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Edited by Sara de Jong and Sanne Koevoets

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International and Interdisciplinary Classrooms*

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CORE FEMINIST TEXTS IN EUROPE ONLINE: TEACHING WITH THE FRAGEN DATABASE

Sara de Jong, Gé Meulmeester and Tilly Vriend

From 2008 until 2011, European women's libraries and scholars have been cooperating in the FRAGEN project, which was part of the EC funded research project QUING. During this time FRAGEN compiled an analytical database of texts from the women's movements in the 27 EU countries as well as in Turkey and Croatia for comparative research into the history of feminist ideas in Europe. This article outlines how the FRAGEN database can be used in seminars to generate interesting discussions with students in two ways. Firstly, the database can be used as a useful teaching *resource*, because it provides easy digital access for students to some of the most significant feminist texts in Europe and allows for interesting comparative projects in classes with international students. Secondly, the database as well as the FRAGEN project itself can be used as an interesting *object of study* and can provide the basis for seminar discussions about the writing of European feminist history and its canon. This article includes concrete suggestions for classroom exercises as well as discussion questions.

The FRAGEN project

This section offers a short overview of the FRAGEN project from the perspective of the people working at Atria, Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History (at the time called Aletta, Institute for Women's History in Amsterdam), which coordinated the FRAGEN project.¹ We will address the aims of the project, its partners, its development and the results so far: a website and database.

Institutional context

The FRAGEN project is a subproject of the European research project QUING (Quality in Gender + Equality Politics),² which compared gender equality

¹ Aletta, Institute for Women's History in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. www.aletta.nu. Tilly Vriend was the project manager of FRAGEN.

² QUING; Quality in Gender+ Equality Policies, SIXTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME, Priority 7 – Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge Based Society, 7.1.2 Gender and Citizenship in a Multicultural Context, 2005. <http://www.quing.eu/>.

policies across Europe. Professor Mieke Verloo was the scientific director of the QUING project. The aim of FRAGEN (the abbreviation comes from *Frames on Gender*) was to create a database of original texts on gender + equality frames which have emerged from second wave feminist movements in Europe³ and to organize and facilitate open access for researchers to this database. From its conception, the project aimed to facilitate comparative research into the history of feminist ideas in different European countries.

Women and gender libraries and information centers have been collecting and indexing great collections on women's movements and feminisms for many years. Their databases show the varieties of feminisms and the rich cultural heritage of women in Europe and around the world. The Mapping the World database gives fine examples of these resources.⁴ The FRAGEN project was unique in that simultaneously all over Europe core feminist texts were selected by experts, digitized and the full text made accessible in *one* database. The linguistic diversity of Europe, budgetary limitations and strict copyright laws were some of the major challenges in the course of the project. Also, throughout the project, there was an awareness that such a database could never be 'complete'. In the next section of the article we will elaborate on these aspects.

The partners

Partners, who were willing and able to participate, had to be identified and contracted in all 29 countries. We found them among our colleagues abroad: women's or gender information centers and gender studies departments at universities in EU countries, and among members of the WINE network.⁵

Approach

The partner institutions were asked to identify three to five experts⁶ who had to select a maximum of ten core feminist texts which they considered to have influ-

³ In general, the database starts from what is commonly called the 'second wave' of feminism in the late 1960s. Depending on the political situation in the different countries, the time period has been adjusted to local circumstances, as in many European countries feminist movements started much later than the sixties.

⁴ <http://www.aletta.nu/aletta/eng/collections/informatiecentra>

⁵ WINE: Women's Information Network Europe. <http://winenetworkeurope.wordpress.com/>.

⁶ These experts could be academics, but also feminist collectives, platforms or assemblies that were especially representative of the feminist movement in a given country. They should be knowledgeable about various strands of feminism.

enced the development of feminist ideas/women's movements in their country.⁷ On the basis of the experts' suggestions, a long list was compiled, from which the experts were then asked to nominate texts for the shortlist that could comprise a maximum of ten texts per country. Experts were encouraged to select texts that were written as manifestos or that were bestowed the status of manifesto afterwards. The partner institutions were responsible for obtaining copyrights for online publication. Subsequently, they were asked to digitize the texts, upload them and code them within the database. We developed several manuals to guide the partners in the process and to streamline the project, such as a manual for the selection of texts, a database manual,⁸ and a copyright and digitization manual,⁹ and we also organized trainings. Further, we started a blog to facilitate easy communication and the exchange of experiences. It was also our task to develop the FRAGEN website and database, into which all partners were asked to code and upload their selected texts.

