

**Research Review Institute Culture and
History Utrecht University 2012**

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Programme: **Gender Studies**
 Programme coordinator: Prof. Rosemarie Buikema
 Research staff 2011: 6.26 fte

The Gender Studies programme aims to be at the forefront of feminist and postcolonial theory formation. Its critical perspectives to the fields of literary and visual studies, new media, science, and technology studies; human rights and post-humanism; history and the colonial archive, and the 'turns' in the humanities, are offered from the group's distinctive conceptual stance. The group is interested in the contextualised and processual study of gender in its entanglement with 'race'/ ethnicity, sexuality, age, and class. Three thematic fields have been formulated: Art & Beyond; Postcoloniality and Social Justice; Contemporary Feminist Theory. Together those research strands focus on the ways in which instances of 'gendering' occur, that is, on how cultural practices and artefacts are able to perform and transform gender in a context that is thoroughly power-laden.

The review committee studied the following key publications of this group:

- Braidotti, R. (2006) *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Buikema, R. & Tuin, I. van der (2009) *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*. London Routledge.
- Davis, K. (2007) *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How feminism travels across borders*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ponzanesi, S. & Merolla, D. (Eds.) (2005) *Migrant Cartographies. New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Postcolonial Europe*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Wekker, G. (2006) *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2008) 'In Spite of Times. The Postcolonial Turn in Feminism'. In: *Theory, Culture, and Society*. Vol 25 (6), 1-24.
- Buikema, R.L. (2009) 'Crossing the borders of identity politics'. In: *European Journal of Women's Studies*. 16 (4), 309-323.
- Davis, K. (2008) 'Intersectionality as Buzzword. A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful.' In: *Feminist theory*, 9 (1), 67-85.
- Ponzanesi, S. (2007) 'Feminist Theory and Multiculturalism'. In: *Feminist theory*, 8 (1), 91-103.
- Tuin, Iris van der (2011) 'A Different Starting Point, a Different Metaphysics: Reading Bergson and Barad Diffractively'. In: *Hypatia*, 26 (1), 22-42.

Assessments:

Quality: 5
 Productivity: 5
 Relevance: 5
 Viability: 5

Quality:

This world-class programme has continued, over the past six years, to produce the kind of dynamic first-class research for which it had already become well-known both nationally and internationally. The Utrecht Gender Studies programme is noted in particular for the theories of located and situated or situational feminism associated with several of its leading researchers and scholars, as well as for its critically reflexive approach to feminist history. These related theories and approaches, also shaped by engagements with multiculturalism and postcolonial studies, have placed the programme on the feminist intellectual map in a sustained and convincing manner. Gender Studies at Utrecht typically embraces perspectives from Cultural History, Postcolonial and American Studies, Comparative Literature, and cognate interdisciplinary approaches. These interdisciplinary points of connection are coherently pursued and managed and the research overall is excellent. The researchers' concentrated gender focus and wide spectrum of research methodologies are evident throughout the submitted research publications. Most of the monographs and essays collections rise out of funded research projects and conferences. Most of the monographs are published by reputable Netherlands and international academic Presses. The key book publications all represent very good, indeed leading, work.

Rosi Braidotti's *Transpositions* (2006), a thoughtful, thoroughgoing interrogation of what a post-humanist 'ethical and political subjectivity' might comprise, is already well-established as a key source in the fields of gender studies and moral philosophy. Its exploration of contingently grounded ethics is in line with standard feminist approaches, and it mounts a persuasive case, informed by post-structuralist theory, against the influential though essentializing moral universalism linked to ethical philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum. This is a key text for our times, by any reckoning. Further lines of critical reflection from the monograph are followed through in Braidotti's 'Theory, Culture and Society' article (2008), and testify to this leading feminist thinker's sustained 'affirmative' critique of the assumed link between 'political subjectivity and oppositional consciousness'.

Migrant Geographies, edited by Sandra Ponzanesi of UU and Daniela Merolla (2005), brings together a rich array of approaches (grounded in film and literary studies) to the subject of postcolonial and multicultural Europe, arising out of a 2001 conference. The collection is in some ways a reflection of its half decade, appearing before the events that brought what is now referred to as a crisis of multiculturalism (Theo van Gogh's murder, 7/7, Anders Breivik, etc.). However, both the conference and the collection have been widely cited and referred to as important insights relating to postcolonial Europe, and several of the outstanding contributions (as by Gilroy, Huggan, etc.), still provide illuminating accounts of the meanings of national and transnational culture in Europe today. Ponzanesi's 10 page feature review from *Feminist Theory* (2007) demonstrates the same sound, clearly stated commitment to multicultural critical perspectives, informed by gender theory, as in the book.

