

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Eefje Blankevoort, AMS Diploma Program 2004*

Interviewed by  
Kirby Vasquez, Class of 2014

May 24, 2012

## **Abstract**

In this oral history Eefje Blankevoort compares the education system at Smith with her experiences in the Netherlands, discusses the new perspectives she received at Smith, her experiences in Iran before coming to Smith, and her surprise that the Iraq War was so ignored in the United States.

## **Restrictions**

None.

## **Format**

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 60-minute tape.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kayla Ginsburg.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Blankevoort, Eefje. Interview by Kirby Vasquez. Video recording, May 24, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Eefje Blankevoort, interview by Kirby Vasquez, transcript of video recording, May 24, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Blankevoort, Eefje. Interview by Kirby Vasquez. Transcript of video recording, May 24, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Eefje Blankevoort, interview by Kirby Vasquez, transcript of video recording, May 24, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 24, 2012, with:

EEFJE BLANKEVOORT

by: KIRBY VASQUEZ  
filmed by: KATE GEISS

VASQUEZ: So my name is Kirby Vasquez. It is May 24, 2012. I am here with Eefje at -- for the Alumnae Smith project and yeah. So, how are you doing?

BLANKEVOORT: Good, how are you?

VASQUEZ: I'm doing well. So you were at Smith College for a program, right?

BLANKEVOORT: Yep.

VASQUEZ: What program was this?

BLANKEVOORT: The AMS program, the American Studies diploma program, so it was one-year graduate program.

VASQUEZ: And when were you here for that?

BLANKEVOORT: 2003 and I graduated 2004, so nine years ago.

VASQUEZ: And what was your education prior to that?

BLANKEVOORT: Well, I did a Masters in history and political science so I almost graduated, but then I had the opportunity to come here for another year and so, you know, like start working, you know, or educate yourself for one more year, like easy choice. So I decided to come here.

VASQUEZ: And what was your college experience like, like how would you describe your college experience before coming to Smith College?

BLANKEVOORT: Well, it is very different than college life at Smith. University of Amsterdam, that was the institute I went to, is situated right in the heart of, you know, Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands. It's not like on campus, like you have here. So student life and you know life in the city are intertwined. I lived off campus because we didn't have one. I worked part-time like most students do in Holland, so it is very different I think. And so coming to Smith -- one of the things that I really had to get used

to, but I really liked, was campus life like everything was just around -- around here.

VASQUEZ: And how did you hear about the AMS program?

BLANKEVOORT: A professor at my university told me about it, and also one of my good friends had done it a year before I went, and he was -- well, he, like one of the guys who did the AMS program and he really liked it a lot. He told me that the education level was like really, really good. It was so high and yeah, he told me great stories, so I decided I will try as well. And then I applied and had to write an essay and did an interview and then I got to go.

VASQUEZ: Great. And so will you talk more about this campus life that you were saying how it's different and like what -- what was different about it, and what did you enjoy about it?

BLANKEVOORT: Well, like in Amsterdam I lived in different like student houses. You just have a house in the city and you usually share, because otherwise it is too expensive, right? Like if you go to debates or festivities or events, it's always in the city. It's just part of city life, but here everything is -- it's like the microcosm. It's like a universe of its own, Smith, you know, you have great facilities, like I did a lot of photography because -- just a facility for photography and art are just overwhelming. You just get to go in and grab a technical camera, if you like, and just experiment.

But you have, you know, your housing and I stayed in Cutter House, which was fun because there were lots of different students. I got to meet American students who were freshmen, sophomores, seniors, but also lots of international students from all over the world. So one of my best friends was from Bosnia. I met a German girl, a girl from Turkmenistan who I actually saw back at the reunion, which was fun. South Africa -- well you know, like all over. So that was really a great experience. And just, you know, living on campus, dining together in the dining hall, hanging out, you know, just laying in the grass or go and sit by Paradise Pond and reading or having a coffee at Campus Center and then strolling off to your class. Like yeah, it was really -- it was really comfortable. It felt like a very, you know, nice little community.

Sometimes it felt a little bit like suffocating because I was used to city life and actually before I came to Smith I just spent half a year in Iran doing research, which was like a completely different world. So it was a bit of a shock at first, but I got used to it and I started enjoying it a lot.

