

Reflections as Gender Institute Director, 2017-2023

Dear UB Gender Institute Community,

At the end of June, my six-year term as director of the UB Gender Institute will come to a close. It has been an extraordinary experience and a tremendous privilege to lead an institute that has had a long history of dedicated leadership, beginning with our first co-directors, Isabel Marcus and Peggy Acara. The Gender Institute has survived and thrived because of women's institutional care work passed down through each generation. When Isabel Marcus stepped down as director in 2003, she gave her successor, Barbara Bono, a basket of self-care items. Last week, I did the same for my successor, Victoria Wolcott, and I hope this tradition will continue with each future director.

The past six years have been the happiest of my professional life at UB, largely because I have had the pleasure of collaborating with amazing colleagues, students, and staff, experiences which have truly enriched my life. Where else at UB would I have had the chance to work with Jo Freudenheim, the Deputy Director of the Gender Institute, who is located on South Campus in the School of Public Health? And my tenure as director had the good fortune of coinciding with the leadership of Vice-Provost Bob Granfield and Provost Scott Weber, who substantially increased the budget of the Institute for the first time in its 26-year history.

As I look back over the past six years, I have so many fond memories, including our sold-out fundraising evening at Lilydale where psychic mediums did impromptu readings of a few colleagues. Then we began our first year-long lecture series featuring Kate Manne's book *On Misogyny*, followed by Moya Bailey on *misogynoir*, and then Paisley Currah on transmisogyny. We also presented two symposia: the first on reproductive justice, and the second focused on the centennial of the 19th Amendment. In addition, we launched the "New Books, New Feminist Directions" series, and developed a wide range of online programming. This past year, we featured a lecture series on Social Reproduction, our first in-person series since COVID, where issues of caretaking have been center stage, beginning with the politics of housekeeping, then moving to the racial and gender politics of 'care work' and their relation to housing justice, and concluding with how social reproduction makes visible the invisible labor of women's work at a global scale.

It's worth remembering that all this happened during a time of tumultuous social and political conflict. I began as director during the Trump presidency and the #MeToo movement, followed by the murder of George Floyd, and the Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020. This happened at the same time as COVID hit, killing over one million Americans. And last spring a 19-year-old white supremacist killed ten people at the

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Jefferson Avenue Tops, a senseless tragedy that we still grieve. A few weeks later, the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v Wade* and now 58% of American women of reproductive age live in states hostile to abortion rights.

What has sustained me throughout all these crises and tragedies has been our strong sense of community. And that has certainly been true for me this semester with the Michael Knowles event. I'm so proud of our students and how they turned a moment of intimidation and fear into a joyous celebration of defiance and courage that affirmed queer and trans identities in a spirit of solidarity.

During my time as director, one thing has become crystal clear to me, namely that gender and sexuality are at the forefront of today's culture wars. As a graduate student at Stanford, I found myself at the epicenter of the culture wars of the late 1980s, which were focused on the 'Great Books' debate, where Shakespeare was pitted against multiculturalism and the future of the Western tradition was supposedly at stake. Such debates seem quaint today, particularly the central role afforded to literature, but what they share with the current moment is a focus on controlling what books can and cannot be read. Today, the most banned book in the US is Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*, about coming out as nonbinary, a book that is banned not only in red states, but also in places closer to home, such as the school district of Wappinger Falls, NY. We're witnessing an anti- LGBTQ+ backlash that takes various forms, such as "parents' rights" and Florida's "Stop WOKE Act," one that is also targeting anti-racist education.

From this perspective, the culture wars of our contemporary moment do not seem so different from their earlier incarnation in the late 1980s: both are part of a conservative continuum intended to stop and reverse social change. But today the stakes are greater because this regressive movement has spread beyond the classroom syllabus. As we witness the rise of hate groups nationally, we see state governments legislating against women's access to abortion, while also banning medical treatment to trans youth. Book banning is directly tied to state and local policies that enforce decisions about people's own bodies. Books and bodies represent our contemporary battleground.

In these times, research on gender and sexuality is more urgent than ever, and the work of the Gender Institute has never been more crucial. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to serve our wonderful Gender Institute community, and with Victoria Wolcott at the helm, I know that the Institute's future is in good hands.

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