FROM **HOPE** TO **ACTION** THROUGH **KNOWLEDGE**

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The Scholarly Advancement of an Academic Project on Gender Justice

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Introduction

In the year 2000, just some twenty years ago, Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) was a small postgraduate programme enrolling a handful of students working towards Honours and master's degrees.¹ At the beginning of Prof O'Connell's term as Rector and Vice-Chancellor the WGS programme was just beginning to consolidate through the secondment/appointment of a Director and a contract lecturer and was in the throes of developing an undergraduate programme. Prof O'Connell's rectorship of UWC saw Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) grow from a small and precarious programme hosted by voluntary lecturers into a fully-fledged department with a prolific research output and four permanent teaching staff members, offering a Bachelor of Arts degree major in Women's and Gender Studies, as well as postgraduate degrees in Women's and Gender Studies.

Today WGS is widely known for its substantial and ongoing contributions to innovative feminist teaching, research and activism. Nationally it is viewed as "one of the most successful women's and gender studies

¹ Historical accounts are always contested and we acknowledge that this is our own narrative of the path of Women's and Gender Studies over the last 20 years and do not claim that such an account speaks for the many who have been a part of this journey.

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units in South Africa” (Byrne, 2017: p. 123). Within the university it is also recognised for important management and leadership contributions to the Faculty and the University more broadly. For example, two of the four staff members have served as deputy deans over the last decade. The development of the initial relatively insecure programme-based offerings to a secure established and thriving academic department has much to do with the multiple layers of support made available from the Faculty and the University senior management, and the strategic vision of Prof Brian O’Connell and his team at the helm of the University. It is not accidental that the programme began its rapid upscaling and strengthening at the same moment that Prof O’Connell took up the position of Rector. In this chapter we reflect on the contributions of the vision, mentorship and strategic leadership of Prof O’Connell and his team through the optics of WGS’s journey to institutional embeddedness and scholarly strength. We begin by situating this story in the historical context of the marginality of women’s and gender studies and the contemporary context of a growing right-wing swing and the dominance of neoliberalism across global contexts, further emphasising some of the unique aspects of the development of WGS at UWC.

Women’s and Gender Studies: International histories and contemporary precarity

While feminist and gender scholarship has a long history, the institutionalisation of Women’s and Gender Studies within universities is relatively new, evident in global contexts only since the late 1960s. Globally Women’s and Gender Studies programmes, units and departments are diverse, but tend to share a common history of feminist research and activism, located in and emerging from larger social justice struggles. North American-based gender studies, for example, have their roots in the civil rights movements of the 1960s and were strengthened by the emergence of second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Burghardt & Colbeck, 2005; Moscovitz et al., 2014). Burghardt and Colbeck writing from the US context note that, “[e]ven with shrinking funds for higher education, 300 Women’s Studies units opened during the 1970s” (2005: p. 301). In the African context, reflecting very different struggles for social justice, the feminist activism underpinning such units gained traction only in the 1980s and 1990s within contexts of nationalist struggles. As Amina Mama and Amanda Gouws have noted: “In the African context, gender and women’s studies has been a growth area over the last two decades” (Mama, 2016: p. 123; see also Gouws, 2004: p. 44).

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While there has clearly been growth of Women's and Gender Studies units, they are also widely acknowledged as sites of marginality and precarity across global contexts. On the one hand, orthodox Eurocentric disciplinary boundaries have led to tensions around where to locate the interdisciplinary feminist scholarship, teaching and activism associated with WGS units. As a result, these programmes have typically been located within a larger department, school or faculty, or as a separate research institute, rather than offered as an independent undergraduate or postgraduate degree option (Burghardt & Colbeck, 2005; Gouws, 2014; Byrne, 2017). In other cases, WGS is woven into degree programmes in an interdisciplinary fashion, with courses or modules on WGS, rather than as a stand-alone degree.

In addition, there are challenges of multiple loads for precariously positioned staff members. Those working on WGS or within WGS institutes or programmes are often expected to handle a wide range of 'gender issues' on campus, including institutional gender policies, gender sensitivity training, and counselling and psychosocial support services for female students (see Mulugeta, 2007). Thus, "It is left to women to raise gender consciousness, earning them the labels of 'bitches' in the academy when they try to disrupt patriarchal power relations in educational institutions" (Tamale & Oloka-Onyango, 2001: p.11, cited in Gouws, 2004: p. 46).

