

# Exposing Exceptionalisms: B(e)aring Complicities and Framing Resistances

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## From the Guest Editors

# EXPOSING EXCEPTIONALISMS: B(E)ARING COMPLICITIES AND FRAMING RESISTANCES

**Marie Lovrod and Corinne L. Mason**

Exceptionalisms are reductive, short-sighted, and often convoluted rationalizations for refusing relational accountabilities. They systematically deliver narrowly conceived benefits to some at great expense to others, who are habitually held from public view and voice. In neoliberal times, excuses for ignoring damage and justifying harms are legion. Our planet is choking on the standard business practice of externalizing costs while permitting pollution, social ills, and health consequences to pile up in the lives of marginalized peoples, species, and places, with complicit nation states increasingly ill-equipped to address the fallout. Some exceptionalisms, like the “doctrine of discovery,” are perpetrated for centuries with virtual impunity, masquerading as sacred edict until the mass graves of children surfacing from residential school grounds reveal assimilative evils that are more difficult to ignore for those who have benefitted most.

When we launched the call for this special issue, there was no way we could have known that so many precarious global situations, pushed to the brink of crisis, would reach such a resounding sequence of cumulative tipping points. As we go to press, Russia claims exceptionalist fears of invasion upon its borders as an excuse to lay siege to Ukraine, while other leading nations bow to disaster capitalisms by providing just enough support to extend the violence, sending streams of white refugees to countries that have been less-than welcoming toward racialized victims of globalizing imperialisms.

American sexual exceptionalisms, which overstate and underdeliver progressive approaches to civil, women’s, and 2SLGBTQIA+ rights, now lay the groundwork for the mainstreaming of white supremacist theories of population “replacement.” The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* potentially endangers concurring precedents including *Griswold*, *Lawrence*, and *Obergefell*, which protected contraception, ended sodomy laws, and advanced same-sex marriage rights. The current transnational white nationalist, anti-democratic, fundamentalist surge has



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unleashed permission for wide ranging violence in every direction, from online trolling of a family-friendly drag show in Northern Ontario, to mass shootings becoming so commonplace in the United States that modest efforts to document some of the North American firearms trade have finally made some progress, if only by inches.

Similarly, Canadian exceptionalisms have permitted and enabled an occupation of downtown Ottawa by white nationalist anti-vaccine protesters, organized, in part, with ex-military personnel. Politicians who sought to capitalize on the situation made limited efforts to distance these shifts in Canadian culture from the attempted coup on January 6<sup>th</sup> in Washington D.C., under the veneer of a tattered Canadian claim to colonialist “civility.” At a time when white supremacist violence dominates the extremist landscape, the province of Quebec has passed Bill 96 to “protect” the French language, most negatively affecting Indigenous and immigrant communities, not long after passing Bill 21, which “protects” a unique secularism, sustaining “cultural” Christianity, under the long shadow of the Islamophobic murders of six men at the Quebec City Mosque.

Under neoliberalism, public post-secondary institutions, with Canada’s Laurentian University a now infamous example, have learned to generate rhetorics of financial exigency in ways that evacuate even the bland commitments to equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization (EDID) that inform organizational branding exercises, of substance. Abandoning already meagre investments in actualizing those promises, and the futures they might enable if more rigorous and generative values of good governance were permitted to frame them, the opportunity to develop meaningful indicators of reciprocity with the planet and its peoples are too easily trampled in the rush to corporatize brazen refusals of public accountabilities.

We consider it vital to the mission of this issue to provide a critical commemoration of the short and long-term academic and community impacts of Laurentian’s exceptionalist approaches to higher education, corporate law, and public service, more broadly. The cancellation of Indigenous Studies and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, among many other dynamic programs, efforts to sell off donated assets and protected lands, the seizure of public research funds to settle ill-advised debts, and repudiations of transparency are all the structural (and very personally political) outcomes of signing equity and environmental charters, but creating inactionable policies, while undercutting, marginalizing, and de-professionalizing scholarship and teaching grounded in substantive engagements with social justice disparities. Expertise that commits to intersectional, collective, and reciprocal movements toward justice is dismissed by universities in which middle managers, routinely hired without critical training in the fields most affected by such willful ignorance, are encouraged to download messaging about interpersonal respect and individualized conflict resolution in conditions that require substantive systems transformations based on rigorous engagements with minoritized critiques from those enduring the worst effects of such extractive logics.

