## 2015 ARC-GS MA Thesis Prize Awarded

The ARC-GS MA Thesis Prize was formally awarded on Thursday December 10, 2015 at 15.30, during a short ceremony before the ARC-GS December lecture. This year’s prize committee consisted of Bojan Bilić, Robby Davidson, Gert Hekma, Liza Mügge, and Rachel Spronk (chair).

The committee read ten theses whose topics differed widely, from feminist squatting in Spain to LGBT parents in the Netherlands to male same-sex sex work in Kenya. The theses represented various disciplines in the social sciences and came from several universities. It was a great pleasure for the committee members to delve into the different topics and, as usual, they learned about many new questions and challenges as students’ master projects tend to explore the boundaries of our societies concerning upcoming questions and lingering queries. The committee wants to point out that despite the relatively short time for doing a master-level research project, especially within the one year master programmes, the quality of the student projects is impressive. Doing empirical research in eight or twelve weeks is not an easy task, and we hope that the ARC-GS MA Thesis Prize is an encouragement for future students to take on new research projects with great rigour.

### Winner

After a short debate the committee decided unanimously that Stephanie Stelko, with her thesis entitled “Doing Vaginismus: Activity and Self-Interpretation of Clenching Bodies” be awarded the prize. A cheque of €500 has been granted to her.

This thesis deals with a relatively unknown, and perhaps even silenced, topic. Vaginismus, sometimes called vaginism, is a female sexual pain disorder. Affected women themselves often describe it as clenching. It is a physical condition due to vaginal tightness caused by contractions of the pelvic floor muscles, affecting a woman's ability to engage in any form of vaginal penetration. Stephanie has, with great care and respect, analysed the narratives, practices and experiences of women’s physical, emotional and relationship challenges.

A major challenge, beside the intense physical pain, is the notion that vaginismus has psychological causes. All women refer to this, which indicates that all women have to deal with this medical reading, although for some women it is a helpful explanation. The use of Botox for example, that relaxes the muscles, helps to overcome being afraid of the clenching of one’s body. Stephanie shows that the Cartesian dualism of body and mind underlines the medical narrative as well as the women’s narratives of vaginismus. The metaphors women used to describe their condition articulate the difference between ‘substance’ and ‘activity’, reproducing the same dualism. Common metaphors they used are ‘the vagina as a lousy friend’; ‘the vagina as a stranger’; or the ‘vagina as a slaveholder’. This resonates with the experience that the contractions are involuntary. In contrast, other narratives describe vaginismus as an activity or as practices. These narratives describe how women do their bodies through their daily practices and how they counteract, avoid and deal with ‘clenching’ when it occurs.

#### Excellent Thesis

Stephanie takes up the classic question of structure - agency in a rigorous manner by outlining the bio-political approach to vaginismus and describing how the Cartesian dualism informs the clinical response to the women’s suffering. According to the biomedical discourse it is also curable. In response, women partly reproduce and appropriate this discourse as, and I quote Stephanie here, “it is a way we are taught to think about ourselves”, while they simultaneously modify the dominant narratives in different ways. She analyses how eventually every woman, whether following the biomedical procedure or taking an alternative route, each desires to be ‘normal’, which is in this case expressed through desire to conform to the coital imperative.

The thesis is an excellent piece of work in the way it respectfully outlines the contours of a sensitive condition while remaining critically feminist in analysing women’s responses. The committee was impressed by the systematic and well-structured analysis of the data. The uniqueness of the thesis lies in the fact that the study of sexual conditions needs more socially scientific reflections in order to unpack the relation between the individual patient and the social environment. Studying vaginismus in relation to the coital imperative and the mindful body opens new doors in the biomedical approach to vaginismus, while analysing the mindful body and its experiences addresses a blind spot in the feminist study of gender and sexuality.

We congratulate Stephanie Stelko wholeheartedly, wish her the best in her further studies and career, and hope that this prize stimulates her to continue with the good work!