There are, in addition, serious challenges around resources and sustainability where WGS staff are often 'on-loan' from their home departments, undertaking their teaching on a voluntary basis with little or no formal institutional recognition of additional workloads (Gouws, 2004: p. 45), or where WGS elements are added into larger courses (Burghardt & Colbeck, 2005: p. 306).

Questions of sustainability for the feminist teaching and research typical of WGS units are highly relevant at the moment. Right-wing political swings and the intensification of neoliberal consumerist and marketised norms in higher education have impacted negatively on the humanities in general and more marginal scholarly programmes like women's and gender studies in particular. To cite one recent example, the international world of gender studies reeled at the news in October 2018 that the Hungarian government intended to close down all gender studies programmes in their universities with effect from 15 October 2018 (Petö, 2018; Reisin, 2018; Von Alemann, 2018). Official arguments put forward were that there is no need for these graduates in the labour market given

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a lack of available jobs (Petö, 2018; Von Alemann, 2018: p. 1; Oestreich 2018; Redden, 2018; Zsubori, 2018) and that “Gender Studies is ‘an ideology, not a science’ and has, therefore, ‘no business [being taught] in universities’” (Redden 2018, cited in Von Alemann, 2018: p. 1). The deployment of the concept of ‘gender’ and by extension university-based gender studies to construct a ‘common enemy’ in the project of nation-state solidarity is of concern to all WGS programmes globally (Petö, 2018: n.p.).

This is but one example of current right-wing nationalist turns that manifest in attacks on critical scholarship and social justice agendas in the academy in general, and on feminist scholarship, teaching and research, in particular. And while attacks on WGS units in the SA academy have been less brutal and less obvious, such units also remain precarious. As Gouws has noted, “[m]ost GWS programmes are under-resourced” (2004: p. 45). In a recent empirical piece on the current state of WGS departments Deirdre Byrne (2017: p. 127) has concluded that “women’s and gender studies does not fare very well in postcolonial South African universities”, locating this as the result of the dominant “neoliberal approach to tertiary education, which commodifies knowledge offerings in terms of their market value”, and fails “to respond to the need for gender transformation in post-apartheid South Africa”. As Moscovitz et al. observe, the WGS curriculum “is historically underfunded and continually asked to assert its institutional value” (2014: p. 236), adding that “[w]e all know who wins battles between business and liberal arts schools” (2014: p. 241).

It is against this context – local as well as global – that the growth and development of WGS at UWC under the period of Prof O’Connell’s leadership needs to be understood. In particular – and in contrast to the national trends observed by Byrne – WGS at UWC has benefited from the consistent institutional support needed to grow – evidenced through its institutional location as a Department rather than a programme.

South African contexts of higher education and gender studies

The South African academy arguably only began taking feminist teaching and theorising seriously towards the end of the twentieth century (Mama, 1996). South African women’s activism, in contrast, has a long history of organisation aimed at challenging the economic, social and political inequalities experienced through our gendered, raced and classed histories of colonialism, segregation, apartheid, and, in the past 25 years, the post-apartheid period (see Mama, 1996; Morrell & Clowes, 2016; Lewis, 1996).

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Some of the earliest texts emerging out of the South African academy to employ a feminist perspective appeared in the 1970s and these relied heavily on collaborations with women in local communities. Located in a critique informed by socialist feminist discourses, a large amount of the gender-orientated efforts of the mid-1970s explored the lives of working-class black women, working with feminist theorising from the North and drawing on local histories and experiences to develop the concept of 'triple oppression' (see Morrell & Clowes, 2016: p. 6; also see, for example, Bozzoli, 1983; Cock, 1980; Gaza, 2007; Hassim, 2006; Hassim & Walker, 1993; Walker, 1990, 1991). In a context of increased repression in the 1980s, studies employing a feminist perspective foregrounded the activism of women, using a focus on the politics of the domestic, on women's protest and resistance, to show how using gender as a category of analysis could inform theorising about class and race. As protest against the apartheid regime intensified over the 1980s, it was women's activist organisations largely outside the academy, organisations aligned to the United Democratic Front such as the Natal Organisation of Women, the United Women's Congress and the Federation of Transvaal Women that placed women's issues on national – and international – agendas. Likewise, feminist activist critiques of patriarchal national liberation movements across the continent informed local struggles. It was activists, for example, who brought together the local and regional groupings of women forming the Women's National Coalition in 1992 that was central in the development of the strategies and resolutions aimed at ensuring women's rights were embedded in the negotiations, policy and political transformations of the early 1990s that underpinned the development of the new constitution.

