



March 23rd, 2020

Dear Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences and Western University,

The global COVID-19 pandemic is an event that will reshape our society in lasting ways. In this time of emergency, academic associations cannot meet face-to-face for their annual conferences. On Wednesday March 18th, 2020, the Federation held a meeting to discuss plans for the upcoming Congress 2020 scheduled from May 30th – June 5th, 2020 at Western University. This open letter is in response to the Federation's decision: to move Congress 2020 to an online format (i.e. "virtual Congress 2020").

The executive of the Sexuality Studies Association (SSA) held an emergency meeting Sunday, March 22nd, 2020, to discuss our plans going forward. We voted unanimously to *decline* the Federation's invitation to the move the SSA|AÉS's annual meeting to an online format.

The SSA|AÉS requests that Congress 2020 **not** be held in the proposed online format; we insist virtual worlds cannot match the verisimilitude and humanity of real life. We vehemently request the Federation and Western University to cancel the meetings for 2020.

In solidarity with the Black Canadian Studies Association, the Socialist Studies Association and the Canadian Sociological Association, the SSA|AÉS resists this call to virtual action. Like other inter/multi/disciplinary associations committed to critical scholarship, the SSA|AÉS shares political concerns articulated by the Black Canadian Studies Association in their open letter to the Federation.

Given the historical roots of critical sexuality studies as a scholarly field/area, as well as dialogues across academic-activist-artistic borders that shape the vibrancy of contemporary worldviews, the SSA|AÉS recognizes the obstacles and limitations of information and communication technologies (ICT), as with contemporary video-conferencing tools.

Claims that ICT capabilities match the purpose and function of academic conferences are false. These tools foreclose any opportunity for complicated and layered forms of human communication. The SSA|AÉS regards such complications as vital and transformative for understanding our world and building knowledge to support its emerging needs.

Further, online tools fail to meet the requirements of an equitable, diverse and inclusive community.

Such tools often exclude individuals living on another side of the digital divide. For example, potential attendees like the many artists, activists and community members are central knowledge producers within our field and yet not as privileged as the academic elite.

Simply put, online formats limit discussion as many tools are accessible only to a chosen few.

Members of the SSA|AÉS are predominantly graduate students, contract instructors and junior untenured faculty members. Without physical meetings and social gatherings, it is extremely difficult for more senior faculty, activists and artists to mentor our precarious members.

Perhaps more significant, however, is the lack of recognition the Federation has given to the very real dangers, risks and harm that virtual conferences present to our members, many of whom are in precarious and vulnerable positions already. Despite utopian visions, the internet is not a place for equity, diversity and inclusion.

The majority of our members are queer and trans identified; we have lived experiences of bullying, harassment and mobbing. Forcing our professional lives into virtual spaces increases our vulnerabilities and triggers past trauma for our constituency. Many of our members are subject to online harassment and violence based on their public research interests.

Members of the mainstream media already target the SSA|AÉS on an annual basis, and increasingly conservative and extremist groups threaten the physical and psychic wellbeing of sexuality studies scholars.

Our executive experiences annual harassment and phishing that often seeks to undermine our mission and goals. Since our inception, the SSA|AÉS maintains a *code of conduct* to mitigate possible troubles at our annual meetings. The SSA|AÉS executive is most grateful for university protocols and security; we have this history of working with both the host institutions' and Congress's security teams because of threats from the unknown public.

We refuse to put our members' physical and mental wellbeing at risk by participating in a "virtual Congress 2020". We ask that our concern be taken seriously by the Federation and addressed in its future communication.

We ask that you *cancel* plans for moving Congress 2020 online.

We request that Congress 2021 take place at Western University; we ask the Federation honour the many hours of labour our colleagues put forward into organizing Congress in London ON.

Finally, we urge the Federation to apply the theme *Confronting Colonialism and Anti-Black Racism for Congress 2021*. The issues emerging from this theme are too important for scholars across the disciplines and everyone residing in Canada.

Sincerely,

The SSA Steering Committee