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Evelien Geerts (*right*) recently participated in the UCLA-Utrecht Exchange Program



Q&A with Evelien Geerts

PARTICIPANT IN THE UCLA-UTRECHT EXCHANGE PROGRAM TALKS ABOUT HER WORK AND HER EXPERIENCES AT UCLA

Founded in 2001, the UCLA-Utrecht Exchange Program promotes cooperation in teaching and research, the international exchange of ideas, and the scholarly efforts of participating faculty and students at the partner institutions. A recent participant in the program, Evelien Geerts, chatted with us recently about her work and her experiences at UCLA. With a Master's degree in Philosophy at the University of Antwerp in Belgium, Geerts is currently enrolled in the Gender and Ethnicity program at Utrecht University in The Netherlands. Her main areas of interest are Continental philosophy and feminist philosophy (critiques on psychoanalysis and pornography, and care ethics), Anglo-American political philosophy, and sexual difference philosophy. For her Research Master's thesis, she will focus on a diffractive rereading of the philosophies of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray.

Can you tell us why you wanted to participate in the Utrecht/UCLA exchange program?

What attracted you to UCLA?

Even when I was still in high school, I dreamt of studying in the U.S. I have always been fascinated with American popular culture and academia because of its high standards, progressive and intellectual attitude, and diversity of its student population. UCLA has always intrigued me, too—and not only because of its special location in the so-called City of Angels. When I was still a philosophy student at the University of Antwerp, I was already following the publications of the Department of Philosophy at UCLA, and I was enthusiastically reading the works of feminist political philosopher Carole Pateman and feminist



theorist Sandra Harding, who are both affiliated with UCLA.

When I had the opportunity to participate in the Utrecht-UCLA exchange program—now as a Research Master's student in Gender Studies at the University of Utrecht in The Netherlands—I immediately applied. Although the exchange program between Utrecht and UCLA is traditionally designed for history students, I nonetheless was able to participate and take some courses at the Department of Women's Studies, with the help of Professor Ellen DuBois of the UCLA Department of History, who kindly guided me through the application process as my official mentor.

Since I am not only doing research on feminist philosophical themes but also regularly work as a freelance music journalist writing on topics such as female musicians and gender representation in music, I was looking for a professor who could help me with my research on the representation of the stereotypical hysterical woman in women's popular and alternative music. Professor Juliet Williams turned out to be the ideal research mentor with regards to these research interests, and it was a pleasure to be enrolled in her Women and Public Policies class and to have her as my independent studies professor. Next to these two courses, I also partook in Professor Abigail Saguy's Gender and the Body class, where I was confronted with a whole new domain of thought, namely sociol-

ogy. My confrontation with these unfamiliar research methods was truly thought-provoking!

Were you raised to be feminist? How did you become interested in feminism? Who are your feminist influences?

To playfully paraphrase and reinterpret Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement from *Le Deuxième Sexe*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," I basically "became" a feminist because of my upbringing. I was raised as a child of divorced parents in the not-so-nice outskirts of Antwerp, Belgium. My parents sent me to a Roman Catholic all-girls school, and I promptly turned into an inquisitive, subversive protofeminist at the age of nine after continuously asking my teachers why women weren't allowed to become priests. No satisfying answer for this injustice was ever given. This particular instance, taken together with my witnessing the struggles my mother as a single parent had to endure, made me aware of the injustices and inequalities that women all around the world have to deal with on a daily basis.

This awareness never really went away. After reading Simone de Beauvoir's books as a teenager, I was completely convinced by and became a supporter of both academic and activist feminism. De Beauvoir was and still is my biggest feminist influence: her existentialist feminism made me want to learn more about philosophy and female philosophers. However,

when I was a bachelor student in philosophy, I felt that a lot of female philosophical thinkers weren't really taken seriously, and hence their ideas and oeuvres usually weren't mentioned. (Hannah Arendt and de Beauvoir were probably considered to be interesting enough, only because of their relationships with Heidegger and Sartre!)

