



DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

What are you reading?

Gert-Jan Vanaken, Liselotte Van der Gucht, Sven Van den Bossche,
Tessel Veneboer, Kika W. L. Van Robays

DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 9, Issue 1

<https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.84824>

Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281

Content is licensed under a Creative Commons BY

DiGeSt is hosted by Ghent University Website: <https://digest.ugent.be>

Reviewed Work(s):

1. Feminist, Queer, Crip by Kafer, A.
2. The Literary and Linguistic Construction of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: No Ordinary Doubt by Friedrich, P.
3. Female Husbands: A Trans History by Manion, J.
4. Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity by Cooke, J.
5. Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies by Chiang, H. and Wong, A. K. (Eds.)

Reviews by:

Gert-Jan Vanaken, Liselotte Van der Gucht, Sven Van den Bossche, Tessel Veneboer, Kika W. L. Van Robays

1

Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip* is a seminal work in crip theory, a fairly fresh, interdisciplinary field at the intersection of disability and queer studies. Expanding on queer resistance against dominant cis-heterosexual life schedules of puberty, marriage, reproduction, and labour productivity, Kafer urges her readers to study the temporal framings of illness and disability.

In the opening chapters, Kafer demonstrates that illness and disability are very often described in relation to time, for example with terms as prognosis, medical history, remission, development etc. These temporal framings are animated by a curative imaginary, leading Kafer to the concept of 'curative time'. Curative time is a way to conceive illness and disability in relation to normative temporalities. Phrases in daily life that are animating such curative time include: 'Were you born that way?', 'How long before they invent a cure?', 'How soon before you recover?' (p. 27-28). According to Kafer, curative time has a compulsory and depoliticising nature. The only appropriate ill and disabled body-mind is one cured or moving towards cure. Far too often, ill and disabled people don't seem to have any fruitful future, or they are presented as a threat to 'our' future since disability may 'destroy family's quality of life or drain public services' (p. 31).

Throughout the book, Kafer strengthens her theoretical claims with thoughtful discussions of various cases. She analyses, for example, the backlash against a Deaf lesbian couple deliberately opting for a deaf sperm donor. Kafer promotes the story as a rare counternarrative of 'disabled parents and parents with disabled children refusing to accept that a bright future for our children precludes disability and asserting the right to bear and keep children with disabilities' (p. 84). This example also ties in with the overall ambition of the book; the aim is to challenge the idea 'that a future with disability, is a future no one wants'. The futures we envisage reveal the biases of the present; therefore, Kafer aims to imagine and articulate 'different futures and temporalities [for disabled people to] help us see, and do the present differently' (p. 28). To this purpose, she develops her proper conceptual resources. 'Crip futures' is one of those. Crippling futures entails imagining political futures where disability is actually welcomed and desired, rather than marginalized, normalized or even deliberately brushed away. Kafer proposes to create crip futures through coalition politics, i.e. looking for mutual reinforcements between disability groups and other social movements. In her final chapter for example, she suggests, to merge insights from disability studies with those of the environmental justice movement and vice versa. Opposing toxic pollution could be done without framing toxin-related disabilities as the

ultimate tragedy to avoid. Disability rights and practices could be mobilized as political tools to advocate for a just and clean environment for all.

My own PhD research focuses on the ethics of early detection and intervention for young autistic children. *Feminist, Queer, Crip* made me acutely aware of the curative imaginary in these early clinical programs for autism. Detecting early autism characteristics comes down to noticing whether the child develops the right skills at the right moment in time, compared to the ‘normal’ temporal schedule of development. Early interventions are acclaimed to offer better odds at living well in the future on the condition they are offered timely during the right window of opportunity, i.e. in the first years of life at times of heightened neuroplasticity.

Fortunately, most of the autism research communities have become aware that the ambition to *cure* autism is long past its expiration date. However, my interpretation is that it is still difficult in the early intervention literature, if not impossible, to imagine a flourishing future for autistic children; at least not without deploying clinical interventions.

Yet, doing away entirely with any kind of interventions might be no viable option either. By interviewing autistic adolescents and parents of autistic infants I came to understand that their real-life difficulties and experienced injustices invoke a societal responsibility to care and to act. As Kafer puts it: ‘The task, then, is not so much to refuse the future as to imagine disability and disability futures otherwise, as part of other, alternate temporalities that do not cast disabled people out of time, as the sign of the future of no future.’ (p. 34)

A potential way forward is that exactly these early interventions become spaces of political possibility. In this vein, my colleagues and I are developing a series of workshops for parents of young autistic children. The goal for parents here will be to arrive at a critical awareness of their situationality: how to understand autism as a phenomenon? How to engage as a parent with their autistic child beyond the role of developmental therapist-by-proxy? Through mutual deliberation with one another, and by bringing in autistic people and neurodiversity advocates into the discussions, we hope to shape a space where parents can speculate on their autistic child’s future beyond a curative imaginary. In other words, early interventions could become spaces where autism futurity can be crippled.

