



# *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

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October 11 2023

Dr. Monica Heller  
President, Canadian Anthropology Society / Société canadienne  
d'anthropologie

## **Re: Cancellation of CASCA/AAA Conference Session**

Dear Dr. Heller,

I am writing you as President of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), an association of Canadian scholars committed to the principles of academic freedom and the merit principle. You can read more information about our organization at [www.safs.ca](http://www.safs.ca).

Our organization would like to voice our concerns regarding the cancellation by the joint CASCA/AAA conference of the talk entitled "Let's Talk about Sex Baby: Why biological sex remains a necessary analytic category in anthropology".

We believe that this decision fails to live up to the best traditions of scholarly disputation and harms both anthropological scholarship and scholars. In particular:

- The process used for the cancellation seems to privilege partisan complaint and calls for cancellation over scholarly communication.

Instead of deliberating differing views in a scholarly venue, the associations attempted to silence the discussion as a whole.

- The CASCA/AAA joint statement on the cancellation ("[No Place for Transphobia in Anthropology](#)") is bound to cause a chilling effect in the discipline particularly among junior scholars and those with precarious employment. The statement creates the impression that this is no longer a question of scholarly dispute but of moral rectitude. In such an environment, it will be difficult for scholars to break from the perceived consensus in order to follow evidence and pursue truth. The result will be arguments and scholarship that have not been thoroughly scrutinized and debated. Advancing knowledge requires such friction between different and sometimes seemingly irreconcilable perspectives.
- Your statement compares gender critical views to late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century "race science" by which you appear to refer to eugenics. This comparison is interesting

because eugenics was the consensus position taken by scholarly associations, progressive activists and governments across the West before this ideology was discredited following the rise of National Socialism in Germany during the 1930s. One might argue that the best antidote to such errors would have been openness to critique and opportunities to disrupt the ossification of academic knowledge rather than calls for 'a more unified' association.

- Finally, scholarship on issues of gender and sexuality is of great contemporary public concern. Limiting the parameters of the debate in such a heavy handed and public manner is likely to make the public see disciplines such as Anthropology as sites of ideological conformity rather than places where scholars search disinterestedly for truth through sometimes-messy disagreement. This will ultimately undermine public support for the academic enterprise as a whole.

We hope that you will consider the concerns brought forward by our organization and others who believe in the importance of a pluralist and liberal scholarly tradition that is open to critique and challenge.

Sincerely,

Robert G. Thomas  
President, Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship.

CC:

Dr. Ramona Perez, President, American Anthropological Association  
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