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## What are you reading?

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**Reviews by:**

Emma Verhoeven, Nele Buyst, Sara Atwater, Daan Kenis, Joke Struyf, Lisanne Meinen, Isabel Walters, Sigrid Wallaert

**1**

**Nash, C. J. and Browne, K. (2020). *Heteroactivism: Resisting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Rights and Equalities*. London: Bloomsbury.**

In their book *Heteroactivism*, Catherine Jean Nash and Kath Browne offer a new framework to interpret resistances to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)<sup>1</sup> equalities. Heteroactivism is described as ‘both an ideology and a form of activism that seeks to reassert heteronormative understandings of home, family, and society, and is opposed to the perceived [...] impact of the unwanted gains in sexual and gender politics’ (p.8). The book illustrates how homophobic and transphobic rhetoric have been adapted and disguised to survive in contexts where blatant attacks on LGBT equalities are not tolerated, whether socially or legally. For instance, rather than explicitly stating that homosexuality is immoral, heteroactivists assert that heterosexuality is the golden standard. Nash and Browne identify and illustrate the mechanisms of heteroactivism through transnational analyses of networks that oppose said equalities in the UK, Ireland, and Canada based on media publications and fieldwork. The book is theoretically rooted in geography and is divided into five chapters that each represent a site of heteroactivist struggle: same-sex marriage, schools, transgender equalities, freedom of speech in universities, and the public inclusion of LGBT equalities.

Nash and Browne illustrate the connection between different elements of resistance against LGBT equalities and how these elements are inserted in (media) discourse. The authors emphasise that heteroactivism is not universally applicable, and actively invite researchers to rethink the concept in relation to its (national) context. An evident example is the resistance to same-sex marriage, which was legalised in Canada in 2005. Canadian heteroactivists opposing the bill focused their argument on the well-being of children that was supposedly threatened by same-sex marriage. In the decade following Canada’s legal milestone, British and Irish heteroactivists adopted a similar stance but their main argument stated that since same-sex

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<sup>1</sup> The authors use LGBT as these are the main groups targeted by heteroactivist organisations, who do not mention ‘queer’ or ‘intersex’.

couples could have a civil partnership, marriage did not need to be redefined. An important strategy that the authors found in all countries is the understanding of LGBT rights and existence as ‘ideological’ and depicting sex and gender as natural, biologically certain, and truthful. Consequently, ‘the possible existence of gender-variant individuals is based on “a lie” demonstrated by an apparent lack of scientific research, and on suspect ideologies driven by political activism’ (p. 121).

*Heteroactivism* offers an interdisciplinary interpretation that is highly useful for scholars and activists to better understand – and oppose – broadly applied tactics of resistance against LGBT equalities. Many of the discussed elements are applicable to the Flemish context I am currently studying. The authors conceptualise many of the frictions that are omnipresent in the Flemish (mediated) debate about LGBT equalities, which forms the context of my research project. For example, Nash and Browne critically engage with discussions about the appropriateness of education on same-sex and transgender themes for minors, as well as the moral panic invoked by such supposed threats as ‘woke cancel culture’, ‘indoctrination’ or ‘cultural Marxism’ regarding LGBT equalities. Although all these elements appear in my research, my main theoretical focus is on homonationalism, i.e., the entanglement of normative tolerance of homosexuality and nationalism<sup>2</sup> (Puar, 2007). Homonationalism depicts Muslims as homogenized ‘homophobic others’ that are contrasted with a supposedly gay-friendly in-group. I found it particularly enlightening how Nash and Browne describe the ongoing racialisation of homophobia, although it is not a central part in their analysis. The driving forces of heteroactivism identified by the authors are mainly white Christians who actively maintain the image of racialised ‘homophobic others’ by amplifying voices opposing LGBT equalities in, for example, Muslim-majority schools. Simultaneously, heteroactivists argue that homosexuality should not be ‘promoted’ so as not to ‘provoke’ Muslims. As a result, LGBT-friendliness is reinforced as a (secular) British, Irish, and Canadian value, despite white Christians being the ones that campaign against LGBT equalities. The framework of heteroactivism allows us to better understand how Islamophobia is propagated by amplifying Muslim LGBT-phobic voices, which, in turn, strengthens the homonationalist image of Muslims as ‘homophobic others’.

*Emma Verhoeven*

**Emma Verhoeven** is a PhD candidate in Communication Studies at the University of Antwerp. They obtained a MA in Journalism from KU Leuven and a MA in Communication Studies from UAntwerp. They are currently working on a project on LGBTI equalities and homonationalism, investigating how certain groups and nations are homogeneously represented as ‘homophobic others’ in Flemish news media.

## 2

**Kimmerer, R. W. ([2013] 2020). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. London: Penguin Books.**

When introducing herself, author Robin Wall Kimmerer calls herself a mother first, then a scientist, a decorated professor, and an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. The

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<sup>2</sup> See also: Puar, J. (2007). *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822390442>.

chosen words and their order are significant for how she alters a commonly accepted hierarchy in knowledge; weaving indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants together. *Braiding Sweetgrass* is simultaneously the author's transmission of ecological and botanical knowledge, a memoir of both her Potawatomi family and her personal history as impacted by the colonization of North America, and a rehabilitation of ways of knowing beyond science. With its claim for monopoly on knowledge, mainstream Western science has become part of a political strategy of oppression of marginalized groups. Even dissent must fit into the tight uniform of scientific thinking and technical writing that is required of the academy.

With this book Kimmerer aims to challenge the assumption that 'science has cornered the market on truth' (p. 160), while also opening the discussion to include other types of knowledge.

