

HISTORY WORKSHOP

The Department of History

Tuesdays ~ 12:30-1:30 pm ~ 203 Munroe Hall

“The Age of the Knife and Pistol”: Women Physicians and Reproductive Surveillance in the American West

Jacqueline Antonovich

Muhlenberg College

April 9, 2019

12:30-1:30 pm

203 Munroe Hall



Between 1870 and 1930, efforts to curb abortion, restrict contraception, and promote hereditary fitness through eugenics dominated public and legal discourse on marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth in the United States. My talk examines the role of white women physicians in promoting social and legislative systems of reproductive surveillance in the American West. I argue that western medical women, emboldened by early enfranchisement and growing professional authority, took lead roles in driving discourse, circulating ideas, and setting policy agendas on reproductive restrictions during this period. Through two case studies, I examine how these women became an effective force for bringing eugenics to the masses – becoming the middleman between scientist and mother, researcher and reformer. I argue that their efforts at reproductive surveillance ultimately promoted a biopolitical framework for the region that pathologized race, class, sexuality, and disability in an effort to eliminate bodies not deemed fit for citizenship.