VASQUEZ: And do you remember your first day here like how that was or --

BLANKEVOORT: The funny thing -- well I remember -- I actually remember that I met my friend Hemina (phonetic) the Bosnian woman, and we just hit it off like that. It was like -- you know, sometimes you have like friendship at first

sight, so we had that. So I remember meeting her and we were both like wow, what is this place, it's like so beautiful, but you know, and there's no like garbage around, everything is so clean and neat. And also we had to get used to -- I remember a girl who was sort of the coordinator, I guess, for the introduction and she was like, "Chop, chop, Smithies," and we were like "Chop, chop? What's that?" you know, come on, we're just chilling and whatever. So we had to get used to this whole new sort of style, I guess around campus, and yeah, we just did the tour and we were just overwhelmed by the beauty of it. I remember that. And I forgot actually how beautiful it is. So I came back and like wow, yeah, it is really cool.

VASQUEZ: And what was the house community like? You mentioned meeting all the students, but were you part of house traditions or --

BLANKEVOORT: Not really that much. I had the feeling that Cutter wasn't -- it didn't have that much house traditions as I heard other houses had, but we had -- it was sort of loose, I guess. But I got to know a lot of people in my house just by you know, sharing the dining hall, sharing the bathrooms. We spent a lot of time, you know, hanging out at the little courtyard between Ziskind and Cutter. So yeah, it was -- that was the house community, I guess, if you just randomly met people. I don't remember any of the traditions like the teas or something like you have at the other houses, but yeah, I got to know a lot of my housemates and also a lot of Ada's actually, some of the Ada's became good friends, so a great mix of different students, I think. I really mostly remember that and treasure that a lot yeah.

VASQUEZ: And can you talk more about the AMS program, the classes you are taking and just the academic work you are doing here?

BLANKEVOORT: So, yeah, the American Studies program, it focused on American history, American literature. My professor was Jim Hicks who is not doing the program anymore unfortunately, and I really enjoyed it because -- well, I studied history but I didn't do that much American history. So a lot of it was quite new to me, and what I really liked, not just studying history, but studying history in a different way. I think in the US there is a lot more attention for minority studies, or you know, studies of non -- not white male history. You know, like I have never heard about herstory before I came here, right? And it's a normal thing to study Asian American history, women's history, African-American history here. So I enjoyed that a lot that we got to study these different ways and that way -- yeah, rethink how you work or which history is being told in a way.

VASQUEZ: And how would you say like since being here -- I mean it was only a short time, but like since being here for that one year, how has it like it affected

you or like your education or what you are doing now coming from Smith?

BLANKEVOORT: Well, I didn't continue in the American Studies, but it did influence I think the way I think, like more critical than before. I mean it's not that I wasn't critical before I came to Smith, but even more I think, and -- yeah, I think that was the most important like focusing not only on the big story that everybody already knows or tells, but focus on other stories and -- I'm now working as a journalist and documentary maker, so I travel a lot and I think that the Smith experience has helped me just opening up more and more to other people and to other stories, looking for the -- yeah, the other story instead of the obvious ones.

VASQUEZ: And how would you describe like the campus atmosphere during this time? Like, do you remember like what was the big news, like were there big things happening on campus during this time or --

BLANKEVOORT: Yeah, well, I remember -- I mean I wasn't -- I came here in 2003, so the war in Iraq had just started. I was in Iran when that started so there it was pretty intense. And then actually when I came here, it shocked me that it wasn't such a big thing here. It really shocked me. I was like, you guys are in a war, actually you started this war and there's nothing going on. So that really -- I thought it was really weird, and like if I tried to follow the news, it was pretty difficult because, you know, like watching CNN, you would have to do it for an hour to take five minutes of news, I guess.

So that was a bit of a shock, and then what people mostly focused on here back then was a lot of gender politics, which I found interesting, because that was really new to me as well. I mean of course in Amsterdam we discussed that as well, but not on a level like here. So at one end, I thought it was shocking that the outside world didn't seem to matter that much, on the other hand, the campus politics were interesting in itself. So yeah, that was a really big debate. I remember demonstrations for gender-free toilets, and I think was that my -- yeah, later on also discussions about how the language of the, I think, student government should change as well. So that was really interesting because there were like new topics that I didn't really, you know, dig into before.

VASQUEZ: And can you describe more about this demonstration? I don't really know much about it.

BLANKEVOORT: Well, it was just like people -- it wasn't like a demonstration. That sounds too big, I guess it was more people, you know, petitioning and going around with leaflets so -- and I met a few of the people who were really active in this works and they explained it a lot to me and we discussed like what they were doing and why and yeah, I got to learn a lot about it.

VASQUEZ: So were you -- did you partake in any of the clubs or organizations or did you just like witness like a lot of activism happening on campus?

BLANKEVOORT: No, I think I more -- I more watched it than I actually joined the clubs. I mean I was really working hard. Like it was pretty challenging, you know, coming here and I remember like having to read at least a book for every class, every week, and not only reading it but make -- doing an essay, preparing for a class discussion or a public presentation. That was pretty challenging as well, because we don't really have that tradition at our universities in Holland. We don't really present or do like debating. So that was a great challenge and also really something that I valued that I learned up here, a bit at least.