Gert-Jan Vanaken

Gert-Jan Vanaken is a medical doctor and a PhD candidate at KU Leuven and University of Antwerp. Out of academia, he works as an environmental justice and degrowth activist. At the time of writing Vanaken experiences some health issues, but identifies as able-bodied and neurotypical.

2

Friedrich, P. (2015). *The Literary and Linguistic Construction of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: No Ordinary Doubt*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

In *No Ordinary Doubt*, Patricia Friedrich studies the rhetoric of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), its social-cultural milieu, and its historical antecedents with the use of literary and linguistic analysis. She argues that the discourse on OCD remains one of ‘otherness, of detachment, of seeing the person living with OCD as different from oneself’ (p. 23). This otherness, which may be the result of social mechanisms and the perception as well as the medicalisation and pharmaceuticalisation of mental illness, challenges not only diagnosis and

adequate, custom treatment, but also—and perhaps most importantly—inclusion and a sense of belonging.

By examining OCD as a social phenomenon rather than a disorder, Friedrich suggests, similar to insights from Disability Studies, that we can come to realise that “‘difference exists, that it may not be possible to suppress it, and, more importantly still, that it might not be ‘right’ (i.e., ethical, respectful, kind, just) to try to repress it’ (p. 25). It should be emphasised, however, that considering OCD a social phenomenon does not deny the difficulties that may come with it. Friedrich’s departure from a social account allows her to address the topic of representation in literature and its ability to convey through e.g., visual and verbal expression that which is otherwise difficult to explain. As such, she aims to add a social dimension to a phenomenon that remains to this day predominantly studied from a medical point of view, which contributes to the construction of so-called ‘sufferers’ of OCD or, similarly, any other (develop)mental difference as ‘deficient and disabled, as opposed to alternatively gifted and able’ (p. 26).

The work consists of several chapters, each dealing with a specific topic such as the power of discourse, the misappropriation of OCD for humour, and a chapter titled *Not ‘Just’ a Story*. Here, Friedrich investigates the literary representation of OCD in works such as *David Copperfield* and *Macbeth* among some lesser-known titles. She departs from the novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s concept of ‘single story’ to call for the representation of ‘the richness and diversity of human experience’ (p. 147), which a single story fails to portray. A frequently featured narrative of OCD concerns a character that ‘becomes consumed with [...] the pursuit of a particular goal’ after a financial or emotional blow (p. 148). Contrastingly, Friedrich advocates for a reinterpretation of OCD to make sense of and bring meaning to the experience and ‘overwhelming feelings of doubt, guilt, and lack of control that often accompany it’ (p. 149).

However, Friedrich warns for the side-effect of downplaying the significant role that OCD or other (develop)mental differences may play throughout people’s lives. In this context, she asks a question that seems most important to me while doing research in this field: how does one convey that OCs (people affected by OCD), and by extension all (develop)mentally different or neurodivergent people, are just like everyone else, without making their challenges disappear from the collective consciousness? One way of achieving this might be (highlighting) the natural portrayal of neurodivergence as ‘part of a bigger picture in which different emotions, experiences, and people circulate’ (p. 166). According to Friedrich, literature can be of help here because it functions as the ultimate means to insert neurodivergence into the fabric of everyday life.

Answering Friedrich’s call for a reinterpretation of OCD and, I add, other (develop)mental differences, I attempt to access the first-person experience of such differences by studying alternative patterns of language, style, and narrativity in literary texts through the lens of neurodiversity. In essence, this view holds the idea that disease-based labels such as Autism Spectrum *Disorder*, AD(H)D (*Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*), and dyslexia (or in German: reading-and-writing-*weakness*) should not be understood as disorders, but as a wide neurobiological diversity parallel to e.g., biodiversity and gender diversity. In my research, I put forward the hypothesis that through literary analysis, neurodiversity can be shown to manifest as an extremely rich perceptiveness or acuity of the senses and thus involves a heightened form of empathy rather than the nowadays prevailing pathology.

