



Sociologists for Women in Society

Interview with Georgiann Davis, 2022 SWS Feminist Activism Awardee Talk

 by Natasha Santana — July 18, 2023

Kejsi Ruka, SWS Intern, conducted the interview.



Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

I'm an intersex scholar-activist and associate professor of sociology at the University of New Mexico. Much of my work is related to my experience being born with a body outside of the sex binary. I have complete androgen insensitivity syndrome, CAIS, which means on the outside I'm female, but on the inside, instead of ovaries, a uterus, fallopian tubes, and XX chromosomes, I was born with internal and undescended testes and XY chromosomes. Doctors didn't discover my CAIS until I was a tween. And when they did, they didn't tell me the truth. They lied to me about my body—telling me I had premalignant underdeveloped ovaries—and they encouraged my parents to do the same. I only learned the truth years later after I obtained copies of my medical records. I was at first confused, then devastated and ashamed, and eventually just unapologetically angry which is where I'm at today.

I didn't pursue my PhD in sociology to study intersex. But that changed in a feminist theory class I was taking. We were discussing intersex, and there I was with this deep dark secret—I was intersex. It was during that doctoral seminar, in the fall of 2007 at the University of Illinois at Chicago, that I slowly started opening up about being intersex. And, you know what? It was fucking freeing to let go of that secret.

I wrote a paper on intersex in that seminar, and then shortly after, for a handful of reasons, decided to study the way in which intersex is experienced and contested in contemporary U.S. society. My first book, *Contesting Intersex: The Dubious Diagnosis*, evolved from my dissertation and in it I interweave my personal experience with my interview data.

As a feminist medical sociologist, what kinds of topics are you researching and looking into?

I like to say that I study all sides of the hospital bed, meaning I like to study patient and provider experiences and interactions.

I'm also currently working on a new book, a cultural memoir, which I've tentatively entitled *Five Star White Trash: A Memoir of a Society in Crisis*. It's about my journey from, in 1992, when I was a 329 pound tomboy who dropped out of the seventh grade to today a still fat tenured associate professor of sociology. I used to think of my journey as a story of overcoming a lot of adversity with everything from hard work to mentorship. But I trash much of that narrative in *Five Star White Trash* by using my sociological tools to analyze my life experiences with everything from dropping out of school, medical abuse, childhood trauma, and more.

Given that you'll be a presenter at the SWS Summer Meeting, can you give us a preview of what you plan to talk about?

I'm nervous as hell, so I hope I follow through with this but I want to talk about being *Five Star White Trash*. And the multiple Lifetime movies I've been through . . . mostly unscathed.

I am curious to hear a little bit about your activism and advocacy work. What drives you to be a scholar-activist?

I used to think it was the possibility for social change, but that was ten years ago when I was naive and way more optimistic about how scholars can use their research to improve lives. Back then I also took for granted that scholars were mostly in the game for altruistic reasons and not for their next promotion, publication, or award. I know much better these days about egos and gatekeepers.

My scholar-activism these days begins with a mirror. How can I be a scholar-activist if my scholar-activism doesn't begin with me? What's my role in the continuation of the social problems I study? What does it mean to get paid, as a scholar, to do work so many activists have been doing without pay for a lot longer?

Do you have a call to action or a departing message for us?

We have to be vigilant and honest about where we come from and where we're located today. I think oftentimes we come into our studies and research interests with the goal of being social justice oriented, which is great, but in order to do that work, we have to work on ourselves. I mean really work on ourselves—think about our role in racial oppression, our role in gender oppression, our role in all sorts of oppression.

Georgiann Davis will be giving the 2022 SWS Feminist Activism Awardee talk during the 2023 Summer Meeting SWS Awards Reception the Philadelphia Marriott Downtown on Sunday, August 20. SWS Meeting

Registration Form is now open:

<https://sws.memberclicks.net/2023summerreg>! For more information

on the 2023 Summer Meeting, please visit:

<https://socwomen.org/2023-summer-meeting/>.