Ron Srigley<sup>1\*</sup> describes Laurentian's disreputable process as the "manhandling" of a preventable situation. By invoking the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act (CCAA), which denied unions and even governments ready access to the information necessary to assess and respond to such an egregious breach of trust, institutional "leaders" dismantled more democratic measures that could have helped to protect public investments, sooner. While several members of the board of governors have stepped down and two complicit administrators have tabled plans to leave the institution, hope for healing, according to a recent CBC report, is now sought from the Indigenous communities so summarily disregarded in the Laurentian take-down, leaving those most affected, once again, to clean up the messes of those privileged enough by corrupt systems to practice violence under the guise of a manufactured crisis with relative public and personal impunity.

Efforts to manipulate the rule of law for economic reasons bring to mind the SNC Lavalin scandal, in which the press adopted an obscuring, sensationalist "he said, she said" construction of events, which very nearly permitted the popular political claim of "jobs, jobs, jobs" to drown out the criminal behavior of Canadian mining companies abroad. Known the world over for extractive policies that harm peoples and places, too many companies replicate residential school outsourcing policies, enabling direct attacks on Indigenous communities through arms-length security forces hired for that purpose. Adjudication of these crimes in states depleted by disparity diplomacies, renders judicial systems subject to bribes and ensures that retirement investors at home learn little or nothing of such nefarious activities abroad. The fallacious logic that sees democracy and capitalism as aligned and mutually constituting ignores how seamlessly capital weaves together with dictatorships, fascisms, and extremisms, all fueled by inequities that most democratic states claim to ameliorate, but simultaneously tolerate and promote under neoliberal politics.

Contemporary exceptionalisms are so commonplace that many slip by unremarked in the busyness of overheated neoliberal efforts to avoid asking: what is the just, meaningful, and critical work that matters most for supporting mutual flourishing across peoples, species, places, and spaces? Exceptionalisms are fundamental to prevailing structures of violence, bias, and the micro- and macro-aggressions they animate within and across borders and bodies. Practices for facilitating aggression and ignorance as privileged measures of power map rather neatly onto the current global pandemic to which they have given rise.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a study in exceptionalisms; mobilizing the variable velocities of neoliberal oppressions as a primary vector of its concomitant spread of polarizing



*An homage to Brigitte DePape*

<sup>1</sup> \* Srigley, R. (2021, December 10). Inside Laurentian University's Demise. Canadian Dimension. <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/the-fix-inside-laurentian-universitys-demise>

xenophobic discourses, related police brutalities, predictable mortalities, and other measurable institutionalized biases. In Canada, pervasive disregard for the elderly and infirm were both exposed and accelerated in the early days of the pandemic. This cavalier indifference to vulnerable groups continues to pervade the institutional and cultural landscape, via disinformed but politically expedient moves to “post-pandemic life” and “learning to live with the virus.”

Rampant labour abuses continue, based on minimal (or non-existent) investments in public health and other institutions, too often left to dress the windows of purported commitments to good governance, while the one percent ponder privatization and laugh all the way to their offshore tax havens. In a blink, unsung essential workers were striving to hold space for battered healthcare workers, struggling to secure the vulnerable behind frontlines made worse by unrepentant demands for freedoms to harm others with impunity, whether by ignoring public health mandates or radicalizing the disgruntled against mutual care.

Claims that “we are all in this together” obscure the power differentials between those privileged enough to socially distance and the often intergenerational and overcrowded public and “slumlord” housing that made such public health orders futile. As people move back into “normal life,” those who are shut in, elderly, and disabled in Canada are targeted for expedient neglect and demise amidst a global mass death and disabling event. The threat of coronavirus variants (and other viruses, such as what is currently known as “monkeypox”) to healthcare systems, the employment sector, and what is left of any meaningful social safety net, is ignored for political convenience. Expertise that positions wearing a mask—an ordinary and simple act of care (already necessary to surviving in the world’s most polluted cities)—as the most effective tool to endure this (and perhaps the next) plague, is politically positioned as a threat to individual bodily autonomy while “freedom” is expressed as the mass spread of contagions. Cultures of exceptionalism distort, absolutely, because they cling desperately to models of power that sustain prevailing monocultures, eliminating smarter and more effective strategies for growing diversely accountable reciprocities.

Resisting exceptionalisms then, is close, difficult work that takes place in both the micro-spaces of interpersonal relations and in wider resistances to the self-justifying macro-hostilities of privilege that root racist, phobic, ableist, and misogynist abandonment of even modestly accurate long view assessments, stealing back hard-won inches accumulated toward more equitable opportunities and futures. Resisting exceptionalisms is tricky—barriers to dismantling structural and institutional injustices are myriad and shifting, as are our complicities in systems that, ultimately, disempower us. In the academy, our positions—however precarious—place us squarely within histories and contemporary forms of colonialism and imperialism, even as we seek to rebuke their continued functioning. The university is both a corporate entity and a liberatory space, and therefore, not exceptional. Instead, the academy is both a microcosm and a producer of societal stratifications and solidarities, including through our intellectual collaborations and even friendships. Importantly, there remain generative prospects for critically engaged feminist praxis that refuse the dichotomy of town and gown.

