

## Editorial:

### ‘Gender and Diversity: What’s at Stake?’

This is the central question of the first round table discussion in this inaugural issue of the *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* (DiGeSt), and one that will continue to be a central question throughout its run. DiGeSt is a journal dedicated to diversity, gender and their intersection, since femininity and masculinity are always classed, raced, and shaped by sexuality and (dis)ability in structurally differentiated ways. It wants to explore the ways in which the rich tradition of research on sexual difference, with its established critical frameworks and methodologies, can both further and build on research that, in many different domains, addresses the questions ‘what is diversity?’, ‘what is difference?’, ‘what challenges and opportunities does it bring forth?’, and ‘why is it so important to understand?’

DiGeSt is a peer-reviewed journal, published by Academia Press, that will appear biannually. The journal is a continuation of a long standing Dutch-language publication called *Verslagen van het Centrum voor Genderstudies* that collected the annual lectures (‘Genderforum’) presented at Ghent University since 1991. It is when the policy officers on gender and diversity withdrew their assistance to the organization of the lectures that the chair of the Centre of Genderstudies, Prof Marysa Demoor, rethought the publication and found help to launch this new publication. A new generation of feminist scholars, headed by editor-in-chief Dr Liselotte Vandebussche, and assistant-editor Dr Griet Roets, joined forces to give shape to the new venture.

DiGeSt aims to provide a forum for debate on current research regarding gender and diversity in Belgium and comments on topical or upcoming trends that affect research in these areas. The journal also has a keen interest in practices and research on other countries and societies. In highlighting the significance of ongoing research in these fields for knowledge, culture and daily life, it aims to appeal to both a specialist and a wide audience. It will offer contributions from a broad array of disciplines in the arts and humanities (such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy,

history, arts, and literature) but also from the natural sciences. It is also one of the first (if not the first) scholarly journals to cover the research focusing on both diversity and gender studies.

In order for the power systems and the mechanisms of exclusion – in our societies and environments at large as well as in our everyday lives, our thinking, our beliefs and (cultural) production – to be brought to light, we need to map the ways in which gender inequality relates to other processes that select, structure and set standards. We want to examine the hurdles modern societies need to cross so as to be the 'open' and just societies they claim or want to be. Social categories such as sex, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, 'race', class, age, disability, (chronic) illness ... continue to define individual life chances and the formation of social boundaries in ways that do not correspond with the proclaimed openness of modern societies and its members.

Apart from the round table discussion on the future of diversity and gender studies, this inaugural issue of *DiGeSt* contains two opening articles by leading scholars in the field. **Catherine Belsey** makes a compelling case for the importance of fiction in thinking about the construction of gender and diversity at a particular point in time. The article presents the results of Belsey's recent research on gender in Shakespeare and reconsiders Shakespeare's frequent use of heroines disguised as boys. Questioning the commonly accepted functionality thesis, Belsey argues that these girl-boys easily move in and out gender-identifications, liberating women from the confines of conventional femininity, emphasizing the (multi-layered) performativity of masculinity and femininity, and celebrating imagined potentialities outside the binary system.

The article by **Geert van Hove and colleagues** reflects on the ongoing discussions in the field of disability studies and the challenges disability and diversity entail for society at large. Van Hove et al. emphasize the importance of studying 'ableism' to scrutinize the discursive construction of a particular kind of 'able' self, privileging normative ways of living and idealizing able-bodiedness. To demonstrate the benefits of this 'ableist turn', they focus on the situation of students with disabilities at Ghent University, which is considered a competitive institution embodying an ableist agenda. They illustrate the paradoxical effects of disclosing disability, which paves the way for support as well as prejudice, and put forward Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as an alternative that does not privilege a(n) (momentarily) able-bodied status but offers genuine equal opportunities to all individuals.