Disappointed by the lack of interest in female philosophers, I decided to look for all these forgotten female voices on my own and quickly discovered the immense oeuvre of Belgium's most underrated feminist psychoanalytical philosopher, Luce Irigaray. Irigaray's *Speculum de l'autre femme* has since then been my feminist Bible, and I was lucky enough to be able to write my thesis on her extensive oeuvre, under the guidance of Dr. Petra Van Brabandt, who was the only woman (and an outspoken feminist) in the philosophy department at the time. Her radical feminist attitude has since then influenced me a lot, and it is under her guidance that I decided to apply for the gender studies program at Utrecht and continue in academia.

Although I have been working in the domain of feminist philosophy (which is sometimes rightfully seen as exclusive, because of its academic and conceptual content), I have always paid attention to extraordinary women in the "real" world as well. I greatly admire feminist activists Gloria Steinem and Mona Eltahawy, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Flemish

politician Mieke Vogels, the artists Frida Kahlo and Bracha Ettinger, actress Jodie Foster, and, last but not least, British musician PJ Harvey, punk cabaret artist Amanda Palmer, and queer activist and electro queen Peaches. These female musicians show us that the riot grrrl movement still is alive and kicking!

Can you tell us about your thesis on Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray?

I have been working on Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference for quite a while now, and I am still awestruck by the fruitfulness and relevance of some of her key themes such as her method of hysterical mimesis, her critique of phallogocentrism, and her ideas about intersubjectivity and ethics. Although her oeuvre comes across as conceptual and opaque, I've always had the intuition that Irigarayan thought is "essentially" (pun intended!) very political—even in an activist manner. Although Kristeva is much more of a traditional Lacanian thinker than Irigaray, I also have the feeling that her works are more or less structured around the concept of revolt—which is a political concept.

Kristeva herself, however, made it clear that she does not want to be associated with Irigaray's sexual difference/female specificity philosophy, and there are indeed many conceptual differences to be found between Kristeva and Irigaray. That has made me

wonder whether the oeuvres of these two thinkers could be brought together or not. In my thesis, I hope to argue that they can indeed speak to each other, because they share the same feminist-political concerns, and that these oeuvres can be brought together by rereading Kristeva's *Histoires d'amour* and Irigaray's *Amante Marine: De Friedrich Nietzsche in a diffractive manner*.

What role does feminism play in (modern) philosophy?

An excellent but also difficult question! To give an Irigarayan-inspired answer: there have been many female philosophers; yet, their voices have always been muted by patriarchy. If we look at the situation in academia, women aren't quite there yet!

I actually have the feeling that the academic landscape in the U.S. is much more diverse and inclusive than in Europe—and I applaud that. Just to use an example that I am familiar with: if one were to take a look at the philosophy departments of Flemish universities in Belgium, you'd immediately notice that there is a shocking underrepresentation of female philosophy professors (you can basically count them on one hand!), and even T.A.' and Ph.D. students. Philosophy departments seem to be male strongholds as in the days of Plato, and feminist philosophy, to be honest, is seen as a mere niche.

Times are changing, however, and that has everything to do with the simple fact that more women are studying philosophy. Wonderful initiatives such as the UK Society for Women in Philosophy and the Feminist Philosophers Blog (<http://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/>) stimulate and advise women to pursue Ph.D.s and that criticize philosophy conferences and departments which (intentionally and/or nonintentionally) exclude women.

How does your work on philosophy overlap with your work on feminism?

At this point in time, all of my work basically focuses on feminist and gender issues, whether I'm working in the domains of philosophy, critical theory, or cultural studies.

That doesn't mean that I am no longer acquainted with the more "traditional" philosophical topics: I used to do a lot of research on the oeuvres of Kierkegaard and Levinas, and I still am pretty much obsessed with everything that has to do with the political philosophies of John Stuart Mill and John Rawls. Yet, I will probably never be able to let go of my subversive feminist side, and I will always continue to confront the philosophical canon with its presuppositions and the many voices that it has slyly silenced throughout the centuries!

