

Jury Report Hélène Phoa Thesis Prize 2025

Hélène Phoa was a graduate of the Research Master Gender Studies at Utrecht University.



She graduated in 2018 and passed away in 2019. In memory of her life, her courage and her commitment to Gender Studies, the family of Hélène Phoa made it possible to award a yearly prize for a gender studies research thesis.

The prize is intended to contribute to supporting a graduate in the passage from being a student in gender studies to a rewarding next phase in life where 'doing gender' may find a new and rewarding form.

Her own thesis was titled: Being/Becoming Aligned. And brought together her yoga practice with feminist theory. She wrote in her introduction:

"Vedic texts and contemporary field of feminist new materialism (Barad, Braidotti) might not seem the most obvious space for intra-active phenomena. (...) Through their respective alignments, I compare their implicit intra-actions. repositioning them from an affirmative and-and, instead of a dichotomous either-or."

All Gender Studies Research Master and all GEMMA students who graduated between September 1, 2024 and August 31, 2025 were invited to apply for the fifth edition of the Hélène Phoa Gender Studies Research Thesis prize.

The award jury consisted of:

- Irina Phoa-Provatoroff MSc (on behalf of family of Hélène)
- Aikokul Ibraeva, MA (winner of Hélène Phoa Prize 2024)
- Dr. Chih-Chen Trista Lin (graduate Gender Studies RMA, assistant professor at Wageningen University)
- Drs. Amalia Deekman (Programmacoördinator Kennisontwikkeling Kenniscentrum Ongelijkheid)
- Nicole Phoa BSc (On behalf of family of Hélène)
- Dr. Berteke Waaldijk (chair, retired professor from Gender Studies Programme at UU)

We have received 8 anonymized theses. Before we discuss their value, we want to say that we were impressed and moved by the trust the submitters put in us. All theses, all motivation letters and especially all prefaces and thank you's showed how a Gender Studies Thesis is a deeply personal, affective project. All authors speak about their own experiences, what makes them tick and what makes them hesitate. All find words that

give the old feminist slogan 'the personal is political' a complete new dimension. Thank you for sharing.

The submitted theses show outstanding perseverance and this illustrates the diversity of the gender and queer struggles our students.

[hier nog stukje plakken over de oorsprong van de prijs]

We had three criteria, which all resonate with the commitments and experiences of H  l  ne Phoa in writing her own thesis in 2017 and 2018

- Originality in the field of Gender Studies: exploring under-researched or surprising questions.
- Conclusions are formulated in such a way that they reach out to new readerships, beyond academic colleagues.
- The author has shown perseverance and commitment in writing the thesis by overcoming personal, financial or social challenges.

The Jury concluded that all submitted theses scored very high on at least one, often two and sometimes three of these criteria. This is also the moment that this is not 'simply a prize for 'best thesis', but a prize that reconsiders what is 'best'.

For perseverance: The Gender Studies programme – GEMMA and RMA – attracts students from all over the world. This means that many students had to work while living at long distances to their family and kin [check camera for streaming-listeners], to encounter prejudice and lack of knowledge about their home situation, whether simple stupidity (do you have running water? Do you need a visa?) or severe ignorance about persecution and political violence in the country they come from and will return to, or even sheer racism when looking for housing and supporting jobs. The Jury recommends the programme to continue creating space and consideration to this aspect of an international programme.

For originality: we were – again - impressed how the students include their own experiences in original, well-researched and innovative ways of doing Gender Studies Research:

1. **Rabsimar Ahluwalia**, *"An Iota of Intensity is a Whole World: Exploring Affective Realms beyond the Binary of Feminist Resistance and Colonial Conformity"* started out from her own experiences in the Netherlands, and turned to a beautiful description of research as co creation: "this project insists on co-creation as method and moral form. The voices that threaded through this thesis — friends, co-creators, songs, images and videos — honour co-creation and accept that knowledge may emerge in companionship in its true enigmatic form." Offers new thoughts on resistance (like vacuum and pluriversity)

2. **Kemal Gaitnazarov**, "Culture and Modernity: Role of Turkmen Women in Shaping Turkmen Identity through Türkmençilik and Soviet Reforms" was special in the well structured way it combined family interviews with language (proverbs) and history (solid historiography) Own family interviewed, combined with careful critique of Soviet history in Turkistan.

Other theses too took personal experiences as a starting point. This may explain the wide range of topics that the jury was delighted to read and learned so much from.

A substantial number of theses addressed writing, the creation of narratives, as an indispensable element of engaging with feminist issues and gender equality. Careful – literary, poetics, critical discourse analysis situated stories, narratives in a broader scholarly exploration. This resulted in theses that combined reaching out to new audiences by exploring 'other narratives' and articulating the personal challenges that they had to face when writing.

