

Take Back the Future: 2023 Women’s, Gender, Social Justice Association (formerly Women’s and Gender Studies et Recherches Feministes) Conference

by Claire Carter, Corinne L. Mason, Krystal Kehoe MacLeod and Daniella Robinson

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Introduction

This special issue emerges from presentations, predominantly by graduate students, at the first in-person WGSJ (formerly WGSRF) conference in several years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It felt good to share physical space together, to provide opportunities to reflect on the past few years, and to imagine and strategize ways forward. As the call for papers outlines, there have been significant societal events and legislative shifts that gave us pause and continue to inform our individual and collective work. The following—which is by no means an exhaustive list—have challenged and reshaped our activist-scholarship in the field: at UBC in 2019, a Black graduate student experienced anti-Black racism, racial profiling, and harassment at Congress; in the summer of 2020, Black Lives Matter organizing in communities and on campuses resurged; beginning in May 2021, unmarked graves of Indigenous children were confirmed at sites of former residential schools; the COVID-19 pandemic spread around the world, with a disproportionate impact on Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and socially and economically disadvantaged groups; in 2022, *Roe vs Wade* was overturned in the United States; in 2023, growing discrimination and violence towards 2SLGBTQIA+ people and communities informed legislative attacks on trans kids and youth in New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, and Alberta; and in 2023, pro-Palestinian activists began protesting genocide in Gaza, resulting in the criminalization of encampments on campuses.

This special issue includes a range of works that demonstrate efforts to come together, call out and critique dominant discourses and practices, engage in advocacy and awareness, and creatively resist ongoing societal injustices and violence. The pieces come from interdisciplinary scholars, including a large selection of graduate student work, who engage in literary and media analyses, policy and legislative critique, artistic practices, and activist and narrative reconstructions.

The various articles encourage reflection on our relationships with our bodies, among or between different generations, and with public authorities. These articles and research notes make visible normalizing and invisibilizing tactics of public figures, and dominant discourses around race, citizenship, activism, girlhood, homelessness, and sexuality. Drawing from events and actions of the last few years, many engage with how we can respond, what we can learn, and what futures we can imagine.

The issue opens with pieces that provide case studies and analysis of dominant discourses, policies, and procedures. Latty analyzes the practice and media coverage of strip searches of black women and girls to reveal a disavowal of the violence done to black women and girls and a simultaneous reaffirmation of Canada as a benevolent nation. LaCroix and Withers' articles both examine homelessness, from the lens of policing and criminalization in the former and invisibilization within practices of homeless counts in the latter. Each of these opening pieces draw attention to systemic discrimination within institutional services and policies in order to push back against racist and discriminatory practices.

The focus of the special issue then moves into discussions of knowledge gaps and collective action within health care and K-12 education. Collaborative work navigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on 2SLGBTQI+ and allied health mental providers and unites different stakeholders to develop curriculum on consent and non-violence.

Activism and notions of citizenship are the focus of the next three pieces. The first article highlights Asian Canadian women's critique of citizenship ceremonies and nation-building. The second and third articles analyze gendered discourses of visibility of girl and tween activists which position them as either exceptional or marginalized, and offer a reframing of their actions as democratic engagement and grounded in intergenerational and community networks

The final two research articles draw upon art and literature to re-imagine relationships with our bodies and across generations and offer us space for reflection on opportunities for growth when we push against embodied and community limitations.

The five research notes included in this issue are based upon roundtables and activist work presented at the conference.

Tichenor invites us to consider the potential implications of a reclamation of the diagnosis term “borderline” through engagement with the complexities of (some) receiving care and support from the state, when the state enacts forms of violence, causing debilitation of some populations. This research note considers a shift from normative understandings of borderline to creating space for imagining how it might be utilized against forms of debilitation caused by settler colonialism, racialized violence, and corporate health care agendas.

Ioannani’s research note examines the intersection of being single and fat on the journey to pregnancy and seeks to imagine a future where people have support and access to prenatal care, without fatphobic walls repeatedly blocking the way.

Scolnic and Halliday’s piece focuses on gendered emotional labour in academia and highlights the inequity between the lack of support they received as graduate students and the expectation of extensive support they will provide to students as they transition to [precarious] instructors.

Pang et al.’s research note stems from community-based research that used art to inform a dialogue between 2SLGBTQ older adults and homecare support workers. They aim to provide a reference document for others thinking about arts-based community research, and the outcome of their arts-based dialogue is the image used on this issue’s front cover.

Ariel et al. are part of the Feminist digital methods lab within which their participants collaborated on the creation of a code of conduct, project themes, and several AR art pieces that were installed in different sites in Toronto.

In total, this special issue reflects the diverse, attentive, and imaginative activist-scholarship and research creation of those working in the field of women, gender, and social justice studies.

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