In the chapter "Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass", Kimmerer offers an account of her graduate student Laurie's research project on the traditional harvesting methods of sweetgrass. Although Kimmerer expresses her difficulties to force traditional knowledge in the standardized form of academic writing ('there is a barrier of language and meaning', p. 158), she accepts the challenge, knowing that 'to be heard, you must speak the language of the one you want to listen' (ibidem). She structures the chapter according to the required academic format (including Introduction, Literature Review, Hypothesis, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusions, Acknowledgements, and References Cited) to illustrate the contrast between the language of traditional knowledge and the language of science. This playful formal intervention shows where science is limited and how traditional knowledge is difficult to fit into the presupposed frame. It also offers us a view on 'variables' that are difficult or even impossible to measure: 'If we use a plant respectfully, it will flourish. If we ignore it, it will go away. This is a theory generated from millennia of observations of plant response to harvest, subject to peer review by generations of practitioners, from basket makers to herbalists' (p. 159) She goes on by stating: 'I envision a time when the intellectual monoculture of science will be replaced with a polyculture of complementary knowledge' (p. 138).

When Kimmerer chose to go to college, she had vacillated between training as a botanist or as a poet. Since everyone told her she could not do both, she chose botany. But the questions she asks herself as a botanist are dismissed by the first scientific scholars she meets: 'Why do asters and goldenrod stand side by side when they could grow alone? Why this particular pair? What is the source of this pattern? Why is the world so beautiful?' (p. 41). As a young student, at the rejection of her thoughts, she had accepted her thinking as a failure, 'not having the words for resistance' (p. 41). When she grew older, she saw the parallel between what had happened then and what had happened to her grandfather, when he was ordered to leave his home, language, culture, and family behind. The professor made her doubt where she came from, what she knew, and claimed that his was the right way to think. To walk the path of science she stepped off the path of indigenous knowledge. Then, as a young PhD student, she was invited to a small gathering of Native elders, to talk about traditional knowledge of plants. Hearing a Navajo woman - without an hour of university botany training - speaking for hours about the plants in her valley, and of beauty, reminded her of the knowledge she had as a child, growing up between fields of strawberries. When she later on gained faith in her own capacities as an ecologist and started to teach her own students, she noticed that her classes became much more interesting and engaging when she not just taught by heart, but instead took her students outside to listen to the lessons of plants—who are, according to Potawatomi tradition, our oldest teachers.

Kimmerer turns to the culture of her family, and learns from native scholar Greg Cajete that 'in indigenous ways of knowing, we understand a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion and spirit' (p. 44). The attitude she wishes to install in her daughters, students, and readers goes by several names, among which 'respect' and

'gratitude'. When taken up by a community, this attitude might become an antidote for the dominant capitalist mode of being: 'The words (of Thanksgiving) are simple, but in the art of their joining, they become a statement of sovereignty, a political structure, a Bill of Responsibilities, an educational model, a family tree, and a scientific inventory of ecosystem services. It is a powerful political document, a social contract, a way of being – all in one piece' (p. 115).

The way Kimmerer emphasizes the validity and importance of different types of knowledge while simultaneously looking for different ways of knowing and engaging with the world, appeals to me as a fresh PhD student in her late thirties, with almost no academic background and a writing practice that is more poetic than scientific. To me, poetry has proven to be a subversive play with rules, hierarchies, and perspectives, which overall has an empowering effect and allows us to question the status-quo. I am curious to learn whether my intuitive way of working, i.e., putting concepts and ideas from different domains or contexts next to one another to see how this highlights the interconnectedness of fragmented facts, is valid in an academic context. It is a strategy that I know works in poetry, and I am curious to find out whether it can work in science too. Kimmerer seems to think that it does: 'I don't fully comprehend prophecy and its relation to history. But I know that metaphor is a way of telling truth far greater than scientific data' (p. 368). During my PhD, I will be working on stories of repair for a community of multispecies. I am interested in the connection between mental health and the act of ecological restoration. At one point during my research, I hope to go outside and engage in ecological restoration with people who are vulnerable in terms of mental health, to see how both people and their surroundings transform. I would like to know if this transformation goes beyond its participants. Kimmerer's book offers arguments in favor of taking this turn in research:

'We need acts of restoration, not only for polluted waters and degraded lands, but also for our relationship to the world. We need to restore honor to the way we live, so that when we walk through the world we don't have to avert our eyes with shame, so that we can hold our heads up high and receive the respectful acknowledgement of the rest of the earth's beings' (p. 195).

Sweetgrass is a traditional gift in the native culture. It is difficult to cultivate and cannot be sold, one must receive it as a gift and pass it on. The more a gift is passed on, the more valuable it gets. An interesting fact is that *Braiding Sweetgrass* has fully lived up to its expectations, passing on its knowledge millions of times. First published in 2013 by Milkweed Editions, the book reached millions of readers in the United States, and was reissued in 2020 by Penguin Books, to become an international bestseller. As Milkweed Editions' website mentions: 'Judging by the thousands of fan comments the author and the press have received, this exposure has led to countless wild places preserved, activists created, and minds forever expanded.' I plan to pass on my copy as soon as this review is completed.

*Nele Buyst*

**Nele Buyst** is a PhD student in the department of Philosophy at the University of Antwerp. Her research on stories of repair for a community of multispecies is funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO). She is the author of two poetry collections (*Regels*, Poëziecentrum, 2020 and *Corps, poreus*, to be published at het balanseer in 2023). In 2022-2023 she work as a guest writer for *nY*, and she writes monthly letters for *rekto:verso*.

