

Australian Historical Association Conference 2022: 'Urgent Histories'

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The 2022 Australian Historical Association Conference, held on Wadawurrung Country at the Deakin University Waterfront Campus, kicked off on 27 June as the AHA's first hybrid event. The conference opened with the outgoing Presidential Address by Melanie Oppenheimer. The days that followed comprised eight keynotes and 117 parallel sessions, book launches, round tables, plenaries and off-site historical tours (plus, of course, countless social events in between). The Australian Women's History Network (AWHN) stream contributed 20 presentations across three days and all showcased the importance of centralising gender in historical inquiry.

With the *Roe v. Wade* ruling overturned by the Supreme Court of the United States days before the conference began, the theme 'Urgent Histories' seemed all too fitting for those studying gender history. The impassioned response seen not only in America, but also in Australia, meant that issues of bodily autonomy and consent were at the forefront of many presentations. The AWHN proudly co-sponsored the opening keynote address by Zora Simic. Presenting research from her Australian Research Council Special Initiative Research Grant, *A History of Domestic Violence in Australia, 1850–2020*, with co-investigators Ann Curthoys and Catherine Kevin, Simic traced domestic violence in Australia from the 1970s to the present day. Arguing that such history was an 'intractably urgent' issue that has been shrouded in a 'veil of silence', Simic noted that while overall violence has decreased in recent decades, rates of domestic

violence have remained steady. She highlighted that this issue has historically been understood as heterosexual, remembering how 'second wave' feminists established 'battered women's shelters', and urged us to reconsider the issue from an intersectional lens. Although undoubtedly a confronting issue, this keynote firmly posited gender as front and centre for the conference that followed.

In line with contemporaneous discussions about changing consent laws, implementing new coercive control laws, and the popularity of figures such as Brittany Higgins and Grace Tame, it is perhaps unsurprising that the AWHN keynote panel was 'Understanding Consent in Twentieth Century Australia'. I was honoured to be part of this alongside Lisa Featherstone, both of us discussing our work on sexual violence, and Cassandra Byrnes, sharing her new and topical research about reproductive coercive control. Conversations on gendered violence were continued by Catherine Kevin, who diversified the discussion by examining abuse in popular culture, and Paige Mahoney, who argued that newspaper reporting on sexual violence in colonial Victoria was influenced by a strong desire to uphold standards of editorial propriety.

The importance of intersectional approaches to history was highlighted across a number of presentations. Jane Carey gave a timely presentation on birth control, arguing that its history is inherently linked with eugenics, and that it was the Black Lives Matter movement, not feminism, that foregrounded this issue in recent years. Jennifer Caligari examined Bessie Lee's role in the Women's Christian Temperance Union in New Zealand and questioned the supposed inclusion of Māori women. She argued that adult Māori women were often overlooked by the predominantly white WCTU and that, instead, it was Māori children who were of greater concern to the movement. Yuan Jing shared a special presentation on the Hui'an people of China. She introduced us to the centuries-old traditions of her culture and discussed some general characteristics and social stereotypes, many of which challenged typical Eurocentric understandings of Chinese society.

What was particularly enthralling about all of the research showcased as part of the AWHN stream was the sheer breadth of topics investigated and how we as audiences were forced to rethink our understandings of historical issues. In Michelle Staff's presentation on female experts in the mid-twentieth century, she noted that the topic was often associated with 'second wave' feminists whose expertise was on 'women's issues',

but a deeper look into the past reveals women who were experts in fields not explicitly tied to this label. Sarah Fulford highlighted the experiences and the struggles of Australian nurses during the Vietnam War and argued that focusing solely on the masculine experience of this time misrepresents the war's history. Chelsea Barnett revisited the classic Australian film, *The Sum of Us* (1994). Noting that previous research on this film has focused on the queer identity of the son, she pivoted to provide an entertaining and detailed analysis of the dynamic between father and son. Rachel Fensham, the chief investigator for the Australian Cultural Data Engine grant, tackled the issue of researching gender in databases, focusing on the problem of tracking name changes, and argued that improving catalogues would help to ensure that gendered experiences would not be lost. The issue of invisible histories was further discussed by Nadia Bailey, who showed us how to find traces of female same-sex attraction in the public press, using a study from an incest trial to build her case.

Special mention goes to Kate Laing, Bethany Phillips-Peddlesden, Natasha Walker, Micaela Pattison, Jeannine Baker and Thea Gardiner, all of whom contributed important presentations to the AWHN stream. Every panel added a new and nuanced layer of depth to understanding the history of gender and sexuality and it was a pleasure to attend each session. It was very special to see so many postgraduate students in this space too, showcasing how much the field is continuing to grow.

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