be time consuming. You bring together people who feel connected to a certain community, in this case women who are engaged in a variety of feminist networks or those eager to research the history of their own organisation. However, they have limited time, different backgrounds, different levels of knowledge on how to use computers and metadata for example. They also want to make sure that the volunteers contributing to the project are paid for their work. Norah hopes that in the field of oral history, the work of volunteers is taken seriously, in order to make community archives successful. But of course, this also requires a certain level of professionalisation, funding, resources etc.

#3 Question of moderator: At a certain point the researcher starts writing the article, but to what extent can participants have a say in this?

Feeling the Traces - Liedeke Plate

Liedeke states that the NWA research agenda is unique in that right from the start, when working on an application, it should include the whole chain. A problem that arises is that the researchers get paid, but what about participants? And what about companies and other organisations that are involved?

The NWA research agenda is a platform that may have funding available for follow up projects. Liedeke pointed out that (Re-)tracing History was a small project, but had relatively huge outcomes. More funding for action-based research projects like those presented here could impact heritage practices even more significantly.

A strong thing about these projects is that they made implicit assumptions explicit. The distinct sub-project teams were forced to reflect together about what traces are, what trauma is, what migration is as a value etc. The researchers were encouraged to discuss and reflect on everything.

#4 The moderator asks for follow-up about attention to power issues: Should volunteers, student-assistants etc. be paid? Who gets funding and who decides this? To what extent do participants have/get power?

Stories in Motion - Norah Karrouche

According to Norah each project received only 50,000 euros, which also includes funding for the action framework and the symposium.

A recommendation is to sometimes not collaborate with established institutions if this would cause conflict with your position as a grassroots organisation. Even though the workflow manual assumes that you are collaborating with an archive, it also includes sufficient tips that you can use independently. One way to address issues of power dynamics, for instance, is to publish your oral history interviews online, independently by using Omeka.

Virtual Agora - Shahin Nazar

Shahin speaks from their project's perspective and the process that they have gone through:

“You see academics designating certain people as immigrant, as this or as that. So, it was incredibly complicated to think about how we call things. From our perspective it has been a matter of language, a matter of who we collaborate with. The comment about established institutions is something we took in[to] consideration a lot. It is such a systemic problem you must think of the entire time, and it never ends.”

#5 Question of moderator: “We were talking about output in educational spaces. But even students have a certain level of understanding, so how do you reflect on the accessibility of the projects?”

Virtual Agora - Shahin Nazar

There are multiple reasons for designing the project in iterative form, one of them concerns the subject's accessibility and usability. When designing a product (or project), designers often tend to include a host of assumptions into their product without testing them. These invisible assumptions seep into the cracks of any product and grind it down or render it unusable in the long term -- irrespective of the supporting team's interdisciplinarity or multiplicity.

We went through numerous iterations to rid our project of these assumptions about accessibility and usability. More concretely, we tweaked the user's experience by testing our initial expectations about how people read and process information, how to best represent contemporary and historical values, which sequences of buttons and swipes make the most sense to them, how to get them to share statements, what a participatory debate even is in the context of epistemic injustices, how to make participation both informative and engaging, etc. and all the while we are researching and scientifically justifying all these micro-decisions.

Now that we have geared the project's cognitive and technical features towards our target audience, our last iteration pays particular attention to how to maximize our historical pedagogy. How can historical knowledge act as the bedrock of moral dialogue and inform contemporary opinions and attitudes in a participatory debate? This requires that we focus

our attention on facilitating and negotiation, on the basis of what people have done in our app. In doing so, we're synthesizing co-creation pedagogies with negotiation-facilitation frameworks. It is for these reasons we strongly suggest any project to iterate, and a great resource (that we use, too) is Bakker's (2019) book:

[Design-Research-in-Education-A-Practical-Guide-for-Early-Career-Researchers/Bakker](#)

Feeling the traces - Liedeke Plate

Liedeke answers the question about the accessibility of dance. She thinks that people will still have a certain feeling after the performance without understanding every detail. Therefore, the production can be performed anywhere, it is only a matter of bringing it to a location. Another aspect that Liedeke mentioned is about the historical places where the production is performed like the castle Cannenburch. On the one hand it is a place full of trauma but on the other it is now a place where people get married and come to make beautiful memories. These are complicated things that we need to think about and that are an essential part of developing projects in sites of contested history.

#6 Question from the audience: "I was curious about your thoughts on the increased interest of academia in stories that come from grassroots and marginalized groups? How come it is a thing now according to you?"

Stories in Motion - Norah Karrouche

Norah speaks from the perspective of an oral history researcher and states that it is mostly about generational change. New generations are undertaking research on their parents and ancestors. During another project, Norah found out that the oral history collections that had been digitized so far, were mostly related to the Second World War. Many other topics are ripe for exploration and researchers want more variation in historical archives. Norah concludes that the interest in marginalized groups increased because of research by people who are coming from those backgrounds, and who saw that there is no material for them in the existing archives.

There was also some discussion of earlier shifts within academia such as that arising from the impact of feminism. Audience members and presenters noted how they, their parents or grandparents were some of the first individuals from particular, previously marginalised communities to attend university. Progress and change are ongoing and expand outwards from individuals, into academies and beyond.

Moderator

The parents did not have the opportunity, but the children have. The moderator talks about her parents, who had to flee a war and thus had no time to think about education. However, they made sure that their children have that time and opportunity.

On this note, the moderator ended the discussion and wrapped up the symposium.