3

**Willet, C. and Willet J. (2019). *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.**

*Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth* by the Willet sisters, Cynthia and Julie, is the first book setting forth a truly comprehensive feminist philosophy of humour. Punctuated with examples from American stand-up, social movements such as Me Too and the lesser known SlutWalk, music, and other forms of media, this work makes huge strides in toppling dominant theories of humour which have rested on normative gender ideologies for far too long. The guiding principle of the scholars is that humour can be a vehicle for solidaric empathy and emotional connection between feminists and other minoritised groups, as well as non-humans.

It is no surprise to those familiar with the canonical literature on humour theory, that the Willet sisters begin their book on feminist and subversive humour by, as the title of their first title suggests, ‘Revamping the Four Major Theories on Humour’ (p. 7). This is because the four major viewpoints – superiority, relief, incongruity, and social play theories – which have dominated the way humour is characterised across disciplines, have isolated humour’s cognitive, physical, and emotional aspects to understand its affective impact. The Willet sisters argue an alternative, holistic theory of humour which sees human subjects (and other species) as embodied beings whose viscerally felt emotions bring together the gut and the brain in ways that challenge the mind-body binary.

Willet and Willet begin by looking at superiority theories of humour which dominated scholarly discussions around humour until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Terry Eagleton (2019) explains the basic sense of this theory as the ‘gratifying sense of the frailty, obtuseness, or absurdity of one’s fellow beings’ (p. 36).<sup>3</sup> In other words, superiority theories of humour claim laughter stems from putting-down the object of humour and feeling superior to another or oneself in a former state. The Willet sisters update this theory, looking at it in the context of abusive free speech which has allowed ‘evil speaking from charged slurs to outright racist, misogynist and sacrilegious jokes’ (p. 7) while ignoring power dynamics. They point a much-needed finger at satirists and comics who revere creating laughter over all other forms of human interaction or the preservation of minoritised groups their dignity. One of the central criticisms of *Uproarious* made by feminist scholars is that it overemphasises humour’s solidaric function which can obfuscate continuing oppression and the role of democratic groups that seek to engage in conflict to expose inequalities within existing political orders. However, one of the central goals of the work is to highlight the dynamics, and its updated take on superiority theory clarifies how these humour dynamics can be abusive shows of power.

One of the most important concepts that the Willet sisters define is their characterisation of what they call ‘belly laughter’. Belly laughter expands on notions of comic relief, like those found in so-called relief theory, but with the added insight that: ‘Humour may on occasion be just a cerebral moment, but the belly laugh, like a table-pounding orgasm, offers relief that is hard to ignore’ (p. 109). Their critique of the incongruity theory and its tradition of depicting humour as a rational, disembodied practice is also implied in this concept of ‘belly laughter’, as they highlight the bodily contractions which accompany laughter, its physiological and regulative functions. This, they argue, enhances our feeling of connection with others but also strengthens our sense of agency. It is these factors of the humour process, they add, that can help us articulate

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<sup>3</sup> Eagleton, T. (2019). *Humour*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Marvin, A. (2022). Feminist Philosophy of Humor. *Philosophy Compass*, 17(7). <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12858>.

and deconstruct how the female body has been depicted as inferior from ancient philosophy until now in popular culture.

*Uproarious* has been an essential reading for my research project, which is part of a European-funded PhD project examining borders in Europe. As my research group is focused on examining borders, my initial study was designed as cross-cultural ethnography comparing women's ludic carnival activities in the former mining areas of Dutch Limburg, where it is a significant cultural practice, and women's cabaret performances in nearby post-industrial Germany, the Ruhr Area. However, as the study progressed (and COVID-19 caused many of these performances and activities to be cancelled or postponed), the study's understanding of borders shifted from national and geopolitical to symbolic and social boundary making, largely focused on community cabaret practices in the Ruhr Valley. Nonetheless, my central research question remains: 'How do women's humorous cultural performances simultaneously construct, reframe and challenge social hierarchies in communities that have been historically defined by male-dominated labor?' Similar to the thesis that the Willet sisters propose in *Uproarious*, my question hypothesizes that feminist humour works dynamically across malleable national, regional and social borders, capable of forming new strains of solidarity amongst diverse ethnic and socio-economic groups. Of course, because of the areas where I have conducted my fieldwork, my question focuses on the dominance of particular forms of working-class masculinity in local cultural practices and how women use the linguistic and multimodal tools they have at their disposal to reinvent their roles in these post-industrial communities. One of the limitations of Willet and Willet's work for my study has been its use of English-speaking and primarily American sources. However, there is a large and ever-growing number of feminist and minority scholars looking at humour in European contexts.

*Sara Atwater*

**Sara Atwater** completed a BA from the University of California, Berkley in English and German Studies. Her Master's thesis at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom focused on children's humour acquisition. She currently lives in Belgium and is a PhD candidate at the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands. Her PhD focuses on humour and performance, and employs qualitative and ethnographic methods to look at how women's cabaret in the post-industrial Ruhr Area of Germany reinvents the region's industrial past. The research is part of a larger project, LIMES, which is centred on the theme of 'The Hardening and Softening of Borders: Europe in a Globalising World'. This programme received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (<https://limes.maastrichtuniversity.nl/>).

#### 4

**Carel, H. ([2008] 2019). *Illness: The Cry of the Flesh*. New York: Routledge.**

As Susan Sontag famously observed in her essay *Illness as Metaphor* (1978)<sup>4</sup>, we are born dual citizens – inhabitants of both the kingdom of the sick and the well. Although we generally prefer to reside among our healthy compatriots, sooner or later, we are all expected to take up residence among the ill. Despite its ubiquity, the experience of illness remains largely unexplored in

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<sup>4</sup> Sontag, S. (1978). *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

biomedical science and philosophy alike. In *Illness: Cry of the Flesh* ([2008] 2019)<sup>5</sup>, philosopher Havi Carel reflects upon this gap and its ethical implications as she explores the phenomenology of illness. *Illness* is no mere philosophical treatise, however. Rather than adopting the detached viewpoint of the armchair, Carel recounts her personal journey with Lymphangiomyomatosis (LAM), a chronic, progressive, and (in 2008) incurable lung affliction. By interweaving philosophy and life writing, *Illness* reads as a much-needed effort to reinstate the value of the first-personal in (medical) science and philosophy and, perhaps more importantly, offers an attempt to render medicine ‘a genuinely human science, where each term illuminates the other’ (p. 54).