Shaped by the local, regional and national contexts of injustices of apartheid, activism aimed at challenging gender and sexual inequalities and related violence has had a profound impact on shaping the development of programmes in gender studies in the South African academy. While UNISA's Centre for Women's Studies (later the Institute for Gender Studies) had been established in 1984, the 1990s brought renewed urgency to questions of gender equity in the new dispensation. Emerging out of student and staff activism, for example, the establishment of the Gender Equity Unit (GEU) at UWC in 1993 was specifically "dedicated to ensuring that women-sensitive policies be developed at UWC" (Hames, 2016: p. 21). The GEU's emphasis was on the importance of building gender and sexual rights into the future dispensation, both in universities and the larger society, and played a key role in motivating for the development

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of an academic programme in gender studies (Hames, 2016). Two years later, in 1995, the GEU successfully launched the Women's and Gender Studies programme, (now the Department of Women's & Gender Studies) at UWC, coinciding with the launch of the University of Natal's Gender Studies Centre and the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Pretoria. This was followed, in 1996, by the launch of the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town and the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Venda.

While the naming of these programmes, along with institutionalising or mainstreaming, feminist scholarship and pedagogies risked losing the critical feminist activist focus, the establishment of these programmes and units provided important space for consolidation and networking as well as for collaborative research and teaching. This was reflected in the widening of feminist research from a focus on 'women's issues' to employing gender analysis more broadly – to an understanding of how gender analysis is necessary to understand all historical, social and economic processes.

The development of institutionalised gender scholarship was also accompanied and promoted by the inception of the first academic feminist journal in the country, *Agenda*, signifying an important landmark in the institutionalisation of an academic feminist community. Launched in 1987 by women activists based at the University of Natal, the journal's aim was to provide a "forum for comment, discussion and debate on all aspects of women's lives ... to attempt to understand the position of women within South African society" (Agenda Collective, 1987, cited in Meer, 1997: p. 6). Publishing poetry, creative writing, first-hand experiences and perspectives as well as formal academic work, the journal aimed to challenge the artificial divide between activism and the academy. In 2002 a further feminist journal, speaking to the larger African context, *Feminist Africa*, was launched by the African Gender Institute at UCT. More recently UNISA has added *Gender Questions* to the list of local and regional feminist journals.

As documented by Morrell and Clowes (2017), the expansion of feminist research sites and journals saw a proliferation of gender scholarship in South Africa since the late 1980s, rising further in the late 1990s and spiking in 2009. At the same time the situation in terms of more permanent institutional locations has not changed much with respect to precarity and may even have declined, as Byrne (2017) argues. Women's

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and Gender Studies departments and institutions have remained in a precarious and marginal position in the South African academy and many gains have been lost as programmes get closed and departments merged into schools, for example. Such challenges have however *not* characterised WGS at UWC, as will be shown. While there have been and remain challenges, WGS has continued to strengthen and thrive.

Women's and Gender Studies at UWC: A tale of institutional care and strategic engagement

It is against this larger context of local, regional, national and international feminist organising and activism that what is now known as the Women's and Gender Studies Department (WGS) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) was first imagined. The history of UWC as a 'struggle university' during the larger mass anti-apartheid democratic struggle is well known and continues to impact on the institutional culture as well as on scholarship, curriculum development and pedagogical practice. Much of current South African gender studies in the academic context emerged in response to the oppressive contexts of apartheid and were bound up with the larger mass democratic struggles of the 21st-century. At UWC, for example, mobilisation against gender inequalities were powerfully bound up with raced and classed inequalities of South African histories of colonisation and apartheid. The Women's and Gender Studies programme – first imagined by the feminist academics and students who formed the GEU in 1993 – is a concrete example of this.

It was just two years after the formation of the GEU that the Women's and Gender Studies academic programme was established in 1995, with the GEU taking primary responsibility for gender and sexual justice policy and practice on campus. Hosted initially within the English Department in the Faculty of Arts, the programme offered honours and master's degrees to primarily mature students with track records of feminist activism in women's organisations and on women's issues (Shefer & Aulette, 2005). The teaching and supervision of the postgraduate programme relied largely on collaboration between, and good will amongst, critical feminist scholars in different departments across the university, teaching and supervision that, at least in the first few years, was largely not formally recognised as part of the academic workload. In the absence of any dedicated teaching staff, the postgraduate programme's development and success depended on the voluntary labour and generosity of feminist

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scholars located in diverse departments such as English, Psychology, Politics, Sociology, History, Law, Physics and Science, guided by an engaged and supportive advisory committee.