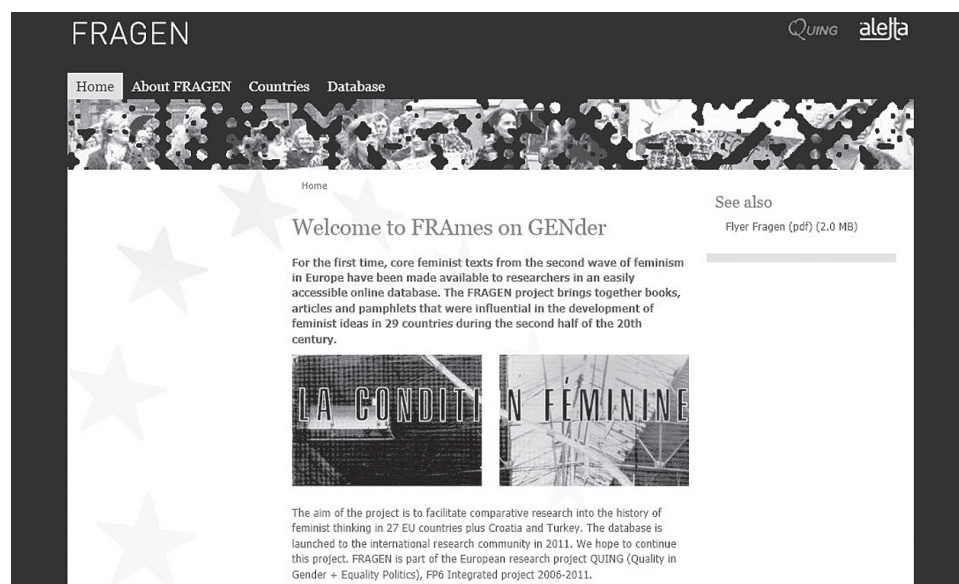


Illustration 3 - Screenshot of the FRAGEN website

⁷ The names of the experts and their expertise can be found in the database, as well as the criteria for the selection of texts.

⁸ Tilly Vriend, *Deliverable No. 102: Manual for the selection of texts and Database manual Fragen* (Amsterdam: QUING, 2009).

⁹ Tilly Vriend and Marieke Kramer, *Deliverable No. 103: Quality assurance guidelines within Fragen: Digitisation and copyright* (Amsterdam: QUING, 2009).

The FRAGEN database

The database is accessible via the FRAGEN website (<http://www.fragen.nu>) and it is open to the research community. It was broadly conceived to include everyone from students to teachers and from academics to other interested parties. The contents of the database can be searched based on various criteria: country, subject, author and title. Its potential is strengthened by the fact that the database provides open access to the texts. In order to preserve the original content of these key texts, they were scanned and uploaded in their original language. The database provides a bibliographical description of each text (such as author, title, publisher etc.), as well as an analytical description based on the QUING methodology. This coding system or survey, which is in English to facilitate access for the users of the database, had to be filled out by the partners for all texts included in the database.

The survey

In order to make the texts accessible to researchers who are unfamiliar with some of these languages, for each text an abstract in English describing its contents was added. In addition, a substantive set of codes offering detailed information about the historical and geographical context of the texts, their authors, their reception and a thematic and analytical framing of their contents, were provided. The 'analytical description' or coding of the text was based on a 20-question survey, in which partners were asked to identify the content of a text. The questions in the survey relate to topics of interest as established in Beijing's 12 critical areas of concern, as well as the use of gender in the text; the intersections of gender with other structural inequalities (such as ethnicity, religion and class); the causes for gender inequalities; the type of feminism occurring in the text; whether the text contains a call for action, the content of this call and who is addressed by this call; and the civil society/state interface. A final question in the survey relates to the framing of feminism in the text according to 13 different types of feminism (liberal, Marxist, socialist, postcolonial, radical, lesbian, psychoanalytic, standpoint, multiracial/multi-ethnic, social construction and third-wave feminism, as well as postmodern feminism and queer theory—one category—and feminist studies of men, based on Judith Lorber's book *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics*.¹⁰

¹⁰ Judith Lorber, *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

FRAGEN as a teaching resource

The FRAGEN database of texts originating from European feminist movements offers many new opportunities for the dissemination of feminist ideas and for teaching gender across Europe. The mere fact that more than 250 texts from 29 countries are now available online, allows teachers and students to analyze the roots of feminisms and women's movements in Europe. The database offers a panorama of different types of second-wave feminisms, and allows students to compare themes that have triggered the women's movement, to analyze academic versus activist texts and to learn about their own feminist foremothers. Courses about the history of European feminisms can now require students to learn from each other's histories by reading one or more texts from other countries.