In the opening chapters of *Illness*, Carel uses her own experience with being ill to critically bear upon contemporary debates within philosophy of medicine. Naturalism, the dominant and highly influential position on disease ontology, takes disease to consist of biological dysfunction. According to a naturalist account, someone is diseased when a specific internal biological mechanism fails to perform in a function-typical way. For instance, in this view the label of Type-1 diabetes refers to an objective biological malfunction, i.e., a pancreatic failure to produce functional insulin. Needless to say, naturalism’s influence extends far past philosophical arguments as it has taken hold of both clinical medicine and the social imaginary.

Critical of this reductionist view, Carel asks: ‘So having the flu, for example, would mean having a fever, an inflamed throat, and a runny nose [...] These facts can be seen by any observer [...] but is this a satisfying account of illness?’ (p. 13). Far from it, as Carel argues, ‘because the ill person also *feels* awful’ (ibidem). What illness *is*, is not entirely reducible to bodily dysfunction. Biology can tell us very little about how it *feels* to be diabetic. Rather than discounting the undeniable merits of biomedical science, Carel insists on augmenting the naturalist account by forefronting illness’s fundamentally experiential, existential, and axiological nature.

*Illness* thoroughly examines the basic structure of illness. Drawing on phenomenology, i.e., the philosophical study of pre-reflexive experience, Carel disentangles the fundamental dimensions of being ill in present-day Western society. Crucially, she defends a relational account of illness by stressing the interaction of body and environment. Carel suggests that illness transforms the whole of one’s being-in-the-world. While the body obviously features centrally in illness as it becomes a source of pain, alienation, or even betrayal, Carel takes chronic illness to extend equally beyond epidermic confines. Illness reshapes the ill-person’s engagement with the world. Through narrating her own struggle with breathlessness, Carel reveals how LAM remodeled both her geographical and social landscape: walking distance, for instance, became an insurmountable journey (p. 44), a flight of stairs something to be avoided (p. 43), and an oxygen canister an awkward conversation piece (p. 92-93). Despite the negativity pervading her story, Carel’s relational account of illness also leaves room for the surprisingly good – for *health within illness*. As the lived body creatively adapts to its transformed worldly orientation, many patients report the possibility of a new meaningful relationship to emerge (p. 96) – enabling a good life in illness.

Beyond mere philosophical dispute, Carel’s phenomenological account of illness elucidates the *moral* misgivings of an exclusively naturalistic medicine. Echoing her own experiences and decades of patient testimony, Carel suggests that the naturalist commitments of

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<sup>5</sup> In the preface to the 2019 edition, Carel looks back upon her work and life since the original release of *Illness*. She discusses how the book has ventured far beyond academic philosophy as it garnered uptake in medical, policy and patient circles. Moreover, since 2008 a treatment for LAM has been identified to which Carel responded well, stabilizing her condition.



contemporary healthcare have led practitioners to treat the disease over the ill person. As (chronic) illness is primarily approached as a physiological problem to be fixed, its existential dimensions – knowledge of which mainly resides with the patient – remain largely unaddressed. Relatedly, by representing disease as observable, measurable, and quantifiable – wholly within the epistemic domain of biomedical science – medicine effectively renders the ill person silent.

Carel's emphasis on the ontological and epistemic import of first-person experience in illness is instructive for my own PhD research in feminist epistemology and precision medicine – a novel data-driven approach to medical research and care. Precision medicine, in its effort to include the patient's environment and 'lifestyle' in traditionally molecular assessments of health and disease, aims to provide holistic and person-centered healthcare. I take Carel's account of the co-constitutive nature of experience to illness to be of interest here in two ways. First, it indicates that, despite its holistic intentions, precision medicine curtails a fundamental aspect of illness when it fails to account for the irreducibility and inaccessibility of the axiological, social, and existential dimensions of illness experience. Second, in both form and content, *Illness* reestablishes the epistemic primacy of the first-personal in medicine. Evoking standpoint epistemology, Carel highlights the epistemic privilege of patients in a field where their knowledge and experiences have increasingly been left out. *Illness* shows that including patient experiences, narratives, and testimonies is not merely morally desirable but an epistemic necessity for genuinely person-centered healthcare practices.

*Illness: The Cry of the Flesh* is, in many respects, an important contribution. In entwining her narrative with phenomenology, Carel counters scientific and philosophical tendencies to discount first-personal testimonies on anecdotal grounds. Moreover, *Illness* shows that thinking from the lives of 'others,' *in casu* those chronically ill or disabled, can be epistemically illuminating. Although many of these themes have received ample attention in disciplines such as disability studies, cultural studies, and literary studies with a focus on life writing (references to which are notably absent in Carel's publication), *Illness* demonstrates the philosophical value of engaging with non-normative embodiment. In so doing, Carel powerfully shows how theory and practice – ontology, epistemology, and ethics – profoundly intertwine. She reminds us that how we think about illness is bound up with how act on it – a lesson ever more pressing as precision medicine envisions medicine to become an even *harder* science.

*Daan Kenis*

**Daan Kenis** is a pharmacist and philosopher. Currently, he is working on a PhD project at the University of Antwerp. His research 'Precision medicine from the margins: a standpoint-epistemological exploration of a new paradigm in medicine' is funded by Research Foundation Flanders (FWO, 1112423N).