In this special issue, scholars critically analyze the productive tensions that characterize academic-activist community engagements. Challenging the inequities that characterize

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hegemonic power, privilege, and status-quo logics, the papers, projects, and podcasts presented here expose scholar-activist complicities with and challenges to exceptionalisms. Authors address both the difficulties and possibilities of community-university engagements in teaching, research, collaborations, and publishing from a wide-range of theoretical and empirical entry points.

Our special issue begins with Shaista Aziz Patel and Dia Da Costa's critical reflection on collaborative writing across caste in the context of academic solidarities and friendship. In their article "‘We cannot write about complicity together’: Limits of Cross-Caste Collaborations in Western Academy," Patel and Da Costa consider the place of collaboration in the academy contextualized by calls for solidarities among Indigenous, Black, and other racialized scholars. Making visible the violence of caste in the university and beyond, Patel and Da Costa's interwoven—and, at times, very separate—life writing engagements with caste power and personal positionalities invite readers to (re)consider the role of anti-caste feminist praxis within the broader conditions of the neoliberal colonialist university, as it follows privileging practices that obscure and ensure the power of dominant caste South Asians over Dalit and caste-oppressed Muslim scholars.

In "Avoiding Risk, Protecting the ‘Vulnerable’: A Story of Performative Ethics and Community Research Relationships," Rachel Loewen Walker and Andrew Hartman illustrate how complications in community-led research can arise through exceptionalist applications of ethics processes. Their article focuses on a \$1.1 million project on gender-based violence perpetuated against and within the 2SLGBTQ+ community in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, led by the local pride organization, OUTSaskatoon. As community-based researchers seeking ethics approval through the University of Saskatchewan, they illuminate the barriers to community-university partnerships involving organizations working directly with "vulnerable" communities. Demanding much more nuanced understandings of and relationships with community organizations, Loewen Walker and Hartman interrogate what is behind the "risk aversion" central to university ethical reviews. Thinking through the harm of purportedly protective methods, they challenge exclusive formulations of expertise and knowledge creation; like Patel and Da Costa, they offer insight into the complexity and promise of relationality as a more rigorous rubric, which, in this case, highlights substandard academic applications of institutional commitments to community engagement.

"Rethinking Gendered Violence through Critical Feminist Community-Engaged Research" by Emily Colpitts and Alison Crosby offers two case studies of community-engaged research on sexualized violence—one focused on Canadian universities and the other on wartime violence in Guatemala—to demonstrate the reductive logics of presumed universalisms found in feminist and human rights framings. Taking issue with a common "violence against women paradigm," Colpitts and Crosby refuse both the concretization of the supposed ideal survivor of violence and voyeuristic spectatorship over victimhood. Skeptical of institutional investments in community-university engagements, Colpitts and Crosby resist the notion that universities and researchers working in communities are neutral, harkening back to Loewen Walker and Hartman's revelations about how community-based knowledge and community-led research are treated within academic routines.

Ina Seethaler's "Women and Allies in Action: College Students as 'Diversity Workers' in the Activism Classroom" focuses on the ways university classrooms too often position community activism, specifically within women's and gender studies programs, without attending to the ways that faculty and students are themselves impacted by the disparities they study. Grounded in Sara Ahmed's critiques of the academic "diversity worker," Seethaler offers student insights, gathered from a community-invested course, to illustrate how racist, misogynistic, and phobic conditions prevailing in the neoliberal academy fail to recognize the constraints and limitations imposed on students struggling with institutional pressures to realize their imaginative and material potentials to mobilize meaningful educational justice projects.

The theme of "learning social change" continues in the article by Amie Thurber, Helen Buckingham, Jordenn Martens, Rebecca Lusk, Darrylann Becker, and Stacy Spenser. Critically concerned with the professional neoliberalization of the field of social work, Thurber et al. consider how instructors can connect students with social movement organizing in community-engaged teaching. Centering solidarity, reciprocity, and justice as social work goals, the authors offer an in-depth case study of a graduate-level seminar project that requires students to participate in several local justice-oriented campaigns over nine months. In the article, students reflect on their projects, positionalities, and expertise (or lack thereof) in climate justice, foster care, immigration justice, and mass incarceration, attending to COVID-19-induced disruptions to community organizing and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement over the summer of 2020.