It was only in the year 2000, with support from the Faculty of Arts leadership, that two full-time academic staff, Tamara Shefer, a staff member seconded from the Psychology Department at UWC to be director, and Lindsay Clowes, a historian, together with Glenise Levendal, a postgraduate student hired as an administrator, were contracted for three years to Women's and Gender Studies. Just three years later a review of the three Gender Studies programmes offered in the Western Cape (by this time the University of Stellenbosch was offering a postgraduate programme) noted that all three programmes were growing, that Gender Studies "was an area of strength" in the region and that "[a] consideration of the quality of staff resources available across the three universities, and the professional relationships amongst them, shows that the region is exceptionally well endowed in this regard" (WGS Review Report, 2003: n.p.). The review report also noted that "gender and racial equity is a constitutional requirement, and it is incumbent upon South African universities to provide graduates with the research and analytical skills that can change the fine words of the constitution into a material reality for those disadvantaged historically by gender and race" (WGS Review Report, 2003: n.p.). Dovetailing with UWC's positioning and history as a university of the left, this understanding translated into additional support from university leadership, support that manifested very concretely in the creation of two permanent posts as well as one contract position, and that saw Desiree Lewis, a well-known local and international figure in feminist scholarship, join the programme at the beginning of 2006. Another extremely positive review, in 2007, saw the recommendation that the programme become either a research institute or a department in a faculty. Given the continued marginal status of gender studies units globally, and the development by this stage of a significant undergraduate programme, a decision was taken that the WGS programme should become a Department in the Faculty of Arts effective from 2009. Another contract position was opened up in 2011 for Sisa Ngabaza, a doctoral student, and her position was made permanent in 2014. Against a context in which the survival of Gender Studies units was increasingly threatened globally, it is important to note that Prof O'Connell and his senior leadership team saw the importance of this new programme and the need for it to be given access to the institutional resources to thrive.

Strategic vision of UWC and Women's and Gender Studies

Both due to our leadership role in the Faculty, but also as a result of the direction and contents of the strategic plans of UWC as articulated in the IOPs, WGS benefited greatly from the strategic planning that was initiated by the leadership of the Rector and key senior managers. WGS staff members participated actively in the planning processes of IOPs over this time, the 2005-2009, the 2010-2014 and the latest of 2015-2019, and have also taken leadership in developing and implementing plans in our department and the faculty more broadly through service as chairpersons as well as deputy dean of teaching and learning. Women's and Gender Studies' development as a fledgling department was supported by and strengthened by the university's key strategic emphases. At multiple levels, the care that the university took in developing the core tasks of research, teaching and learning, international collaboration and community engagement through dedicated planning processes, assisted WGS to develop as a department and to crystallise the potential already evident in the small department.

Curricular development

One of the first priorities of the emerging WGS programme in 2000 was to expand the curriculum beyond the small Honours and master's Programme that had been on offer since 1995. The undergraduate programme was first offered in 2001, with students able to take second- and third-year 10-credit modules either as electives or towards a major. *Who is Afraid of Feminism?* was the first course to be offered by the WGS Programme at second-year level in the first semester of 2001 drew just 7 students, in contrast to our current average intake in excess of 120 students. By 2002 five undergraduate modules, together with recommended modules in other departments, formed a suite of modules at undergraduate level to allow for a Bachelor of Arts major in Women's and Gender Studies. The undergraduate courses have continued to be offered and developed and strengthened over the years, serving as core service modules for a number of other professional and academic programmes. These modules aimed to introduce students to key concepts and ideas emerging from feminist theorising and to alert students to the centrality of gender in all aspects of private, cultural and public life. Because there were relatively limited South African-based/focused texts initially available, extensive use was made of articles published in *Agenda*, and, as time went on other journals such as *Feminist Africa*. In taking up an interdisciplinary

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approach that acknowledged the history and significance of local feminist activism the pedagogical approach also deliberately retained strong links with other sites and departments and organisations addressing gender scholarship, theory and activism.

A further priority for the WGS programme in this period was to develop the postgraduate offerings of WGS. Beyond strengthening the already established honours and master's programmes, we rapidly developed a PhD registration, with the first PhD in WGS graduating in 2003. WGS has since graduated 14 further PhDs in WGS with over 20 currently registered in our department, and WGS staff also graduate and continue to supervise PhDs and master's in Arts in other departments such as Psychology and ISD.