5

**Limburg, J. (2021). *Letters to my Weird Sisters: On Autism, Feminism and Motherhood*. Bloomsbury: Atlantic Books.**

In *Letters to my Weird Sisters*, British author and poet Joanne Limburg writes letters to Virginia Woolf, Adelheid Bloch, Frau V and Katharina Kepler—all women who were judged during their lives because their behaviour made others uncomfortable. While she writes to them, Limburg investigates the connection she feels with these women. Starting from personal observations and

questions, she develops deeper analyses of issues regarding autism, motherhood, and feminism. Although she links her recognition mostly to her (late) autism diagnosis, the work is just as much about ‘unwomanliness’. Limburg demonstrates how unwomanliness and its accompanying dehumanization play a role in both ableism and normative motherhood. Limburg explicitly positions herself within an intersectional feminist framework (p. 10). Since I explore motherhood as additional axis within intersectional thinking (i.e., next to race, gender, sexuality, class etc.), her analysis on unwomanliness and its importance for normative motherhood provides a substantive piece of the puzzle.

Limburg offers a refreshing view on the feminist concepts of the resting bitch face and the feminist killjoy (p. 18, 204). In feminism, non-conforming behaviour is often rephrased or reclaimed as consciously contrary, however, Limburg is ‘less interested in women who chose to be difficult than [...] in women who couldn’t help being weird’ (p. 15). Limburg’s writings also deepened my understanding by their focus on ‘shaming women for the way they mother their children’ (p. 151) instead of mother-blame, something non-normative mothers are already more vulnerable to. By writing about mother-shame, Limburg explores the additional impact of internalized discriminatory attitudes. Shame often comes with blame, especially in very self-conscious people. This is already demonstrated in Limburg’s letter to Virginia Woolf, but even more in her own account on Socially Gracious Joanne (p. 219), the alleged acceptable version of herself: ‘a rigid container for an unruly social self’ whose ‘underpinnings are made out of explicit corrections’, and thus, she is ‘the personification of internalized ableism’ (p.228).

In her letter to Adelheid Bloch, a woman who became disabled because of brain damage, Limburg reflects on the lines we draw between ourselves and others. Limburg talks about differences within the autistic population but also sees similarities and the need to admit that this population, as a community, exists. As Limburg keeps on to Adelheid Bloch and to all non-speaking autistic people, she reminds us to keep to each other within any community. Certainly, regarding the difficult relationship between (white) feminism and motherhood, this is a relevant issue. Feminism has a bad reputation regarding motherhood, often being perceived as a monolithic theory which is supposedly unfriendly to mothers, hence being a mother would be not feminist at all. However, all kinds of feminisms and all kinds of feminists exist. Limburg takes for granted the individual differences between people in a community and how these differences can exist next to each other. For feminists who fail to succeed in getting all feminist ideas in line, this is an interesting thought: maybe it is not possible and even not desirable. Maybe it suffices to recognise that there are as many different needs as there are different people, and that it is hence valuable to keep acknowledging each other in those needs.

In the letters to Frau V and Katharina Kepler, Limburg demonstrates the vulnerability of motherhood. Mothers are constantly judged, especially those who are perceived insufficiently ‘motherly’: ‘even in this supposedly free society, there’s something authoritarian about the state of modern motherhood’ (p.134). In the letter to Frau V, the reader learns that Frau V is the mother of Fritz, a boy diagnosed by Hans Asperger in Nazi Germany. Limburg analyses the way Frau V’s behaviour is scrutinized as she seeks help for her son. Despite the highly detailed information she provides, thus showcasing an especially in-depth knowledge about her son, medical staff think her ‘strange’ and ‘cold’ (p. 136). She is perceived as not ‘motherly’ enough: she and others cause Leo Kanner (a child psychiatrist who coined the diagnosis of autism in the USA in 1942) to come up with the concept of the ‘refrigerator mother’ (p. 156) which was an important element for autism diagnosis from the 40s to the 60s, and for years a way to blame mothers for their children’s disability.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Frau V might have been an excellent mother to Fritz precisely

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<sup>6</sup> It is the (now controversial) psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim who further developed this idea ‘successfully’ in 1967 of the morally failing parents, and especially the ‘refrigerator mother’, as the cause

because she adapted to his needs, for example his need for less physical contact. Limburg reflects on the reasons why Frau V was dismissed, and why the similarities between Fritz' behaviour and that of his mother were not recognised despite the contemporary research into the possibility of hereditary traits (p. 139). In this letter, Limburg also reflects on the necessary invisibility of mothers 'when they provide for our needs in a way that doesn't inconvenience or frustrate us' (p. 146).

Another mother-son relationship is featured in Limburg's final letter to Katharina Kepler, the mother of the well-known astronomer Johannes Kepler. A widow of many years, Katharina was forced to ask others for help since women were not allowed to act freely. Unfortunately, she had a habit of 'rubbing people the wrong way' (p. 18) which caused miscommunication and conflicts with neighbours—one of whom accused her of witchcraft. Although she had to mainly rely on her son for her defence during the subsequent witch trial in 1620, she eventually wanted to speak up for herself. Johannes saw how that again aroused resentment in the audience. The relationship between this mother and son was uneven, not only because of their gender—men had much more standing, which influenced even a mother-son relationship—but also because of Katharina's 'unwomanly' ways of communicating. These can lead, as Limburg shows, to social misrecognition and eventually to social negation which can be not only traumatic but also dangerous: 'once you have been put outside the first person plural, anything might be done to you' (p. 209).