In a similar spirit to Friedrich’s, the internationally renowned South-African author Antjie Krog emphasised the importance of empathy through literature during her inaugural speech on October 5th 2021 at the dawn of her writer’s residence at Ghent University: ‘I shudder at the thought that enormous power is given or grabbed by people who never lived the life-changing experience of becoming somebody or something else through literature, who [have] never had [their] egotistic, vain, self-sufficient, closed-off self-broadened into a fuller humanity [through reading]. [...] Becoming humane is best achieved through literature. Literature assists

us to listen along the many joints of this world.’¹ Empathy with the first-person experience of neurodiversity expressed in literary works may expand and elucidate fictional issues, which represent real-life topics ‘that we had not thought of before reading these narratives’ (p. 182). Without forgetting the individual nature of (develop)mental differences and their implications, sharing experiences with the characters might lead us to extrapolate those experiences as our own, and may ultimately help establish the connection that our hyper-connected world, paradoxically, all too often lacks.

Liselotte Van der Gucht

Liselotte Van der Gucht studies English and German Linguistics and Literature at Ghent University and at the University of Bayreuth. She is currently doing a PhD research on neurodiversity in 20th-century German and Austrian literature (FWO grant number: 1128122N). She mainly focuses on alternative patterns of language, style, and narrativity through the lens of neurophenomenology.

3

Manion, J. (2020). *Female husbands: A trans history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

With *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (2020), the American historian Jen Manion investigates the historical constructions of gender and sexuality by focusing on the changing meaning of a particular category of gender-crossers. The title, *Female Husbands*, refers to people who lived in the UK and US between the mid-18th century and World War I, and who ‘transed’ the female gender they were assigned at birth, by taking up life as a man and by marrying a woman. By studying a diversity of source materials, such as UK and US newspaper articles, novels, and police reports, Manion aims to chart the various, dynamic representations of these historical figures. While the subtitle might suggest an interpretation of ‘female husbands’ as a transgender identity category, the book itself understands gender as a dynamic, performative act rather than a fixed identity. Instead of calling the husbands ‘trans’, Manion transforms the term into an active verb, following Susan Stryker’s (2017) definition of ‘transing’ as any movement away from the gender one was assigned at birth.² As a result, Manion is able to overcome the cultural and historical specificities of contemporary terminology.

For female husbands themselves, the ‘transing’ of gender can have various and multiple motivations, ranging from a personal identification with a certain gender, to economic reasons, gaining greater geographic mobility, or the wish to marry a female partner. In Manion’s view, however, the search for individual feelings or motivations is a futile effort. More interesting to her are the perceptions of others, as these offer us insight into historical discourses on gender boundaries. Striking are the various interpretations made of these people’s lives throughout history. For instance, the life of ‘female husband’ James Howe was subsequently read as an

¹ Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte UGent. (2021, October 5). *‘Inaugural Lecture Writer in Residence: Without literature a university turns out barbarians’*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yn95PrO3Wgg&t=3060s&ab_channel=FaculteitLetterenenWijsbegeerteUGent

² Stryker, S. (2017). *Transgender history: The roots of today’s revolution* (2nd ed.). New York: Basic Books.

example to promote respectable manhood in marriage in eighteenth century UK, a heroic tale of hard work and personal advancement in the early US republic, while the upcoming sexology discourse in the late nineteenth century re-interpreted Howe as a fraud hiding their so-called ‘true sex’.

In my own research on transgender narratives in modern and contemporary Dutch literary fiction, I give a similar overview of ways in which ‘transing’ characters are interpreted throughout different time periods and in changing discursive contexts. The characters in the work of Andreas Burnier, for example, were originally perceived as subversive, feminist gender-crossers, and they now tend to be reimagined as trans characters, whose ‘gender trouble’ has more to do with personal identification. Manion’s monograph makes clear that constructions of gender and sexuality and social categories in general become visible at the crossing of boundaries. As such, a focus on historical figures as ‘female husbands’ can encourage critical reflection on the gendered norms we implicitly attach to legal, social and economic institutions such as marriage. In my view, the book urges us to ask the following question: In which situations does the crossing of gender provoke debate in the here and now? In countries where same-sex marriage has become legal in the last decades, marriage no longer seems a primary locus where binary genders are necessarily stabilised. Instead, debates on gendered bathrooms, intersex people competing in sports, access to trans health care, or the assignment of legal gender might tell us more about current ethical debates on the organization of gender relations. Manion’s contribution to trans history is not providing evidence that there have always been people who ‘transed’ gender but highlighting the different contested terrains for gender stabilization throughout the ages. As such, the study demonstrates that histories of gender variance are not only important for trans or queer studies scholars, but for anyone working on ever-changing meanings and functions of gender relations.