In 2011, you published an article on the lack of gender studies in Belgium. How do you account for the lack?

I indeed wrote an article on the lack of graduate programs in gender studies in Belgium, after the coordination network for gender studies, Sophia (www.sophia.be), published a study on the possibility of creating such an interdisciplinary program.

Let's start with some positive news: there are many academic research centers in Belgium that work exclusively on the themes of equality and diversity, and some universities even offer minors in culture and diversity studies and are teaching (undergrad, graduate and Ph.D.) courses that focus on gender issues. There used to be an excellent graduate women's studies program in Flanders that was organized by the universities of Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels, Leuven, and Hasselt. It was cancelled in 2006 because of the lack of governmental funds and initiative.

Since then, it has been impossible to graduate with a Master's degree in Gender Studies in Flanders or Wallonia. Although there are still many people enthusiastically working on gender issues in Belgian universities, this situation has nonetheless stimulated an immense brain-drain. That is why Sophia, with the help of the federal Institute for the Equality of Women and Men, hopes to institutionalize gender studies once again. It won't be easy because of the current

UCLA graduate students in women's studies can participate in the UCLA-Utrecht exchange program. For more information, visit <http://www.utrecht.ucla.edu/> and www.genderstudies.nl

economic crisis, the rise of political conservatism, and Belgium's extremely complicated linguistic situation—that is, this master's program should consist of courses taught in Flemish, French, and technically also German and English, if the program wishes to be internationally relevant.

Have you seen that ideas about feminism in the U.S. are different than in Europe?

Well, I specifically wanted to experience the life of a women's studies student at UCLA, because I wanted to find out if there is such a thing as an Analytic/Continental divide (a theoretical and conceptual split that is still noticeable in philosophy) in women's/gender studies and in feminist activism. When it comes to academic feminism (that is, women's/gender studies departments), I would say that there are some striking differences: feminist thought seems to be more institutionalized and taken seriously as an academic discipline in the U.S. Although gender departments in for instance The Netherlands do pay attention to (post)colonial issues, intersectionality, and multiculturalism, these issues have been integrated in U.S. academic programs much earlier than in Europe.

Culturally—and I can only speak from my own experiences in Belgium (or Flanders, to be more precise) now, I sense that American women (and

men!) aren't afraid to call themselves feminists or supporters of equality politics. A big percentage of Flemish women around my age, however, seem to be wary of this label, and apparently consider it to be outdated and even irrelevant, which is quite shocking. In the end, American and European feminists probably don't differ that much: they're both fighting for more worldwide equality, without neglecting the diversity of women's needs.

Can you tell us about any experiences or insights that you have had while at UCLA?

I had so many interesting experiences at UCLA. If I had to pick one, I would probably have to refer to the many interesting and inspiring class discussions I've had. I really enjoyed the mature and open-minded atmosphere of the women's studies classes, and I have the feeling that one's opinion really is appreciated here. Discussions and listening to each other are truly stimulated at UCLA, and I find them extremely important not only in academia but especially in gender studies. They prevent us from relapsing into a bourgeois feminism that thinks to know it all but only misrepresents the multitude and diversity of women's experiences and opinions.

I would love to thank all the professors at UCLA and at Utrecht University that have first of all

made this exchange possible, and that have helped me during my inspiring stay at UCLA.

What projects are you working on?

Because I hope to graduate this summer, I am working on my thesis project, and I'm looking for positions either in philosophy or gender studies. I'm also currently editing two research papers that I wrote for Professor Williams's classes—one paper is on Foucauldian feminism, in which I tried to confront Foucault with Butler and Irigaray, and the other deals with the representation of female hysteria in music. I will present the latter at the 8th European Feminist Research Conference in Budapest soon. I also hope to start working as a freelance journalist again and publish some articles in newspapers and magazines.