Being a mother is insufficient to be valued in a society. This is especially apparent in writings about other non-normative mothers, such as mothers living in poverty, Black, queer or disabled mothers, all of whom are much more at risk to be considered bad mothers than middle-class, white, heterosexual, able-bodied mothers. Thanks to Joanne Limburg, not only do I recognize different kinds of ableism in normative motherhood more easily, but I also reflect more about the link between motherhood and norms of femininity. Mothers who do not behave womanly enough might be in trouble.

Limburg's way of taking the four women's credibility for granted is refreshing, considering the lack of credibility they suffered in their lifetime. She loves her mothers-to-think-through (a concept she borrows from Virginia Woolf) because they could not be other than themselves. Limburg detects behaviour that made others uncomfortable and looks at it benevolently, with much understanding and empathy, shattering an autism stereotype on the way. She acknowledges the dehumanization these women faced because they did not fit into the prescribed image of a 'woman' or 'mother', and continues to address them as people in their own right. It is a pity they cannot read the letters she so carefully and honestly wrote to them. For scholars, this is a beautiful composition of intersectional feminist theory and personal observations, written by a very eligible mother-to-think-through.

*Joke Struyf*

**Joke Struyf** is a PhD Candidate in Philosophy (University of Antwerp) who works on the intersection of motherhood(s) and feminism(s), focusing on contemporary normative motherhood and mothering as a revolutionary practice. She builds on black feminism, queer and crip theory and the mundane moments of learning in everyday mothering.

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of autism. See: Bettelheim, B. (1967). *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*. New York: Free Press.

6

**Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.**

Empathizing with others can also be harmful, especially when this practice becomes a tool to hide the power imbalances present in encounters. With her book *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (2017), Maria Puig de la Bellacasa convincingly discusses the ambivalence of care and its conflicting dimensions. Care can both do good as well as oppress. Embedded in a discussion about the implications of a more-than-human conceptualization of care, Puig de la Bellacasa stresses its nature as a “species activity” with ethical, social, political, and cultural implications’ (p. 3). By building on the comprehensive feminist care ethics and political theory of Joan Tronto, Puig de la Bellacasa puts forward the importance of interconnection and interdependency in a care framework. By explicitly framing these obligations as more than moral principles, i.e. as everyday constraints grounded in lived materiality, *Matters of Care* can be read as a timely intervention in the field of care ethics, dealing with the influences of critical posthumanism, ecocriticism, and feminist new materialism. However, the work goes further than merely introducing new forms of critical theory by rethinking the interconnection between care and knowledge as well. Puig de la Bellacasa puts forward how we can reconceptualize care as an ethico-political and relational way of engaging with knowledge (p. 28). Such an approach is crucial if we want to relate to another person’s lived experience and make sense of it.

In my research project about the representation of neurodivergent experiences in videogames, I explore if and how videogames can help to better understand what it is like to be neurodivergent. Videogames are characterized by immersive and embodied aspects which potentially allow neurodivergent people to better explain their experiences. The concepts of care and empathy, which are terms that are often uncritically used in (journalism on) game design and minority positions, also led me to rethink the meaning of ‘understanding’. What kind of knowledge about other people’s lived experiences do we strive for, and what are our intentions with that knowledge? Puig de la Bellacasa persuasively engages with the epistemological dimensions of care and in particular demonstrates how caring actions can also take on the form of contesting dominant ways of knowledge production. She puts forward ‘caring thinking’ to argue that relational processes such as knowing and understanding require care, and furthermore affect how we care (p. 69). As a result, her work can also be read in line with other feminist phenomenologists such as Kym Maclaren and Hanne De Jaegher, who have explored the concept of ‘letting be’, where love and knowledge intertwine.

Caring thinking has become a leading concept in my exploration of what it means to ‘understand other people’s experiences.’ There is no neutral knowledge in that regard, and the type of knowledge we seek (i.e., ‘what are the symptoms of a psychosis?’, ‘what does Tourette’s feel like?’) matters for how we subsequently deal with each other’s experiences. For example, people may feel sympathy towards others but not recognize their implication in some of the difficulties present in the lives of neurodivergent people (such as stigma and oppressive neuronormativity). This might lead people to only care-about, but not care-for, which is now often the case in game design. Representation of neurodiversity in videogames is still rare, the exception being in so-called ‘empathy games’ or simulation games. These game types often, but not necessarily always, occur together, with the former referring to the pursuit of a certain attitude within players, and the latter referring to a style or genre of game that is often employed to achieve empathy. Important in the context of simulations, Puig de la Bellacasa stresses that ‘care is not about fusion; it can be about the right distance’ (p. 5). In other words, we must think critically about our desire for a complete connection to the subject of our caring actions. What attracts me

to Puig de la Bellacasa's writing, is how she leaves room to explore possible paradoxes or conundrums. On the one hand, we should acknowledge the impossibility of fully knowing another person, but on the other hand, that does not free us from the obligation to care both about and for others.

Empathy games are reflective of a design practice where players are presented with other people's experiences to make them care about others. Videogames *can* make people care, but should this also be their primary function? There is a difference between games that offer space for people to (reciprocally) care about each other, and games that are explicitly designed to make people care and simplify actual experiences to be easily consumable. With her introduction of a tripartite concept of care, Puig de la Bellacasa proposes concrete alternatives. Her definition of care as maintenance doing, affective relation, and political commitment helps me to better articulate where empathy games often fall short: they strive for a feeling-for, without pushing for social justice. Additionally, empathy is marketed as an end goal whereas it is better conceived of as an ongoing activity.