Sven Van den Bossche

Sven Van den Bossche (he/him) is a PhD researcher at the University of Antwerp and Ghent University, working on the intersections of literary studies, (trans)gender studies and queer studies. His FWO-funded project is called “Born in the Wrong Story: An Embodied Approach to Transgender Narratives in Dutch Literary Fiction” and investigates how various transgender identities, trajectories and experiences can be rendered visible through literary techniques, such as metaphors, temporal ordering and narrative voice.

4

Cooke, J. (2020). *Contemporary Feminist Life-writing: The New Audacity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

In her recent monograph, *Contemporary Feminist Life-writing*, Jennifer Cooke takes up the task of thinking together a variety of seemingly very different literary texts – novels, non-fiction texts, memoirs - all labelled as ‘feminist life-writing’. She identifies what she calls a ‘new audacity’ (p. 3) in the way female and queer authors use autobiographical material in literary works today. As Cooke convincingly shows, the politics of autobiographical writing are a feminist concern: the ways in which authorship and textual authority are defined often rely on the erasure of female authorship. Autobiographical texts written by women have long been considered as merely personal or confessional as opposed to the self-evident universality of philosophical and literary

texts written by men. Although writing the self through autobiography might be a feminist concern, it would be a misunderstanding to think that it is a writing practice exclusive to women. Among many others, thinkers like Kierkegaard, Rousseau, and Roland Barthes use personal material in their philosophy but somehow their texts are unblemished by accusations of being gossipy, intimate, or simply too personal.

Informed by the feminist catchphrase ‘the personal is political’ 1970s feminists started reclaiming confessional literature as a feminist praxis – think of the personal-theoretical work of Kate Millet or the poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Cooke’s analysis of confessional literature reveals how both the appreciation and neglect of autobiography relies on the reader’s belief in honesty and authenticity. Cooke shows how speaking about ‘ugly feelings’, such as envy among women or humiliating life events, affirm the (literary) value of telling life-stories: ‘from the genre’s inception with Saint Augustine’s Confessions [AD 400] in which he admits to thieving fruit as a child, the ugly act has been a key signifier of the autobiographer’s honesty and authenticity, assuring readers that their narrator is confessing all, the bad alongside the good.’ (p. 66) An interesting contemporary case is Chris Kraus’ cult novel *I Love Dick* (1997) in which the author submits herself to a romantic obsession to the extent that the reader is inclined to think of the desperate author-narrator as pathetic, which must make the story ‘true’. Why else would an author give the protagonist her own name and debase herself like that? Cooke usefully terms this literary technique the ‘performance of a texts’s own perversity’ – a powerful and ambivalent exaggeration of womanhood.

For Cooke, the audacity of recent feminist life-writing emerges from a rejection of being silenced. She names the French writer Virginie Despentes as a crucial example of speaking out. Despentes’ novel *Baise-Moi* (translated as *Rape me*) is a ‘phenomenology of rape’ (p. 48) which in Cooke’s analysis produces a feminist politics through affective impact on the reader. As a doctoral researcher working on the ‘fake autobiography’ of the American author Kathy Acker, I am interested in the feminist politics of autobiography and how sexuality destabilizes identity in the text. My research scrutinizes the instability of the self in literary form and thus also the instability of gender positions. Kathy Acker’s use of ‘autoplagerism’ in the 1970s must be considered as an important precursor to contemporary autofictional and autotheoretical tendencies. Acker often fictionalized herself as ‘Kathy’ but also consistently rejected the idea that autobiography signifies authenticity. Acker’s texts refuse the distinction between a fictional and a real ‘I’ as they are both narrated selves. In an interview she explained: ‘when I placed “true” autobiography next to “false” autobiography everything was real.’ (1991, p. 7) For Acker, there is no true self behind or preceding the fiction.

Considering autobiographical writing as feminist praxis then, we must challenge the authenticity of the autobiographical ‘I’ and accept the ambivalence of the feminist position in autobiographical genres. Jennifer Cooke’s monograph usefully points towards the ways in which contemporary works of feminist life-writing transgress stable positions of both woman and the autobiographical genre. Recognizing this ‘new audacity’ in contemporary life-writing shows how questioning the category of woman is intertwined with an interrogation of the genre of autobiography. In so doing, Cooke’s book reminds us of that fundamental issue literary studies will never be done with: How every conception of the self is not only inscribed by ideology but also, crucially, by (literary) form and how different forms of narration allow for the formation of a (feminist) subject.

Tessel Veneboer

Tessel Veneboer is a doctoral student in the English department at Ghent University. Her PhD research “The queer potential of fragmentation: sexuality and identity in the work of Kathy Acker” (2020-2024) is funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO).