Critical reflections on the complexities and contradictions of enacting feminist praxis within the neoliberal university continue with the article "Decolonizing or Doing the Best with What We have? Feminist University-Community Engagement outside WGSS Programs" by Nafisa Tanjeem and Michael J. Illuzzi. For Tanjeem and Illuzzi, feminist curricular praxis extends beyond women's and gender studies programs, where feminist apprehensions about university-community engagements must remain central to rendering service-learning initiatives more effective. Like Thurber et al., the authors reflect on disruptions to teaching and learning during COVID-19, and on the responses of universities to anti-Black racism and police violence by way of EDID initiatives. Ultimately, Tanjeem and Illuzzi argue that neoliberal expectations for faculty to "do more with less" create increasingly confining conditions under which to dismantle hierarchal relationships between universities and communities, which were never entirely separate entities in any case. Still, as the authors show, collaborative pedagogical approaches that center decolonial and feminist praxis, and subversive moves to extract resources from the university for more effective community engagements, endure.

Calla Evans and May Friedman provide a conversational exchange on teaching and service in "On Being the 'Fat Person': Possibilities and Pitfalls for Fat Activist Engagement in Academic Institutions." As two differently situated scholars, teachers, and activists, Evans and Friedman consider the role of "the fat expert" in the academy. Taking up this issue's ingoing concerns about the role of community knowledge in the university and offering a critical analysis of the politics of collaboration, these authors explore what it means to be "the fat person" in colonial and fatphobic institutions, as administrators commit to EDID initiatives and frameworks.

Their reflections on how to be fat scholars in the fatphobic academy invite readers to wrestle with the complicities of working within and against institutional confines.

Continuing efforts to think about community-led expertise through the immediacies of diverse embodiments, Claire Carter's "Collaborative Movement: What Queering Dance Makes Possible" anchors this issue. Carter illustrates the "uneasiness" of feminist praxis, as outlined by Evans and Friedman, in another context. Carter presents personal and theoretical reflections that arise from stepping outside the comfort zones generated by daily movements within a public institutional space, into dance research based in community-grounded practices. Exploring challenges to queer and trans-affirming movement praxis in Regina, Saskatchewan, Carter's collaborative project *Queering Dance* foregrounds concerns with researchers' accountabilities to challenge the coloniality of space and place, while unsettling heteronormative and gender-binarized community-based dance programming. Offering fresh possibilities of being together amidst structural and institutional challenges, Carter holds space for feminists to "keep moving."

The exceptionalist logics laid bare in this special issue showcase the rich and fierce feminist, queer, decolonial, anti-racist, and anti-caste critiques offered by scholars committed to community-engaged praxis beyond the limits of the institutionalized imaginary. Still, the incessant erasures of transitional and transnational forms of violence leave much to think through in relation to university commitments to community. Rather than offer a conclusion, we extend an invitation to continue this conversation beyond the topics, case studies, and theoretical approaches offered here. There is much more to say about how we bear the lived realities of enduring manufactured crises—poverty, overdose, houselessness, migration, climate change, and war—and there are more prevailing complicities and effective resistances to lay bare. We welcome ongoing dialogue on these and other fronts.

Heartfelt thanks to the artists, authors, reviewers, podcasters, as well as the conversational exchange and field report contributors to this issue for trusting us with your perspectives and expertise, and for labouring alongside us as we bumped along the rocky path of publishing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Your answers to our call for papers have placed us all in a set of conversations that have enriched our thinking, challenged our expectations, and led us to new ways of conceptualizing exceptionalisms. Thank you to Dawna Rose for the arresting cover art. Many thanks also to the peer reviewers for this issue. Your keen insight, careful critiques, and recommendations have guided authors, and this special issue, in new and exciting directions. Finally, thank you to the *Engaged Scholar Journal* editorial team for keeping us on track, offering us grace during more than a few hiccups, and for ensuring that this issue (finally) went to print.



## About the Editors

**Marie Lovrod** (She/They) is Associate Professor and Program Chair of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Saskatchewan. Born and now working on Treaty 6 Territory, a traditional gathering place for the Cree, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Dene, Ojibway, Saulteaux/Anisnaabe, and Inuit peoples whose histories, languages and cultures continue to inform the futures of all Treaty people, she remains committed to decolonization. Her research engages the intergenerational, cultural, social and interspecies effects of economic and structural violence in local, national and transnational contexts. She has served as president of two national scholarly associations, Women's and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes and the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, as well as the editorial board of *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture and Social Justice*. Invested in creative approaches to complex issues, nurtured in processes of respectful, co-constructive meaning-making, she values humility in collaborative co-learning projects. She works from the principle that everyone and everything matters. Email: marie.lovrod@usask.ca

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