The central question of the round table discussion concerns the way forward for education and research in diversity and gender studies. Scholars from different fields such as sociology, anthropology, literature, cultural theory, and political sciences address this question. **Chia Longman and Katrien De Graeve** discuss the slow institutionalization of gender studies in Flanders and its recent results, of which *DiGeSt* is a striking example. They propose an intersectional analysis in which diversity forms an integral part of gender studies, and warn against a fashionable 'happy diversity' which neglects actual power structures and systematic inequalities, and focuses on 'diversity' as a simple add-on without questioning the unmarked norm.

**Sarah Bracke** also points to the genealogy of gender studies in Belgium in order to answer the question what gender studies should/could become. She argues for a (re)connection of gender studies to a feminist political project in order to analyse power relations and stresses the everlasting necessity of challenging the gender binary and its heteronormative power matrix. She argues against a 'gender lite' in which gender is a parameter instead of an analytical category. A thorough gender analysis should for instance take into account 'race' and ethnicity as crucial dimensions of gender, since masculinities and femininities are not constituted outside relations of 'race', class, (dis)ability and sexuality. It should also refuse to study 'diversity lite' instead of difference, and address what social justice with respect to ethnicity, disability, class and sexuality might actually mean.

**Nadia Fadil's** contribution urges us to think through the question of 'difference' with regard to the issue of Islam and the woman question. Fadil uses Christian Joppke's and Sindre Bagstad's critiques on Saba Mahmood's seminal work *Politics of Piety* (2005) to exemplify the difficulty of envisioning scholarly routes that escape the epistemological trap of either demonstrating Islam's 'intolerable' differences or laying bare postcolonial anti-Western projections. Following Foucault, Fadil invites us to engage in a systematic reflection on the categories that shape our imaginaries. She argues for a continuous reconfiguration of homogenous narratives about the Self. Europe, she claims, has projected upon the 'Other' practices and ideals that no longer fit in with its Self-understanding, although this Self is equally challenged by illiberal behaviours and internal differences as its common understandings of the 'Other'.

**Elleke Boehmer and Sarah De Mul** use the case of literatures in Dutch to encourage Dutch literary critics to abandon their traditional focus on Dutch-language material which is strictly tied to what is happening with the boundaries of the Low Countries. Postcolonial writers such as Unigwe, Isegawa, Benali and

Lamrabet challenge conventional definitions of literature in Dutch and its concomitant notions of language, culture and 'race'. Simultaneously, the 'postcolonial turn in Dutch literary criticism' questions the appropriateness of traditional, anglophone or francophone postcolonial critical concepts for the study of postcolonial literature in the Low Countries. Boehmer and De Mul aim to draw postcolonial critical perspectives from within: out of Low Countries conditions themselves, where unequal conditions continue to exist, to arrive at a careful re-articulation of traditional postcolonial concepts.

**Koen Van der Bracht and colleagues** of the Ghent University sociology department draw attention to the slow adaptation of Belgian policy and society to the continued immigration after the official migration stop in 1974, thus directly addressing the ongoing challenge of creating an open society without socio-economic deprivation, a structural lack of opportunities and discrimination of ethnic minorities. They sketch the remarkable demographic and economic developments within migrant communities and point to the recent migration after the enlargements of the European Union, which creates or highlights a so-called 'super-diversity' that should be taken into account in future research. There is a lack in research on the consequences of discrimination on socio-economic deprivation, mental and physical health, and the development of reactive ethnicity. Van der Bracht et al. call for better access to the necessary data and thorough and longitudinal research on a range of subjects with the aim of developing a clear image of the socio-economic situation of ethnic minorities.

Our next issues will also include a "What are your reading?" section, in which we give the floor to early-career researchers to report on key studies that are of particular significance to their research. Through original research and critical reflections we hope to fuel the ongoing debate on diversity and gender and provide the necessary knowledge to help create a just society that is able to deal with an increased heterogeneity and to develop the indispensable maturity to reflect on the differences and challenges within its own borders.

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