Kathy Davis's *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is a good, well-founded retrospective account, drawing on perspectives from book history, reception studies, and situational feminism, of the reception and influence of this key feminist classic of the 1960s, and sheds light on 'good transnational feminist practice' and how it might be achieved. The approach, like that of many other of the Gender studies' outputs, is indicatively and appropriately tempered, optimistic and non-judgemental. Davis's *Feminist Theory* article (2008) is a close theoretical interrogation, informed by a range of feminist sociologists and other theorists, of the key concept and/or strategy of intersectionality for feminist theory, and finds in its ambiguity as a term its strength. This is a robust, nicely worked essay.

Gloria Wekker's 2006 monograph on Netherlands-Surinamese fluid sexualities and mati culture, *The Politics of Passion*, rests on extensive research and a range of methodologies including interviews with Afro-Surinamese women, conducted in the Netherlands and Suriname, and sheds important new light on this Netherlands cultural domain of cross-sex relations, interrogating gender, race, cultural and sexual stereotypes and contributing to a more complex understanding of Netherlands migrant and postcolonial cultures today. This is an extremely good study. This is one of the few pieces of research in the programme that explicitly and robustly reflects on the imbrication of race with gender in the politics of intersectionality.

Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture, edited by Buikema and van der Tuin, is a clear, lively and well-researched teaching collection, introducing students and researchers more widely to a representative range of contemporary feminist approaches. The co-editorship and involvement of several of the Programmes members as contributors testify also to a good level of constructive collaboration in Gender Studies at Utrecht. Buikema's 2009 'work-immanent' reading of Coetzee's *Disgrace* and van Niekerk's *Agaat*, published in the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, offers a finely tempered phenomenological reading of the performativity of both novels. Van der Tuin's 2011 reading of Bergson in a feminist frame endorses the kind of affirmative approach that others in Gender Studies too are investigating and putting into practice.

The dissertations written under the supervision of this programme are certainly wide-ranging, and build out from the supervisor or co-promoters' research areas. We note the focus of PhD research tends to be more sociological than literary or cultural, which is a surprising trend in the only gender studies programme in the Netherlands located in the Humanities.

Productivity:

The effective intergenerational cooperation among the group's researchers provides a firm basis on which the programme energetically and intelligently combines and interrelates approaches from feminism and women's studies, aesthetic and visual theory, comparative literature, multiculturalism and postcolonialism. The researchers at all levels creatively expand and adapt their ideas in the apparently tireless generation of new research and PhD projects and grant applications. The output in terms of publications is excellent with respect to quantity as well as quality.

Relevance:

The group has developed a compelling corporate identity through the concept of gender studies, generously yet rigorously interpreted. Where other programmes in, for example, women, gender, and society are entrenching themselves in quantitative and social scientific methods, Utrecht gender studies enthusiastically embraces the rich and complex philosophical and theoretical heritage of feminism while balancing that heritage with historical and cultural study. The Committee was impressed by the group's willingness to think about gender both at a high theoretical level, inflected by post-structuralism, and in specific contexts and multi-axial ways, paying sensitive attention to the myriad other determinants of class, race, and sexuality. Several of the programme's projects, such as that on the use of digital media by migrant youth in the Netherlands, connect their scholarship to the wider sphere, especially to local and national communities.

The societal relevance of the research is without doubt high and is underlined by the number of professional and popularising publications as well as by the regular invitations and participations of staff members in projects and lectures aimed at a wider public in which the group deploys its expertise and knowledge about inclusion and exclusion, equality and difference, masculinity, femininity and conflict. These issues are particularly applicable to the shaping of post-war societies and to the development of processes of transitional justice in post-totalitarian societies. The need to include gender expertise in society is also evidenced by the number of external (third stream) funded projects awarded to the group.

Viability:

Utrecht Gender Studies has positioned itself as an international leader in theoretical and philosophical approaches to studies especially in the context of the humanities. The group evidences excellent team spirit and cooperation in research, administration, and teaching. No doubt they will continue to attract significant numbers of talented students and PhD candidates both nationally and from abroad. There is nevertheless a concern whether researchers will be able to balance the time devoted to teaching and advising students and PhD researchers against time for new research. The programme's remarkable enterprise in attracting research grants which include some PhD funding would be well rewarded with the additional award of directly funded PhD positions.