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“Healing is an Act of Communion”: Critical Perspectives on Women’s Health, Wellness, and Disease

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“Healing is an Act of Communion”: Critical Perspectives on Women’s Health, Wellness, and Disease

Co-written by the editorial committee and cover artist: Shannan Grant, Barbara Hamilton-Hinch, Irene Ogada, Dayna Lee-Baggley, Tara Pride, Clare Goulet, Maggie MacIntyre, Tammy Bernasky, and Jessica Jerome

Atlantis Journal was established in 1975. While it was founded at Acadia University, it became a publication of Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) in 1980. A publication aimed at supporting critical studies in gender, culture, and social justice, named for the lost city of Atlantis, and based at a university known for its strong history of advancing women’s education and commitment to social responsibility, *Atlantis* was the obvious home for this project and associated special edition. The editorial committee was confident that this journal, and the people who make it possible, would help us co-create a space in which the editors, authors, reviewers, and readers could co-learn, heal, and grow together.

“Healing is an act of communion” is a quote by bell hooks that motivates reflection on healing as a profound connection with ourselves, each other, and the natural world.

Healing is often understood as returning to a prior state, health, or peace, or engaging in therapy or treatment that can be self-facilitated and/or facilitated by others. In agreement with this perspective, western and complementary medical practices are often used to heal or treat diseases. This model of treatment is often described as evidence-based and patient-focused (or person-focused) and is grounded in systems biology. However, women’s and gender-inclusive health research and practices remain limited and underfunded, while existing approaches are often homogeneous, focusing more on medical interventions, methods, and outcomes that are frequently *done to* women rather than *with* women. While current research and practices are beginning to address these gaps, much work remains. The patriarchy and its manifestations remain strong and, on the counter-offensive, ranging from overt political action to subtle cultural and social and, on the counter-offensive, or reasserting traditional gender hierarchies (e.g., shaming, stigmatization, gaslighting of women public figures, violence against women, algorithmic bias—relevant with growing application of Artificial Intelligence or AI).

This special edition and collaboration are a peaceful stand and an act of communion. We view this special addition as a beacon and an invitation to engage in counterculture and in collective healing. With this piece, we wish to counter dominant norms in academic publishing, which serve to privilege the voices of a dominant few, and challenge people to broaden their perspectives on evidence in health and wellness. Admitting bias (every human being has bias), we think this edition is special for several reasons, including the art, research, and narrative that make it up. But, the real “special sauce,” if you will, is the people who made this happen, those who are actively addressing the gaps, individually and collectively.

For instance, the *Atlantis* team supported us in our efforts to make space for participatory action and engagement with authors, reviewers, and community, from the beginning of the process to its completion and bey-

ond. This manifested in several ways, including a recent invitation we received to speak about this edition at the 50th anniversary celebration and conference of “Atlantis: Revolution and Resurgence: Celebrating Feminist Publishing Registration.” Other forms of participatory action included, for example, allowing flexibility for authors, in terms of timelines. Many of our contributors are caretakers and/or parents, work multiple jobs, engage in community, and/or participated in work strikes during edition preparation. For women, our work is never purely academic and many people benefit from our labour. We believe that in relation to academic work and collective action/protest, a dichotomy of and/or is not appropriate and does not warrant academic penalization.

To challenge traditional colonial and patriarchal publishing models, we took a co-learning approach to publication. For instance, an editorial group, composed of nine women, representing several perspectives, professions, fields of study, and experiences, created a review group composed of 20 women from across Canada (Cape Breton to British Columbia). We provided authors with feedback and mentorship and an opportunity to resubmit, as desired and needed. The publication process was a discussion, rather than a transaction. The literature identifies several overlapping structures that define the patriarchal system, which manifests differently across cultures and times. One we are particularly interested in is information management (e.g., flow, vetting, capture, sharing, and storage). Great care was taken by the reviewers and editors to not edit the authors’ voices away.

For this edition, we invited interdisciplinary and intersectional feminist analyses that consider race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, socioeconomic status, and/or other dimensions of identity and social justice. Our goal was to foster a vibrant dialogue that reflects the range and diversity of experiences, welcoming holistic approaches to health and healing. The collective works represented in this edition span several topics and geographies, ranging from Nepal, to India, Thailand, to Canada, from public health policies, perspectives on aging, body size, health care accessibility, birth practices, mothering, vaccination, and grief. They represent original research, commentaries, reflections, literary work, and graphic art.