The teaching and learning project in WGS

Feminist scholarship, especially given the well-established dictum "the personal is political", has had a long engagement with (re)thinking more creatively and reflexively about pedagogical practices in the university. As Bell Hooks (1994: p. 12) argued over three decades ago: "[T]he classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy". By and through emphasising teaching and research foregrounding social justice, the Department has taken a leadership role in the Faculty and beyond, encouraging and supporting colleagues to employ more innovative pedagogies and to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Teaching in the Department has been acknowledged by awards for excellence by the Faculty as well as nationally through HELTASA and a TAU fellowship for Lindsay Clowes, for nominations of staff members as 'Champions' of flexible learning pedagogies, and through invitations to staff members to share their innovative practices with colleagues through colloquia organised by UWC's CIECT and other fora. The important contributions made by staff members to the development of social justice pedagogies in the Faculty and beyond have also been acknowledged by the appointment of staff members to consecutive terms as Deputy Deans of teaching and learning in the Faculty.

The innovative pedagogical approaches employed in the Department have also been shared more widely through sustained contributions to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Recognising the possibilities for enhancing students' agency and expertise in their own learning, the Department has embraced digital and online methodologies, and explored

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contemporary pedagogical approaches, including authentic learning (see, for example, Shefer & Clowes, 2015), participatory active learning, flipped classrooms, digital technologies, photovoice methodologies (Clowes, 2013, 2015a, 2015b; Ngabaza et al., 2013, 2015; Ngabaza, Shefer & Clowes, 2018; Shefer, Ratele & Clowes, 2018). And while much of this research has developed the scholarship of teaching and learning, it has also contributed to understandings of the day-to-day challenges and constraints that students face at the University and in their classrooms (Ngabaza, Shefer & Clowes, 2018; Shefer, Strebel, Ngabaza & Clowes, 2018; Shefer, 2018). Prof Desiree Lewis has also taken the emphasis on activist pedagogies into the popular terrain, promoting and researching feminist digital activism across diverse global Southern contexts (Lewis, Hussen & Van Vuuren, 2013). Two of our current projects funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation are also specifically focused on social justice, feminist and decolonial pedagogies, both experimenting with and writing about them. Members of the WGS department have published widely, contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning, including reflecting on our teaching and our student experiences (see, for example, Clowes 2013, 2015a, 2015b; Clowes, Shefer & Ngabaza, 2017; Ngabaza et al., 2015; Shefer, et al., 2018). We have contributed to a wide range of special editions of local and international journals, as well as edited volumes and participated in research projects on social justice pedagogies and reconceptualising higher education. Notably Tamara Shefer co-edited an international volume with Vivienne Bozalek, Rosi Braidotti and Michalinos Zembylas emerging out of an NRF-funded project which was published last year (Bozalek et al., 2018). Of further importance have been our efforts to facilitate student and emerging authors' publishing through writing workshops, critical co-authorship and mentorship (see Clowes & Shefer, 2013), facilitating scholarly development and publishing by students from undergraduate levels (see Ngabaza et al., 2013, 2015) critical reviewing (Bozalek, Zembylas & Shefer, 2019) and postgraduate supervision, training and support.

Research and international engagement

WGS has been extremely productive in terms of research output, with all current staff publishing regularly at local and international levels. Two of our permanent staff members are NRF rated, at B and C level respectively, and all four have doctoral degrees. All staff have led and continue to lead local and international-level research projects. Importantly, as evident above from our contribution to teaching and learning scholarship, a key

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strategic goal of the University, we have always understood and practised our research, teaching and social/community/public engagement as entangled with each other. WGS has also been acknowledged and rewarded by the University for excellence in achieving the research goals of the University; for example, in 2010 Tamara Shefer received the annual UWC Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Researcher Award in the Human and Social Sciences, and Desiree Lewis and Sisa Ngabaza have won Faculty research awards.

