

September 26, 2023

Dear Drs. Ramona Pérez and Monica Heller,

Open Letter: RE: 2023 AAA/CASCA Annual Meeting Cancellation

We are disappointed that the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and the Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA) have chosen to forbid scholarly dialogue at the important joint conference, themed “Transitions”, to be held in Toronto in November. Our panel, “Let’s Talk About Sex Baby: Why biological sex remains a necessary analytic category in anthropology”, was accepted on July 13th, 2023 after the submission “was reviewed by the AAA’s Section Program Chairs or by CASCA’s Scientific Committee/Comité Scientifique de la CASCA”. From the time of this acceptance until we received your letter dated September 25th, 2023, no one from the AAA or CASCA reached out to any of the panelists with concerns. Thus, it comes as a shock to all of us that the AAA and CASCA canceled the panel due to the false accusation that “the ideas were advanced in such a way as to cause harm to members represented by the Trans and LGBTQI of the anthropological community as well as the community at large.” Due to the serious nature of the allegation, we hope that, rather than maintaining secrecy, the AAA and CASCA will share with us and its membership documentation about the exact sources and nature of these complaints and the correspondence that led to this decision.

We are puzzled at the AAA / CASCA adopting as its own official stance that to support the continued use of biological sex categories (e.g., male and female; man and woman) is to imperil the safety of the LGBTQI community. Our panel description, written by Kathleen Lowrey, acknowledges that not all anthropologists need to differentiate between sex and gender. One of the abstracts explicitly expresses concerns that ignoring the distinction between sex and gender identity may cause harm to people in the LGBTQI community. In “No bones about it: skeletons are binary; people may not be”, Elizabeth Weiss wrote: “In forensics, however, anthropologists should be (and are) working on ways to ensure that skeletal finds are identified by both biological sex and their gender identity, which is essential due to the current rise in transitioning individuals.”

Kathleen Lowrey was key in bringing the panel together and in defining our unifying theme. Our panel included a group of diverse women, one of whom is a lesbian. In addition to having three fields of anthropology presented in our panel, our panel also included anthropologists from four countries with three languages – an international panel concerned about the erasure of women.

Spanish anthropologist Silvia Carrasco planned to present data that looked at “sex-based oppression, violence and exploitation” and the difficulty of addressing these issues when biological sex is disavowed. UK anthropologist Kathleen Richardson’s abstract highlighted issues surrounding material disparities between the sexes in the tech industry that are being erased by counting men who identify as trans as women rather than by having more women enter the field. Francophone Canadian anthropologist Michèle Sirois was to offer an ethnographic account of the ways “in which Quebec feminists have organized to document, clarify and oppose the exploitative surrogacy industry that hides under the guise of ‘equity’ and ‘inclusion’”, and in which surrogacy policies which exploit poor women are cynically framed as liberatory.

Your suggestion that our panel would somehow compromise “...the scientific integrity of the programme” seems to us particularly egregious, as the decision to anathematize our panel looks very much like an anti-science response to a politicized lobbying campaign. Had our panel been allowed to go

forward, we can assure you that lively contestation would have been welcomed by the panelists and may even have occurred between us, as our own political commitments are diverse. Instead, your letter expresses the alarming hope that the AAA and CASCA will become “more unified within each of our associations” to avoid future debates. Most disturbingly, following other organizations, such as the Society for American Archaeology, the AAA and CASCA have promised that “Going forward, we will undertake a major review of the processes associated with vetting sessions at our annual meetings and will include our leadership in that discussion.” Anthropologists around the world will quite rightly find chilling this declaration of war on dissent and on scholarly controversy. It is a profound betrayal of the AAA’s principle of “advancing human understanding and applying this understanding to the world’s most pressing problems”.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Lowrey, Associate Professor at University of Alberta

Elizabeth Weiss, Professor at San José State University; Heterodox Academy Faculty Fellow

Kathleen Richardson, Professor at De Montfort University

Michèle Sirois, Présidente de PDF Québec

Silvia Carrasco, Professor at Autonomous University of Barcelona

Carole Hooven, Associate, Department of Psychology, Harvard University; Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute (Hooven was slated to participate, but could not due to a change in circumstances.)