*Matters of Care* is a perceptively written book that dares to be at once specific in its formulation of both criticisms and possible alternatives, but also acknowledges the ever-present friction. For example, Puig de la Bellacasa discusses how a risk of anthropocentrism is always lurking, even when her more-than-human conceptualization of care actively decenters the human. Rather than tucking away these unsolved tensions, she stresses how they can be generative. The acknowledgment that care is not only a moral commitment, but an ongoing and non-ideal intervention is crucial. This helps me to clarify how empathy games designed to make players care about neurodiversity can still be harmful. With its commitment to epistemic humility, *Matters of Care* reflects that to care means to understand that we should strive for the 'as well as possible', instead of perfect. It is precisely by acknowledging the ever-present risk of harming, even with good intentions, that we remain open to areas of improvement.

*Lisanne Meinen*

**Lisanne Meinen** is affiliated with the Center for Ethics of the University of Antwerp. In her PhD project she investigates how we can better understand neurodivergent experiences through videogames. She combines a close reading methodology with qualitative inquiry to integrate the life experiences of neurodivergent players. Her academic interests include feminist philosophy, critical disability studies, queer theory, and all the ways they speak to each other.

7

**Cheyne, R. (2019). *Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.**

The central premise in Ria Cheyne's book *Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction* is that genre fiction has the power to change how people think and feel about disability. With this, she points towards a productive intertwining of genre studies and disability studies: both disability and genre fiction evoke emotional responses in readers. 'Disability makes us feel' (p. 1), Cheyne states, and genre fiction is 'fiction that works to produce an affective experience' (p. 3). By mainly drawing on affect theory, Cheyne focuses on affect's effect in relation to depictions of predominantly physical disabilities in adult literature.

Unlike previous research on genre, Cheyne does not limit her study to a single one, but instead devotes her five chapters to explorations of disability in the genres of horror, crime, science fiction, fantasy, and romance—all without sacrificing cohesion or depth. *Disability, Literature, Genre* considers both the interplay between genres, and the different ways in which they can shape understanding and emotional response considering that ‘disability affects are complex and context specific’ (p. 161). One example through which Cheyne demonstrates the importance of engaging with multiple genres, is how in both horror and crime fiction disability is used to create anxiety in readers. Whereas crime fiction relies on anticipated closures, horror tends to offer conclusions driven toward fear and uncertainty. Cheyne argues that readers’ emotional responses are also influenced by the roles available to disabled characters, which typically vary between genres. For instance, in horror this includes stock characters such as ‘the deformed monster, the vulnerable blind or deaf character, the psychotic villain, and the protagonist (often female) teetering on the brink of madness’ (pp. 29-30). All of these roles generate fear and anxiety either for or about these characters. In crime fiction, however, disabled characters tend to fulfil one of the three genre-specific key roles of ‘investigator, perpetrator, and victim’ (p. 55), which offer a greater chance of closure. This is especially true of the disabled detective, as ‘it is through their actions that disorder is transmuted into order, ignorance into knowledge, and anxiety into reassurance’ (p. 80).

Cheyne’s knowledge of primary texts with disabled characters in genre fiction is vast, as is demonstrated by her annotated bibliography, which is included as an appendix. This comprises over 250 entries and details both the genre and the disability that are depicted in each novel, as well as the role the disabled character(s) have in that novel, with due regard to the diverse range of genders, ethnicities, and sexualities of both characters and authors. Cheyne’s analyses of the popular novels and series she engages with in detail, such as Jeffrey Deaver’s *Lincoln Rhyme* series, Thomas Harris’ *Hannibal Lecter* series, and George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, encourage readers to re-examine their own responses to these novels. She achieves this by examining how these novels encourage readers to notice patterns in disability representation, and by illustrating how these can be transgressed, subverted, or even adhered to in ways that encourage readers to re-evaluate their own expectations and prejudices, through what Cheyne terms ‘reflexive representations’ (p. 20). While ‘scholarly work on disability’s relationship with affect or emotion has often focussed on negative emotions’ (p. 12), Cheyne takes on a different approach by arguing that even disability depictions that are interpreted as negative can also positively affect reader’s thoughts or feelings about disability. She asserts that ‘normative genre conventions can enable politically productive representations of disability’ (p. 21). Her suggestion is that reflexivity is encouraged by genre, and may cause readers to think more about disability representation and the roles ascribed to disabled characters since ‘genre reading, as affective practice, always involves reading with a degree of openness’ (p. 164).

Using affect as a lens, Cheyne investigates the different emotions associated with each genre, such as fear in horror fiction, wonder in science fiction, and enchantment in fantasy. This enables her to examine the ways in which disability is used to feed into these emotions, or can be used to disrupt them. Cheyne also analyses how these texts tap into the potential transformative power of affect to change reader perspectives. As she demonstrates, each genre has ‘characteristic disability icons’ (p. 7) which are ‘embedded within and embody familiar narratives or tropes’ (p. 8). Using fantasy literature as an example, these icons include the ‘mad’ character with ‘uncanny abilities’ (p. 114) or the ‘blind wise character’ whose iconic status ‘gains its force from the assumed contradiction between blindness and sight’ (p. 114). These genre-specific icons defy the status that conceptions of disability have as something only recently included in literature, considering how they elucidate their roots are integral to the conventions of the genre. As Cheyne states, ‘representations of disability in genre texts are produced and read

in the context of that genre's history of disability representations '(p. 19), and 'texts work on readers' feelings in complex and cumulative ways '(p. 166). These assertions reinforce the vitality of research that addresses both genre and disability in literature.

