February, the shortest month, has traditionally been one of the most ambitious, most exhausting, and most rewarding for CSW. Our signature conference, Thinking Gender, opens the month, as we host graduate students from snowier regions to balmy southern California lured by the conference’s well-earned reputation as an incubator of rigorous interdisciplinary exchange. Thinking Gender represents a genuine collaborative effort of faculty and graduate students, the latter running the conference and disseminating their research, the UCLA feminist and LGBTS faculty volunteering their time and expertise by providing written feedback on papers by graduate students from around the globe. This year—the 23rd annual Thinking Gender, CSW hosted over 200 attendees from Germany, the United Kingdom, Austria, Norway, Canada, as well as the United States. A highly competitive conference, it features the cutting-edge research of younger scholars who are arguably among the select few most likely to obtain tenure-track positions, making the volunteer labor of already overburdened faculty rewarding enough to keep signing up, year after year, to chair and discuss. Making this conference possible is our unique partnership with UCLA’s Graduate Division, provider of funds for a graduate student coordinator who in addition to the more specialized training in the vetting of research abstracts and plenary paper selection—gains translatable real-world skills in project management and events programming.

During a lunch chat with Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Education Robin Garrell and Vice Chancellor of Academic Personnel Carole Goldberg at this year’s conference, I hazarded that the range of research on women, gender, and sexuality reflected in the program represents a significant expansion and diversification of women’s issues and feminist activism beyond the days of our early assistant professorships. Garrell shared that it was
not uncommon in those days to see pin-ups in the labs in Chemistry. Indeed, if we think of this year’s Thinking Gender as a laboratory of collaborative exchange on the topic of gender, sexuality, and women, it is striking that our program and poster image for the conference—our pin-up, as it were—has come what seems full circle: a gender-indeterminate figure dressed in jeans, hoodie, and athletic shoes, crouched in a culvert with back to the camera. This gender-indeterminate figure, one body length from emerging into the sunlight, might be considered on the cusp of naissance, entering a (hopefully) nurturing new environment after, let’s say, a 23-year—long labor down the canal. This figure doesn’t displace or serve in quite the same way as the pin-up in the organic chemistry lab, which might have been a visual pun on that other meaning of “chemistry”—sexual attraction, the erotic connection or intimacy lived definitely outside the lab even as its amino acid, peptide, and amine components might be studied inside it as molecules. Nevertheless, I extend the laboratory conceit because Thinking Gender has functioned precisely as an experimental space of bringing together organic components—here, graduate student and faculty researchers—mixing and crossing them in conventionally controlled as well as surprising, even volatile combinations to yield new discoveries and unexpected results. To wit, the figure on our poster would most likely not have been the combinatory result expected for those casting about on the subject of women’s rights (with a very middle-class white presumption of who that woman was) in the mid twentieth century.

It is sometimes difficult for those, conceiving of labs and studios as high-cost repertoires of action occurring in brick and mortar spaces, to perceive the more nimble and periodic structure of Thinking Gender as a crucial laboratory infrastructure that gathers individual researchers and cross-pollinates humanistic, social scientific, life, and physical science research. My mission for this commentary is to illuminate the role Thinking Gender plays and to propose that its documented success in generating interdisciplinary collaboration needs to be expanded further to more tangible outcomes level. One way to do this would be to select plenary panelists for extended research collaboration facilitated by CSW across the year. Tangible here also refers to the inputs (the necessary funding of innovation) for these synergies in cross-training and collective results making. Concretely, these students would be enrolled in weekly Google-hangout meetings, share the results of their work, and collaborate on a multi-authored project that experiments in a networked and blended approach. Happily, this mission aligns with current priorities in bringing more parity to the distribution of funding for graduate students across campus. CSW looks forward to partnering with Grad Division and with private and public foundations to inaugurate this second phase of our exciting, innovative, and renewed laboratory experiment: Un-Thinking Gender—decidedly not; rather, Gender Lab: TG 2.0.

—Rachel Lee