



Introduction: Unmasking Transphobia, Building Transpositive Solidarities

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The historical catalyst for this collection of essays is a tragic and disturbing one, consisting both of a particular event and a general global pattern. In March of 2023, Joanne Boucher, a faculty member in the Department of Political Science at the University of Winnipeg, delivered a public talk with the dodgy title, “The Commodification of the Human Body: The Case of Transgender Identities.” According to the event description, Boucher’s talk was to explore the “economic interests involved in transgenderism” and to investigate the intersection of “government, corporate-funded lobby groups, the medical industry and the biotechnology sector.” Although framed in neutral-sounding academic jargon, both the event title and the event description contained blaring red flags, readily identifiable even to casual readers. The most obvious of these was the scare term “transgenderism.” Like its close siblings “postmodern neo-Marxism” and “critical race theory,” “transgenderism” is a term of art for reactionary culture warriors seeking to inflame public opinion by sounding the alarm about some nefarious political plot. (“They’re coming for our children,” or some such paranoid refrain.) Within the trans community, the term “transgenderism” is almost universally reviled as profoundly offensive and positively harmful. Moreover, the reduction of gender-affirming healthcare to a biopolitical function of state and capital, as indicated in the event description, further heaped insult upon injury. It negated the basic subjectivity, agency, and humanity that lie at the heart of trans life and everyday experience. For these perfectly understandable reasons, the event elicited intense criticism from the 2SLGBTQ community and their comrades. Many called for the event to be canceled. Those who attended the talk had their worst suspicions confirmed: Boucher presented transphobia under the thinly veiled guise of political economic analysis.

Far from being a unique and isolated event, Boucher’s talk was part of a much larger and more general global explosion of transphobic discourse, which has been

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expressed in recent years in the form of utterly cruel and inhuman legislation. In the United States, for example, 2023 turned out to be a record-setting year for transphobic lawmaking, with draconian restrictions set on gender-affirming care, bathroom access, drag performances, and student identity.¹ State legislatures in Alabama, Arkansas, and Idaho decreed that healthcare workers who provide gender-affirming care could potentially face felony charges. In Idaho, this could result in a ten-year prison sentence, and in Arkansas, a fifteen-year sentence. Florida passed a bill effectively empowering the state to kidnap children from their parents if they are deemed to have been “subjected to sex reassignment prescriptions or procedures.”² Both Florida and Kansas passed bills criminalizing the use of bathrooms that don’t match one’s gender assigned at birth. In Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Montana, and North Dakota, teachers are now permitted to ignore their students’ preferred pronouns. In Tennessee, a drag performance could mean a \$3000 fine and a six-year prison sentence.³

Unfortunately, Canada has not been immune to such regressive legislation or hateful sentiment. In 2023, Saskatchewan passed the so-called “Parents’ Bill of Rights,” which makes a child’s use of preferred pronouns at school contingent upon parental consent. In New Brunswick, Minister of Education Bill Hogan similarly introduced a policy requiring parental consent before teachers could address children according to their chosen pronouns. In Manitoba, then-Premier Heather Stefanson attached a last-minute “parental rights” pledge as part of a desperate re-election campaign strategy. (It thankfully failed.) In major cities across Canada, the 1 Million March 4 Children movement organized hate rallies denouncing “gender ideology” and leading chants of “Leave our kids alone,” sparking raw fear and genuine horror in the 2SLGBTQ community.

In response to this frightening national and global drift, the University of Winnipeg’s Centre for Research in Cultural Studies (CRiCS) organized a public event aimed at understanding our current political moment and offering guidance for solidarity and praxis. “Unmasking Transphobia, Building Transpositive Solidarities” was held in March 2023 on Zoom. It featured Jarvis Brownlie, Misha Pensato, Lara Rae, Noah Schulz, and Peter Ives. Together, they addressed both the campus event and the larger pattern of militant and increasingly violent transphobia across the globe. In attendance was Adele Perry, Director of the Centre

¹ Kiara Alfonseca, “Record number of anti-LGBTQ legislation filed in 2023,” *ABC News*, December 28, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/record-number-anti-lgbtq-legislation-filed-2023/story?id=105556010>

² Nick Logan, “It’s already a record year for anti-2SLGBTQ bills in the U.S. Here are some of the rights rolling back,” *CBC News*, May 14, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/us-transgender-2slgbtq-legislation-1.6842069>

³ Matt Rasnic and Rachel Liesendahl, “Drag performers on what Tennessee’s ban on public performances means to them,” *PBS News Hour*, March 31, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/drag-performers-on-what-tennessees-ban-on-public-performances-means-to-them>

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for Human Rights Research (CHRR) at the University of Manitoba, who suggested that the presentations be turned into mini-papers and published at the CHRR's journal *At the Forks*. After discussions with CRiCS Director Angela Failler, we decided to publish the collection simultaneously on the CRiCS website and at *At the Forks*.

This collection features essay versions of the informal talks delivered at the March 2023 event. The subject matter here is instructively broad. In “Right-Wing Organizing and Transphobia,” Jarvis Brownlie provides a wonderfully helpful overview of the right-wing playbook for advancing transphobic laws and policies. This playbook includes the use of transphobic dog whistles (like “transgenderism”) and deliberate provocations designed to excite public outrage. It includes the perverse career goal of getting “canceled,” thereby achieving a kind of political martyrdom. Once canceled, transphobes can then proceed to attack universities as intolerant institutions that deserve to be defunded and subjected to curricular overhaul. Brownlie also provides a very helpful overview of the more general pattern of transphobic legislation and activism in North America.