My PhD thesis also blends disability studies and genre studies. However, I have taken my research in a different direction by examining depictions of child characters with hidden disabilities in children's and young adult literature. My focus is not on characters with physical conditions, but on characters with invisible or hidden disabilities such as autism, OCD, anxiety, and depression. Similarly to Cheyne, I use contemporary texts with due regard for a variety of races, sexualities, and genders of both characters and authors—although, again similarly to Cheyne, this is not the focus of my study. While Cheyne examines characters in adult literature, and therefore their impact on predominately adult readers, I believe that it is essential to consider the effects these depictions of disabled characters have on the most impressionable and vulnerable of readers: children. To this end, I evaluate to what extent child characters with hidden disabilities are integrated into the existing popular genres of romance, fantasy, and detective fiction—three genres which have had a strong presence and history in children's literature<sup>7</sup>. However, since these genres rarely included child characters with invisible disabilities prior to the last fifteen years, my research focuses on the depiction of child characters with hidden disabilities in twenty-first century children's genre novels. In contrast to Cheyne, I do not consider the potential positive impact of negative depictions or stereotypes, as to me this is problematic since in children's literature the effect of this is to perpetuate misunderstandings, considering how these novels form a potential introduction to both the genre and the condition depicted. Child characters with hidden disabilities typically have been Othered in mainstream genre texts, which my thesis examines. I also examine children's novels which—as has been the case with depictions of gender, race, and sexuality—have begun to depict child characters with hidden disabilities in more realistic ways that do not rely on generating or adhering to damaging stereotypes. One example of this change is the inclusion of autistic girls into children's literature—a discourse that has traditionally been male dominated—in novels like Elle McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* (2020). My engagement with these more positive depictions highlights how a progression away from both stereotypes and misconceptions enables child characters with hidden disabilities to fulfil conventional genre roles such as that of detective or love interest, furthermore promoting understanding and acceptance of hidden disability.

*Isabel Walters*

Having completed a master's degree in English Literature at the University of Bristol, **Isabel Walters** is currently in her third year of studying for a PhD in children's literature at the University of the West of England (UWE). Her research focuses on the depiction of hidden disabilities in contemporary children's literature (2000-2023), with an emphasis on the role of genre.

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<sup>7</sup> See: Andrew, Lucy. *The Boy Detective in Early British Children's Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Christian-Smith, Linda K. *Becoming a Woman Through Romance*. Routledge, 1990. Mendlesohn, Farah and Edward James. *A Short History of Fantasy*. Libri, 2012.

8

Cherry, M. (2021). *The Case for Rage: Why Anger is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle*. New York: Oxford University Press.

At the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, protesters were often framed in a less than favourable light. They were seen as too disruptive, too violent, too loud—too angry. This perception caused the public debate to rather focus on expressive means used by protesters than on the pressing issues they were protesting against. Philosopher Myisha Cherry foregrounds this dynamic of stereotyping angry people and provides a theoretical toolkit for anti-racists to respond appropriately to both their own and others' anger. In her book *The Case for Rage: Why Anger is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle*, she specifically argues that a certain type of anger, which she calls 'Lordean rage,' is essential to the anti-racist struggle. In this way, anger is not something to be repressed or even simply tolerated, but something to be cultivated and celebrated.

Lordean rage is named after the self-professed Black lesbian, mother, warrior and poet Audre Lorde. Cherry was inspired by Lorde's essay *The Uses of Anger* (1981), in which she argues for the usefulness of Black women's anger in the fight against racism.<sup>8</sup> Cherry adopts this idea and carries out some excellent, thorough, ameliorative social and political philosophy with it, which nonetheless remains accessible throughout. She starts by advocating what she calls an 'image variation view' (p. 12) of anger, which acknowledges that not all anger is alike. She differentiates five different kinds of anger using four axes, i.e., the target, the action tendency, the aim, and the perspective of the anger. Of these five types, Lordean rage is the one that targets racism and aims for change, thus adopting an inclusive perspective – in the words of Audre Lorde: 'I am not free while any [other] is unfree' (p. 24). Throughout the book, Cherry goes on to explore the aptness and the productive potential of Lordean rage, how it can be trained and focused, and what allies in the antiracist struggle should be aware of when using their Lordean rage.

My own research is not about antiracism, but rather about the philosophy of anger as it relates to social justice struggles. Specifically, I study the interplay between feminist rage and epistemic (in)justice. One part of that project is to theoretically delineate the type of anger I am working with, and to specify how it can be productive. This is in many ways a very similar project to Cherry's, though the target of the anger has shifted from racism to misogyny. At times my project was even so similar that I wondered what my original contribution could be, since Cherry had so thoroughly and competently set out the productive potential of anger aimed towards societal change. Ultimately, however, I think the similarity is more of a blessing than a curse. The closeness between Cherry's work and mine really forces me to think about what exactly makes my work unique, and to focus on further developing that uniqueness. The main challenge for me will be to really delve into what makes my concept of feminist rage stand out, and to examine what this specific concept can do that other types of anger, such as Lordean rage, cannot do. Cherry's thoroughness in her work on anger can serve as an inspiration and sets the standard for future philosophy of anger very highly. Combined with the accessibility of the text, this book is a feat that researchers like myself can only aspire to achieve.

Importantly, Cherry's book is not only relevant to other researchers who work on anger. It is relevant for any person who has felt strongly about injustice, who has felt indignant, frustrated, or angry, and who has had conflicting thoughts about those angry feelings. Cherry shows brilliantly how not all anger is alike, and how a specific type of anger, which she calls Lordean rage, can (though not always) play an essential part in the anti-racist struggle. *The Case for Rage* is hence a must read for anyone who cares about social justice.

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<sup>8</sup> Lorde, Audre. (2017). *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. London: Silver Press.



*Sigrid Wallaert*

**Sigrid Wallaert** is a PhD researcher in philosophy at Ghent University and FWO Flanders. Her research aims to delineate the concept of feminist rage and, using the theoretical framework of epistemic injustice, to clarify its potential productive and epistemic value.