So no, I didn't participate in any clubs, but yeah -- I did -- I did get a taste of it, I think, just watching things going on on campus, talking to people who were involved and asking them like why are you doing this and why is it important to you. It's part of -- yeah, I guess like -- I had been working as a journalist before, so I somehow -- sometimes sort of took on that part as well, while I was here, just you know, sort of investigating what is this place about.

VASQUEZ: And you think you had like a nice mix of like working hard and like meeting students and been a part of the community?

BLANKEVOORT: Oh definitely, yeah. There were times that I was just stuck in Cutter, you know, in my small room studying hard but at the same time just going to class and meeting people and talking to people, discussing your projects. Also I'm really glad I took two art classes, photography classes, because that was really different than the other academic work, like you really had like -- I don't know a lot of discussions, a way that you can really express yourself, also something that I have actually never seen anywhere else like at Smith, the level of self-expression is just tremendous here.

Like Smithies just really know how to express themselves and they love to do it. And that's something I really learned here as well, like you know talking about the projects you are doing and why, and why you are doing it, who are you that you want to -- you know, I was just talking to some of the Smithies and they were saying like yeah, we talk about how our feelings have feelings. I always thought that was like -- oh yeah, that's what Smith is also about.

VASQUEZ: And so you are back here doing research? Can you explain more about the research you are doing and --

BLANKEVOORT: Well, actually so this year is a reunion for the AMS diploma program as well, the 50th anniversary, so I thought when I got the invitation at first I was like, hmm, should I go, you know, it's pretty expensive and I -- you know, just to go for the reunion I don't know, but I really liked the idea of you know, going back to Smith because I haven't been back at all. So I

decided to do an article for a Dutch Feminist magazine, so it was sort of a good excuse to come back and it's fun as well, because I go around interviewing students about their -- you know, their experience at Smith and also going into the archive reading on, you know, how different women have experienced their time at Smith throughout the century and -- or decades and also just taking on -- like looking at the photos in the archives is great, it's really great. I didn't really do that when I was here. I didn't know that much about the college archives, so I'm glad I have a chance to discover them now while I'm here.

VASQUEZ: And what are like the differences that you see. Like have you noticed any differences since coming here?

BLANKEVOORT: Not like really, no. I mean I was actually like surprised how, yeah, similar it is and I could still find my way easily. Yeah, I mean there are -- people are telling me there are some differences but for me like just being back for a few days now I haven't really seen it, that -- it's not that obvious to me.

VASQUEZ: And what -- did you get any like close relationships with professors and stuff or like how were your relationships with your professors or mentors?

BLANKEVOORT: Yeah, with some of them like with Jim, our professor in AMS. It was a great guy -- great professor, we had a lot of fun and we had great academic discussions during the class, but he also invited us to his house to meet his wife and just be around his place and we had a lot of fun. Also going on a few trips. We went to Washington and New York, which was great fun. I really like my conversations with Meradyl (phonetic), I forgot her last name, was my photography professor here. She's not here anymore, but she really was really inspirational. Another professor, Lucretia, who wasn't actually my professor, but I got to know her and we just met up for coffee again. I'm going to have dinner with her tomorrow and she's just great, also really inspirational person. So different professors. Also at Hampshire, I took a class there and there was a great professor there as well, so.

VASQUEZ: What made you decide to take a class on campus? Were other students doing it as well or --

BLANKEVOORT: Not for my AMS class. I think I -- it was a class about theory of photography and photography and the way we look at images and -- well, I don't remember it exactly, but it seemed interesting. And Jim really did point out that there were also classes in the other colleges that we could take, and I was curious to go there and just see -- I mean I went to Amherst for a few lectures as well, so -- and I really liked Hampshire and it was very you know very different -- different atmosphere, but also really good, so I'm glad I did it, yeah.



VASQUEZ: Well, that's great that you got off campus to do that --

BLANKEVOORT: Yeah.

VASQUEZ: Not every Smithie does that. So I guess my final question is like going -- like going off and looking back to something that like you are glad you did, like the AMS program and, you know, about your experience being at AMS. Do you think it like affected your future --

BLANKEVOORT: Well, I think it was a great year. I really learned a lot of new things basically, like really -- as I said, like, a different way of studying history, I think. I broadened my interests, like my scope of interests here, I think. Got to know a lot of different people, got to know the American educational system, which is so different from the European or at least the Dutch experience, so I really -- I really liked that as well. So lots of things, yeah, and I actually heard that there is no Dutch students coming in anymore for the AMS program and I think that's really -- really such a shame, so I hope they will -- they will have a chance to sort of get that -- yeah, get those Dutch students out here again as well, because I think it is a great experience.