FRAGEN and canon formation

The FRAGEN project prompts a number of questions regarding canons and canon formation that are suitable for seminar discussion, in particular with groups that include international students. Among feminists, questions concerning canons and canon formation tend to elicit skepticism or even frustration. Much of feminist activity has been aimed at revising the existing 'malestream' canons. However, to this day much of the canon, regardless of the discipline, is dominated by the work and perspectives of white heterosexual men. It is for this reason that canon formation should remain a central topic of feminist inquiry. Questions concerning canon formation touch on systems of exclusion and normalizing practices, and as such they touch the core of many of the central themes of feminist theories. In order to inspire teachers to open up this discussion, we have framed a number of issues that may be studied in exercises and class discussions:

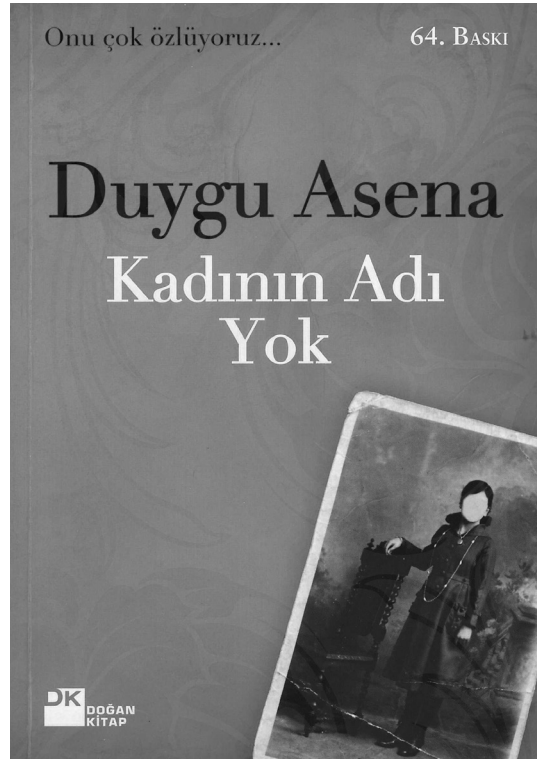
Suggested assignments

- Even though the ambition of the FRAGEN project was certainly not to install a new European feminist canon, the selected texts and the process of selection can be studied in the light of questions about canon formation. Which national texts are presented as central to local and European feminism(s), and which underlying assumptions that framed the project can be recognized *a posteriori* through this selection? Teachers

can encourage their students to discuss whether the FRAGEN database succeeds in correcting existing (feminist) canons, or whether it merely encompasses a reinforcement of existing canons or other national databases? Through analyzing the selection criteria and procedures, students can engage with the question of what a feminist canon is or should be and ponder which texts students would expect to be included in the canon and why. Following this exercise, students can go back to the FRAGEN database to check whether the selected texts meet the requirements they have formulated.

- Another way to engage students in discussions on canon formation through the FRAGEN database, would be to look at the *types* of texts that are included in the database, which range from slogans to policy recommendations, from political manifestos to academic articles. Students could look at which texts were written by activists and which were authored by academics. Then they could consider the implications of the fact that many of the experts responsible for the selections are themselves academics that have been or still are activists. Students may also consider why manifestos represent a *genre* of feminist intellectual and political writing, and the manner in which manifestos perform feminisms in particular ways. How would the students define a manifesto, who decides which texts are granted the status of a manifesto, and how do manifestos fit into the general and feminist canons?

Illustration 4 - Cover illustration of a book on the Turkish long list



- Advanced students who are familiar with international feminist theories as well as with their country's feminist history, can be challenged to evaluate the selection of texts from their country of origin. Some project partners indicated during the project that they were unsure whether 'their texts' were worthy of inclusion in the database. How did these insecurities arise? Is the Western/Eastern European frame internalized in such a way that it may have influenced the selection of texts? Or were the selection criteria, one of which was that the texts had to have been produced during the second wave of feminism, biased towards particular regions in Europe? More generally, the database and its construction may give rise to discussions concerning selection criteria *per se* as systems of exclusion in themselves, and advanced students may be invited to reflect on how such 'excluding' practices may be subverted or corrected.
- Other points for seminar discussion could be whether a 'foreign' perspective on the kind of feminism produced in another country, corresponds with the actual selected texts. For example, is there a correspondence between what is considered as 'French Feminism' and the selected texts or not, and why would this convergence or divergence occur? What is the relation between these 'national feminisms' and transnational feminism?

The categorization of feminisms

It has become increasingly common to refer to feminisms in the plural, to point out the heterogeneity of feminist theories and practices. As feminists know all too well, typologies and categories can both make visible and obscure ideas, perspectives and information. In the FRAGEN survey that the partner organizations filled out for each text, one of the questions pertained to the framing of feminism within the text, asking which type of feminism occurred in the document according to Judith Lorber's categorization of feminist strands.¹¹ For each of these options, the person interpreting the text could tick major, minor or not applicable, and there was no restriction concerning the number of feminist types deemed applicable.

This survey question (and the way it was answered) gives rise to interesting topics for discussion for both basic and advanced teaching about feminist theories.