With respect to international engagement and research grants, WGS has benefited from historical context such as a long-standing, early relationship with the Women's Studies Programme at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands dating back to the early 1990s and opening up a range of collaborative research projects and faculty and staff exchanges, including at least 3 SANPAD-funded projects led by and/or with the participation of WGS staff and students (see, for example, Shefer et al., 2007). Such an early collaboration opened up connections and possibilities for a wide range of transnational and importantly North-South-South collaborations allowing for the establishment of significant networking between global southern partners on the continent and further afield. We were especially fortunate again to benefit from the strategic vision of Prof O'Connell's team and the emphasis on international collaboration. We appreciated hugely the way in which our Department and research was kept in mind during international collaborative meetings at the executive level. A range of current established relationships have resulted, which has much to do with this strategic vision of internationalisation and the way in which it was implemented with an emphasis on existing expertise and needs, and constructive imaginaries of how these could be bolstered to build the staff member, students, department, faculty and university through particular pathways of international and local collaboration. We valued the generous seed support offered, which has borne fruit in a wide range of collaborations. An openness to and direct engagement with and support of our many international collaborations, including South-South exchanges and local collaboration, have opened up wonderful opportunities for both students and staff at WGS. The support and interest of senior management in WGS over this time also assisted in consolidating a wide range of international funding for our research, including from the NRF, Scandinavian and Nordic funding, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and more. Such collaborative projects, often including staff and student exchanges across geopolitical borders, served as valuable support for postgraduate students through residencies and academic forums, and a strengthening of our scholarship

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in the department. The encouragement of the university leadership also allowed for WGS to be a founding member of an international gender studies network (RINGS) and to host the second annual conference and AGM and continue to be an executive member.

Community engagement

As noted earlier, community engagement through feminist activism has been central to the establishment and development of the WGS Department. Emerging out of the GEU, itself the product of feminist activism on and off campus, the driving force behind the teaching and research undertaken in the Department is the struggle for social justice. Understanding students to be an important community in and of their own right, for example, requires a feminist pedagogy that teaches for social justice in socially just ways. This commitment to social justice manifests in a variety of ways. On the one hand, students are encouraged to familiarise themselves with and participate in the activities of the GEU on campus, for example. On the other, community activists and activist organisations people such as Sally Gross, Estian Smit, Funeka Soldaat, Patrick Godana, Mbuyiselo Botha and others who lead feminist, LGBTIQ+ organisations, have participated in classes to share their work and insights with students.

Another aspect of the ways in which the Department works towards social justice is through our graduates' career trajectories, with WGS graduates taking up high-level posts that have important implications for the broader project of social justice and change. The Western Cape Minister of Health is a graduate of WGS, for example, as is the Acting Executive Assistant to the DVC Academic at UWC. Graduates of our postgraduate programme work in a range of non-governmental and activist settings. Others have permanent academic posts at the Universities of Stellenbosch and Cape Town.

The emphasis on social justice also underpins the scholarship of the Department, through research – published in a wide range of peer-reviewed journals – that aims to make a difference in the lives of those marginalised by race, gender, class, sexuality and other vulnerable positionalities. In addition, staff members continue their involvement in community and activist organisations involving a diverse range of constituencies. On the one hand, staff members chair or co-chair international and local teaching and research groupings such as RINGS: the International Research Association of Institutions of Advanced Gender

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Studies, and sit on the editorial boards of both local and international journals. On the other, staff members work with and serve on a range of boards of organisations committed to challenging injustice. Examples of these include Gender Dynamix, Rape Crisis, the Sara Baartman Centre for Women and Children, organisations working towards changing legislation such as the Sexworkers Education and Advocacy Task Force (SWEAT), those committed to transformation of the media in line with democratic imperatives, such as the Press Council of South Africa (PCSA), as well as those that have the resources to validate forms of knowledge production – and particular producers of knowledge – that have not been valued, or have been less valued in the past such as Iziko museums, art galleries and mainstream and marginal artistic and activist performances and work.

Concluding comments

WGS has many fond memories of encounters with our former Rector, Prof Brian O'Connell. His willingness to always be available to support and open events; being welcomed into his office for a face-to-face chat; his openness to funding events when all other sources were unavailable; his ethical, warm and welcoming interpersonal manner; his positive outlook and energetic engagements; his long-term dedication to social justice and his modelling of this commitment in his own practices. We valued and continue to appreciate Prof O'Connell's accessibility, generosity and engagement, which was not unique to WGS but a part of his larger capacity for building community and a shared vision. Also significant was the strategic path that the Rector and leadership facilitated towards mobilising the University on a path of scholarly excellence. For Women's and Gender Studies, which moved from a precarious small programme to an established academic department over the time of Prof O'Connell's visionary leadership, the benefits are poignantly clear. While we continue to work within shifting and multiplying challenges, at both global and local levels, with gender studies increasingly under fire and always dispensable, the deep roots that were nurtured over the last two decades are something to be celebrated and appreciated.

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