VASQUEZ: Do you have any questions?

GEISS: I do. I have a couple.

VASQUEZ: Great.

GEISS: I'm curious about, why did you go to Iran? Can you talk about that and what was your experience there?

BLANKEVOORT: Yeah, so I went to Iran because I was writing my -- or I was doing my Master's thesis about war propaganda. So "The Image of War," it's called, so I went to Iran and I studied there for half a year. I did research in all kinds of archives and talking to -- it was really -- it was a subject that's very sensitive and also very sort of controlled by the hardliners in Iran, so I got to talk to lots of clergymen and bearded revolutionaries and like really the tough, tough parts of Iranian society. But I also got to know a lot of great other people, like journalists and activists and painters and other artists. But yeah, it was -- it was -- I was just finishing my thesis when I came to Smith, so I sort of stopped writing on it to do the AMS program and then I went back to Holland and I finished my thesis, and then I actually went back to Iran a lot and I lived there again for several -- well, like months in a row and then come back. So in --

VASQUEZ: That's great.

GEISS: And what are you doing with that research?

BLANKEVOORT: Well, my thesis -- I graduated with it and then I actually wrote a book about Iran, a journalistic book more about like how people in a country like Iran with such strict rules, strict Islamic rules imposed on them by a very strict regime tried to live a nice life between the rules, so to say. So yeah, that's what my book is about -- about people -- basically about the different lives of the people I met there and also a little bit about propaganda, but mostly about what's it like to live in a country like Iran. Also because, of course, especially at that time, 2003 to 2006, I mean during George W. Bush's administration, Iran was the next one on the list to be attacked. Fortunately it didn't happen but there was really, at a certain, at a certain point like it was like ready to be bombed, right, bomb, bomb, bomb Iran. Remember that song?

GEISS: Yeah.

BLANKEVOORT: Yeah, so I mean -- I thought it -- and so I thought it was important to do journalism work there and write about the other side of the story. It isn't just, you know, just these clergymen and these crazy -- crazy Muslims. You know, there's a lot more to that story than we usually get in the media.

GEISS: So you were -- I'm just going to ask you one more question. From your perspective. You have a unique perspective -- I think a lot of -- I mean I think you saw it being here at the time that you came here, the culture that we live in is very self-centered in a way in terms of looking at what's happening in the media and our sense of the world even on campus as aware as Smith is. I'm just curious as to -- you talk about the book that you wrote in sort of -- what for your own sense of what you would want to offer to the world, it seems like as a journalist one wants to kind of share your experiences, so what -- can you tell us a little bit about having been here at Smith and then having been in Iran, what sort of a picture that you can paint of the differences and similarities, things that kind of -- just kind of make you look at the world a little differently?

BLANKEVOORT: Like the differences between Iran and Smith College? (laughs)

GEISS: Well, no, not just that, but in terms of just -- I mean you're from Holland so --

VASQUEZ: Yeah.

GEISS: -- that's sort of a -- you have -- you're coming into our culture in a -- from a different perspective anyway, so -- any insight you want to share basically?

BLANKEVOORT: Well, I think there's -- there's so many differences between American and Dutch culture. I mean there's a lot of similarities and we do get a lot of American culture in the Netherlands through, you know, films and music

and TV programs, but I think there are a lot of differences. For example, the level of discussing like political issues, especially at Smith, and I think it's not true for the entire US, but like at Smith like you really go in depth about issues like gender, women, race, social equality or inequality and I don't think we do that as much as we do -- as you do here at Smith, so that was really -- I mean I think even in the Netherlands we sometimes think it's too much. So we have to get used to that. You know, it's like wow, you're so politically correct, right?

And now in the Netherlands actually, and I'm not proud of it, but we have a -- like the right wing populous movement which has been on the rise for about 12 years now and is getting strong unfortunately, and it actually is the opposite of political correctness. It actually says you have to -- you can say whatever you want and I -- I don't care if I offend you with that. I don't care if you get hurt because I'm entitled to say whatever I want. And that's like so completely opposite to the Smith atmosphere and I think -- I think we could -- I mean I learned a lot from being here and I think we could learn about, you know, from that attitude that you don't have to say everything because you want to or think it's right. I mean maybe you should think about why it might be offensive to people, so that's really something -- I think is very different from my background and culture I come from but something I really -- yeah, appreciate that I learned that and take with me in my experience.

GEISS: What's the name of your book?

BLANKEVOORT: It's in Dutch and it's called *Stiekem Kan Hier Alles*, which means, "In secret everything is possible here, only in secret."

GEISS: Thank you very much.

VASQUEZ: Great, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2012.*