3. **Sophie Wagner**, in "Narrativizing Endometriosis" combines feminist critiques of medical prejudice with a reading of the oil paintings by the artist Solomon Kammer. A quote: "When I first was diagnosed [with endometriosis] I started isolating myself because I felt that no one could relate to me, [...] It soon dawned on me that it wasn't that my family and friends didn't care, they just didn't understand, so I resolved to make it my business to shine a great big offensive spotlight on endometriosis." (Kammer, as cited in Gillespie, 2017) art work by cross roads own experience and addresses a very important topic, - moving away from medical jargon and research to narrative by people experiencing endometriosis. Especially the combination of feminist art and personal experience struck the jury as a great approach. (just like cobweb)
4. Critical construction of narratives was also central (even in the title) of **Ines James'** "Narrative Selection: On the Potentials of Alternative Evolutionary Theories for Refiguring the Human in Feminist Ecocritical Discourse". In this innovative thesis, Ines James moved beyond the humanities in addressing evolution theory. We loved the way the author showed how marginalized narratives on evolution (the Aquatic Ape theory, the Carrier Bag theory, rhizomatics, lateral gene transfer, symbiogenesis, punctuated equilibrium, and the Hopeful Monsters hypothesis) can yield "quote from Ines: "different dimensions of evolution from which more situated and mutable understandings of being and becoming emerge".
5. **Belén Cornejo-Daza's** "Magical writing" analyses the transformative power of author and journalist Joan Didion, arguing that she is an example of feminist

transmedia" Belén stands in a tradition of the Gender studies programme firmly positioned in Humanities faculty, literature, film, text, image. Quote BCD: In e a selection of three essays by Joan Didion to argue for the ways in which feminist transmedia constitutes a transformative process in which affective/embodied experience is trans-mediated into aesthetic/artistic experience. She concludes: the materialization of feminist transmedia as a potential hopeful artifact needs to be understood in a *non-linear, non-optimistic and open-ended* sense which pictures hope not as an achievable, fixed and static result, but as an affective orientation towards the possibilities of change.

A third element that struck us was the commitment to making a difference: activism and other ways of imagining political engagement. The theses all contributed to imagining an alternative forms of 'doing politics' – it is an element present in all submissions, but especially strong in the work of Belen and Isabella:

6. In the thesis "Hegemony and Negativity: Two Political Logics of Queerness" **Michelle Bertoni** takes up the challenge of unpacking non-optimist forms of hope or activism. Original research question, extensive literature study. With deeply committed and creative thinking about resistance and politics beyond the positivity of the political subject as defined future-oriented optimism. Deeply moving for the members of the jury was radical openness of the author about her own position, how Michelle explored the limits of activism that require bodily presence, clear demands and a non-shakeable view of the desired future. At some places it reminded us of Spivak 'can the subaltern speak' in her exploration of politics that do not repeat the forced optimism of the colonial project.
7. **Isabella Giraldo Vesga** in "Thinking/doing the (im)possible: Examples of crack-making practices grounded in Medellín, Colombia" asked: where can women go when nowhere feels safe? Isabella addressed attention to resistance and alternative form of being anticolonial . the jury regrets that a no pictures can be integrated in this report, the examples and analysis of communal art, needle work, embroideries and patchwork were not only colourful but inspiring. "*How do (communal) forms of being, acting, and relating in Colombia open imaginative, social, political, and cultural spaces that contest coloniality?*"

From this thesis we take the term 'a gathering of women and knowledge' used by Isabella, to describe the texts that we saw. We know that not all authors identify as 'women', but the image 'gathering of knowledge' is fitting for of a group of gender studies theses that create knowledge as if it is shared wisdom, via co-creation, via communal involvement, and in participatory engagement

8. The thesis that combined excellence in all three criteria was submitted by the winner of the HP Thesis Prize 2025, **Priscilla Akomprah**, who wrote *“Marriage, Faith, and Harm: A Feminist Analysis of Domestic Violence in Ghana”*. We congratulate Priscilla, the people in Ghana and here in the Netherlands who supported her project, your family (who is watching) and the advisors who advised supported and steered from Utrecht (Prof. dr. Bruce Mutsvairo) and from Lodz (Dr. Margaret Ohia-Nowak)

This thesis

“explores how bride price (marriage) and Christian religious teachings intersect with domestic violence in Ghana, using a Ghanaian decolonial feminist standpoint. It centres the voices of survivors as co-creators and it treats their lived experiences as critical knowledge. Drawing on eight in-depth interviews with individuals who span across domestic violence survivors, domestic violence support workers, law enforcers and church leaders, the study examines how marriage is conceptualized, how religious teachings shape understandings of domestic violence in unions, and how survivors navigate harm when these systems overlap.”

This is by the way a quote from the abstract provided by Priscilla, and will show how clear she writes, how she avoids unnecessary jargon and thus reaches out to audiences that may include survivors, support workers and police and church leaders.

The thesis stands out for its radical positioning of experiences of survivors and advocates in the development of not only ‘grounded theory’ but equally for ‘grounded interventions’ via a ‘Ghanaian feminist decolonial standpoint epistemology’. The way Akomprah assesses the intersection of different discourses helps in- and outsider to understand the risks associated with religious and cultural discourses on marriage. We read the thesis as a fundamental effort to decolonize Western feminist theory. We applaud the way this thesis does not simply apply Western feminist interpretations to Ghanaian experiences but has the strong focus on African feminist theory. So many authors that were new to most members of the jury – Mama, Tamale, Asamoah-Gyadu, Oyěwùmí, Diala, A. C., Mohlabane, N., & Tshoaedi, M.. The clear explanations how orthodox Christian teachings shape expectations about marriage are illuminating. The conclusions differentiate clearly between recommendations for activists and advocates, and academic knowledge production.

The quoted letter (accidentally from a paper co-authored with one of the other graduates who submitted their thesis) is moving and an inspiring example of how academic researchers can engage with co-creators and research participants/informants: not only writing about, for and with, but also *to* them, honouring through a conversation the commitment to making knowledge as a communal project.

The thesis not only resonates with the life experiences of Hélène Phoa, her dedication to support change, but also with the commitment Hélène showed in her thesis: start from an original and personal engagement, and a deep conviction that gender studies is a field that should be in conversation with all domains of knowledge and wisdom.