“Healing as an act of communion” acknowledges that, as humans, we rarely heal alone but through connection, community, and sharing, finding wholeness through relationships, shared experiences, and mutual care, whether it’s spiritual communion or communal support in friendship and social justice movements. It emphasizes interdependence, where we support others’ healing and receive support in return, recognizing liberation and wellness not as isolation but as belonging to one another. The call for submissions for this special edition spoke to those who submitted, identifying a commonality among us all. Even if we did not first see the alignment with the call, we explored each submission with an open mind, and authentic curiosity. We grew forward together, collectively, co-creating this edition, and are hopeful that this work resonates with the reader, and larger community, and ultimately that subsequent special editions focused on women’s health and wellness will grow out of this. We hope that it will bring editors, gatekeepers of knowledge, to examine their practices for exclusionary habits, processes, and bias, and change them. To engage in best practice, to address “isms” and to decolonize our systems, we need to work together to ensure everyone is at the table.

Thank you for reading.

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Barbara-Ann Hamilton-Hinch, is a Professor in the School of Health and Human Performance at Dalhousie University in the faculty of Health and the Assistant Vice-Provost Equity and Inclusion. Her research exams the structural, institutional, and systemic racism and oppression that exists for populations that have been marginalized but particularly people of African descent. Her work looks closely at the social determinants of health and crosses all disciplines from education to health to justice. Barb identifies as an 8th generation African Nova Scotian and is the first African Nova Scotian to graduate with a PhD from Dalhousie University.

Irene Ogada is an educator and researcher in women and children's health and nutrition. She is committed to community-led inquiry, action, and transformation. Applying intersectionality and socio-ecological lenses she collaborates to co-facilitate participatory platforms for women and children in equity-seeking communities to articulate their health and nutrition experiences and needs; co-facilitate collaborative health and nutrition actions that foster sustainable and equitable communities; contribute to development of culturally safe resources and processes in health and nutrition programs for women and children; and enhance the capacity of future researchers/mentees to contribute to sustainable and equitable communities.

Dayna Lee-Baggley is a Registered Clinical Psychologist in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and Nova Scotia. Her registrations include clinical psychology, health psychology, and organizational psychology. She is the founder and CEO of Dr. Lee-Baggley and Associates, which provides evidence-based workplace wellness solutions. She is the creator of the "Dr. Dayna Method" which is a science backed system to equip leaders with people leadership skills and to equip employees with skills to flourish. She also conducts research at Dalhousie University and at Saint Mary's University. She is the author of the book *Healthy Habits Suck: How to get off the couch & live a healthy life...even if you don't want to*.

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Maggie MacIntyre is a writer, editor and visual artist with decades of lived experience navigating healthcare and other systems in pursuit of support for chronic and acute conditions of the menstrual body.

Tammy Bernasky is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Cape Breton University and teaches in areas of public policy, gender and women studies, and stigma. She has life-long experience of disability and more than 25 years of experience working on disability inclusion efforts at local, national, and international levels. Using an intersectional lens, she centres the stories of diverse people with disabilities in her research. In 2022, she published the book *Working to End Gender-Based Violence in the Disability Community: International Perspectives*.

Jessica Jerome (Two-Spirited) is Mi'kmaq, originating from the district of Gespegewagi. She was born in Lis-tuguj Mi'gmaq First Nation and was later adopted by the Jerome family in Gesgapegiag. Jessica is a member of the Micmacs of Gesgapegiag Band, which is situated along the banks of the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec. Jessica's professional art education includes studies at the New Brunswick College of Craft and Design, where she earned a Certificate in Foundation of Visual Arts. She furthered her education with a Certificate in Applied Media and Communication Arts and obtained a Graphic Design Diploma from the Waterfront Campus of Nova Scotia Community College. Jessica's artwork has been exhibited in several galleries and juried shows across Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. Her pieces are part of permanent displays at the Cancer Centre in Kingston, Ontario, as well as in her home community. She has also contributed graphics and logo design work for Mi'kmaq communities throughout Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, supporting First Nation community and economic development initiatives.