In “Where Does Our Power Come From?,” Misha Pensato deftly undercuts Boucher’s pseudo-Marxist logic with genuine Marxist reasoning. Boucher’s lament for the commodification of healthcare rings hollow, says Pensato, for the simple reason that so many other types of healthcare, from birth control to tooth extractions, are similarly commodified—often at impossibly exorbitant costs. So, why single out gender-affirming healthcare? Trans people, like so many other disadvantaged groups, are adversely affected by the commodification of healthcare. Yet, Boucher isolates trans folks as somehow singularly responsible for the capitalist takeover of our healthcare system. This isn’t Marxist analysis so much as petty and vindictive victim-blaming. It fails to appreciate a political economic structure inherently oriented toward the ruthless commodification of all that exists. So, what is to be done? Pensato’s political vision is clear and straightforward. The long-term answer is fully socializing healthcare. The short-term answer is to move beyond the liberal politics of recognition, epitomized by corporate-sponsored pride parades, and organize and push for structural transformation. To do that, we need to build a truly diverse workers movement, which includes solidarity with our trans comrades.

In his essay, Noah Schulz locates the struggle for trans liberation within the broader fight for greater justice and equality. This struggle can take many simple and immediate steps, as Schulz notes. One such step is centring trans voices. Among Boucher’s striking lapses in critical judgment was her omission of trans scholars who research gender-affirming healthcare and therefore have something important to say about the matter. Schulz calls for active engagement with the work of trans scholars whose positionality and academic expertise make them

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invaluable authorities. This is not, as Schulz indicates, to imply a single and monolithic trans perspective. Rather, the trans community holds a rich panoply of views, whose sheer diversity demands substantive and sympathetic engagement, not cold and blanket exclusion. Schulz asks that we extend this sympathy to trans students, who are among the most vulnerable in our university communities. Ultimately, this means a synonymy between the struggle for trans liberation and the fight against fascism. Schulz finds immense hope and beauty in the sizeable turnouts in defense of trans students at the University of Winnipeg and of local drag queen story hours at Scout Coffee + Community.

In her essay, Lara Rae offers a personal take on Boucher's talk and on the ethics of free speech. As Rae notes, Boucher's argument was premised on a "risible concept": that capitalism regards trans medicine as a lucrative business opportunity and that this is why trans medicine has become so widely embraced. The implication, of course, is that trans medicine and capitalism go together like hand in glove, and that if capitalism is inherently corrupt, so, too, is trans medicine. The problem with this idea, Rae rightly points out, is that trans medicine has a long history going back nearly a century. To essentialize it as intrinsically capitalist is an egregious theoretical and a historical mistake, a case of "the tail wagging the dog," as Rae puts it. Having attended Boucher's talk, Rae also offers some thoughts about free speech. She shares that she departs from her students in that she holds a more old-fashioned view according to which it is necessary to challenge those with reprehensible views by dismantling their arguments from a place of knowledge and understanding rather than seeking merely to banish them.

Finally, in his essay, "Academic Freedom and Narratives of Transgender Identity," Peter Ives brings badly needed clarity to the loud and cacophonous controversy over "free speech." L'Affaire Boucher followed a familiar pattern: the announcement of a controversial talk followed by calls for its cancellation followed by condemnation of "cancel culture" and the restriction of "free speech." The problem with this controversy, as Ives notes, is that it conflates *freedom of speech as a political right* with *academic freedom as a principle central to the specific work of universities*. The former applies to academics and non-academics alike by virtue of being citizens or subjects of the state. The latter applies exclusively to academics by virtue of being members of a university community. Freedom of speech entitles you to proclaim that the sun revolves around a flat earth whose moon is made of cheese. Academic freedom entitles you to pursue whatever line of research you like, but does not mean you have the freedom to speak demonstrable falsehoods, a point relentlessly made by Stanley Fish.⁴ Rather, academic freedom is bound both by the constraints of the relevant academic disciplines and by the peer-review process, neither of which were followed in Boucher's case. The failure to distinguish between these two very

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different types of freedom has not only created so much disheartening confusion. As Ives rightly argues, it also contributed to the University of Winnipeg's bungled public statement on the matter.

While the March 2023 roundtable event highlighted a very real problem, the focus was limited to transphobia on the political right. To be sure, this was a perfectly understandable first step in making sense of a general problem. However, as has become clear, transphobia is hardly confined to the political right. It can be found across the ideological spectrum, including among liberals and, pathetically, even among leftists. CRiCS therefore held a second event in October 2023 to address the latter phenomenon. This event was titled, "Transphobia Right and Left," featuring Kade Doyle Griffiths, Corinne Mason, Misha Pensato, and Noah Schulz. This panel provided a long-overdue critique of the baffling and frustrating phenomenon of left-wing transphobia. Though the talks from that important roundtable event are not included here, the problem of left-wing transphobia demands critical attention. The present collection is but one contribution to an ongoing discussion whose urgency sadly has not dissipated.

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[3] Matt Rasnic and Rachel Liesendahl, “Drag performers on what Tennessee’s ban on public performances means to them,” *PBS News Hour*, March 31, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/drag-performers-on-what-tennessees-ban-on-public-performances-means-to-them>

[4] Stanley Fish, *Version of Academic Freedom: From Professionalism to Revolution* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014).