5

Chiang, H. and Wong, A.K. (Eds.) (2021). *Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies (2021), a new collection of different essays edited by Chiang and Wong, is the welcome follow-up work of *Queer Sinophone Cultures* (2017), a volume edited by Chiang and Heinrich. Together these two edited volumes lay out the fundamentals for what is now called Queer Sinophone studies. In an earlier review, Yahia Ma (2021) already summarised the status of both these books:

If *Queer Sinophone Cultures* co-edited by Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich imaginatively advanced Sinophone studies and queer studies by expansively encompassing the minoritized Sinophone world, *Keywords* attempts to reclaim the field of queer Sinophone studies and reconceptualise the transdisciplinary, transnational, transcultural conflux and kinship between queerness and Sinophone studies.³

Furthermore, we could also interpret the collection as a first answer to a call raised in “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition” (2004), an article of Shu-mei Shih, to explicitly widen the scope for Chinese Studies beyond the standard centred view on the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and to include minority groups spread over the world. As Alvin Wong explains in the chapter on Postcoloniality, this includes ‘the visibility of South-South, minor-to-minor, and transnational articulations [of queer desire]’ (p. 62). This attention to minority groups is also present in Nathan H. Madson’s chapter on Activism. He points out how the divide between expatriates, among others, and local Cantonese speakers automatically excludes and renders invisible a large group of ‘ethnic minorities, recent migrants from mainland China or Taiwan, and domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines’ (p. 206). He shows the necessity of breaking open the concept of ‘locality’ and look at all different queer communities within Hong Kong, not just those who are visible in mainstream media.

For an upcoming scholar and PhD student interested in the field of Queer Sinophone Studies, *Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies* and its prequel have become of indispensable value. Different keywords are summed and further elaborated upon through the work’s collection of different essays. The topics range from ‘postcoloniality’ to ‘ethnicity’ to ‘fandom’ and ‘activism’. The aim of *Keywords* is to solidify the relation between queer theory and Sinophone studies, as they both challenge ‘the doxa and hegemony of binary thinking, essentialism, and disciplinarity’ (p. 3). When it comes down to queerness, the authors constantly re-emphasise that this is not only a matter of the LGBTQIA+ community, but that this needs to be ‘understood as inclusive of any practices or identities that deviate from the linear trajectory of normative social practices’ (Shernuk, p. 91).

³ Ma, Yahia (2021). Book review: “Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies.” *Intersections*, 24.

In my own research, I am particularly interested in Hong Kong activism and its visual culture. As Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region in China and, following the handover from British colonial powers to China, a postcolonial area, it is crucial to note how *Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies* moves away from the typical China-centric stand (as demonstrated by Alvin Wong) towards a more 'subversive geopolitical [...] region situated at the intersections of British postcolonialism and the PRC's growing global dominance' (Howard Chiang, p. 221). Hong Kong is a very atypical example of postcolonialism, and I would like to argue that its position goes beyond 'a culture of disappearance' as phrased by Ackbar Abbas in *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (1997). Looking at Hong Kong from a transnational perspective has the potential to create new methods, queer methods, of analysis and make new relations between different regions, such as the South-South connections between Hong Kong and Argentina, as shown in Wong Kar Wai's film *Happy Together* (1997).

In the case of my research on Hong Kong activism and visual culture, this can be applied to the creation of zines and the way they're instrumental to building a community that goes beyond the exclusion of queer people. By making use of similar minor transnational relations, it is possible to link activism in Hong Kong to other areas such as Thailand, Myanmar, and even the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Here, I look at the parallel spaces between activist and queer communities when it comes down to writing zines, as there are often overlapping topics. I also look at the other side and how there are sometimes no intersections, as is the case in a lot of Hong Kong cultural production.

It is clear that *Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies* is of great importance for my own research, but the book also holds a ground-breaking position within the larger field of Chinese studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies. The collection is a critical reading of different media (i.e. books, films and legal studies), it introduces new conceptualisations and approaches. Alongside this, *Keywords* is of essential importance for anyone working in the domains of postcolonial studies or queer studies, as it offers research from a too often neglected field.

Kika W. L. Van Robays

Kika W. L. Van Robays holds a Master in Eastern Languages and Cultures (Ghent University) and a Master in Gender and Diversity (Interuniversity Belgium). She is currently a PhD Fellow at the department of Cultural Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and is looking into the interrelations of cultural production, in particular zines, at the intersection of activism and queer communities. Her research interests are in the field of sinology, gender studies, queer studies, media studies, and queer sinophone studies.