¹¹ Judith Lorber, *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Suggested assignments

- Undergraduate students who are new to feminist theories can be challenged to categorize texts according to Lorber's typologies and compare and contrast their own answers with the boxes ticked in the survey. Another avenue for stimulating critical thought could be to discuss with the students the fact that the survey allowed the interpreting partner organizations to select more than one type of feminism for each text. Is any combination of different feminisms possible or are there feminisms that are incompatible with one another? Lorber distinguishes between the 'gender reform feminisms' of the 1970s, which she associates with liberal, Marxist, socialist, postcolonial feminism, the 'gender resistance feminisms' of the 1980s (radical, lesbian, psychoanalytic, standpoint), and, finally, the 'gender rebellion feminisms' that arose in the 1990s (multiracial/multiethnic, feminist studies of men, social construction, postmodern and third wave). Students may be challenged to investigate and/or critique this categorization, for instance by being asked to present arguments for and against specific theses implicit in this categorization. For instance: can texts from the 1970s not be multiracial/multiethnic? And are standpoint and postmodern perspectives irreconcilable, or can students locate texts that seem to encompass characteristics of both perspectives?
- More advanced students may be challenged to reflect on the political and epistemic effects of the categorization of different types of texts. Such an exercise may involve questioning the relationship between readers and authors (who has the 'primary right' to categorize a text?) and the way in which categorization practices do or do not aptly represent the evolution of feminist knowledge across disciplines, institutions, and geographical locations. Who chooses and defines the categories and what implication does this have for texts written in countries 'at the margins' of Europe, such as in Eastern Europe and Turkey, where categories such as state feminism or religious feminism that are not included in Lorber's typology, could have been relevant?

Because FRAGEN does not only give access to the texts included in the database, but also to the processes of its own production, it offers a unique opportunity to

students of gender studies to engage with the question of how knowledges may ‘travel’ across disciplines, locations and perspectives.

Feminist methodology

Feminist theory has sought to challenge ‘malestream’ research in terms of its methodology, methods and topics. The FRAGEN database offers interesting teaching material for courses on feminist methodologies, by providing a unique collection of feminist research findings that students may study for inspiration. For instance, the diversity of types of feminism present in the FRAGEN database illustrates to students the fact that research renders different results depending on the ontological and epistemological starting points of the researcher, which, in turn, limit the methodological choices available to the researcher—particularly in terms of conceptualization, bibliographical selection, the collection of data, and interpretation.

Suggested assignments

- The database lends itself to comparative research on the feminist history of different countries, which may be followed by a student discussion about the methodological dilemmas that they faced in terms of collecting, selecting, and comparing texts from different geographical and historical locations.
- Both the contents of the FRAGEN database and the processes of its production may be used to generate discussions on feminist methodologies. Students may be asked to investigate the implications of analyzing ‘old texts’ on the basis of ‘new terms’. For instance: how would one go about reading intersectionality ‘into’ texts published prior to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s coining of the term in 1989,¹² but which were coded into the database under that category? What does it mean when elements of five different types of feminism were detected in a particular text, and does this text indeed inform potential approaches based on each of these categories? Teachers can discuss the advantages and limitations of the chosen selection

¹² Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Sharpley-Whiting (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 208–38.

process with their students, in order to get them to reflect on their own selective processes when setting up their own research projects.

- The FRAGEN website attempts to make the process of the production of the database visible by including information on motivations for the selection and the drafting of the long list. Teachers may ask students to be equally explicit about the steps they take in their own research processes, in order to prompt a deeper level of reflexivity. Such an exercise may serve to illustrate the challenges and complexities of producing ‘situated knowledges’.
- To take the FRAGEN database itself, rather than the texts it contains, as an object of study may pose particular methodological challenges to more advanced students. As Manoff writes, cultural studies and postmodern theory have expanded the concept of ‘text’ to include, for example, databases.¹³ This could inspire students to study not only the texts in the database but also the database itself *as* a text. Additionally, theorists, who are interested in the materiality of (digital) objects, have argued that the specificity of print versus electronic texts engage different ways of relating to texts.¹⁴ Advanced students who wish to treat the FRAGEN database as an object of study will thus be challenged to engage with new methodologies that make such a project possible.

Conclusion

Developed as part of an EU research project with the aim of providing researchers access to a wide selection of texts, FRAGEN also serves as a great teaching resource and a fascinating object of study for students. The FRAGEN database provides a concrete entry point for students to consider the mechanisms of canon formation, the intricacies of the categorization of feminist ideas, and feminist methodological dilemmas. Working with FRAGEN will help to prepare students to become the next generation of feminist authors. We are looking forward to a future in which their work can be included in an extended FRAGEN database.

¹³ Marlene Manoff, “The Materiality of Digital Collections: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives,” *Libraries and the Academy* 6.3 (2006): 312.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 314.

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