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## Where Does Our Power Come From?

Misha Pensato

We've had a couple of moments of major community rallying against anti-trans oppression recently. Back in Fall 2023, several hundred people showed up in Winnipeg to protect a drag queen story hour from bigoted protestors.<sup>1</sup> Both this and the more recent response to Prof. Boucher's talk have been incredible displays of community support which created space for activists to connect with one another and foster social ties which can be drawn on for the next time people need to respond. These major flashpoints were both organized responses to rightly perceived threats. It's good that we're able to mobilize support during these times. However, we cannot liberate trans people through defensive actions alone. These actions protect our communities and keep us safe, but they are not where our power is.

We give up our power when we ask institutions and governments for recognition or for special protections. The goodwill of these institutions is not enough to rely on. This strategy has often failed 2SLGBTQIA communities. Banks will fly progress pride flags and donate money to pride parades while simultaneously funding pipelines being forced through Indigenous lands at gunpoint – this colonial violence is a betrayal of our Two Spirit siblings. In 2016, the government of Canada added gender identity and expression as protected categories in the Canadian Human Rights Act, which was widely seen as Canada showing support for trans and nonbinary people. However, this bill did nothing to address the real systemic issues our communities face. This strategy treats transness as an isolated identity when the reality is almost every issue trans people face, overlaps with other oppressions. Isolating transness only helps a few privileged and wealthy trans people while leaving nothing for the great majority of us whose lives are tremendously precarious.

Transphobic speakers on campuses are not the most pressing issue for trans people in Canada. We disproportionately lack adequate housing, employment, and access

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to timely and affordable healthcare. We face abuse at the hands of police particularly through the criminalization of sex work and closure of safe

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consumption sites, we face social isolation and a lack of mental health supports. Trans people experience these oppressions in a specific way, yet all these issues are shared across broad groups – they are not specific to trans people. Our power is when we see the overlap between struggles, when we recognize that an injury to one, is indeed an injury to us all.

What would our healthcare system look like if trans people really achieved liberation? It would entail a radically changed understanding of what health means. A liberatory health system would be one which affirmed bodily autonomy, one which refused to pathologize human difference, one which completely rejected the warehousing of disabled people in institutions, one which took seriously the physical and emotional suffering all of us face at various points in life. It would require an end to the forms of gender oppression and racial discrimination which our institutions consistently reinforce. Healthcare would be free for all, and care workers would be paid a fair wage.

The vast majority of people would benefit from this kind of future. Yet, in our present moment, provincial governments are gutting funding for healthcare services, likely as a precursor to greater privatization which will make care increasingly difficult for many to access. I know from my own experience and the experiences of many other trans people I know, that it has become harder to access transition related healthcare in Manitoba over the last number of years, particularly since the start of the pandemic. Many Manitobans, trans and cis, struggle to access holistic, equitable, and timely care. This is just one instance out of many where trans liberation is bound up with the liberation of working class and disabled people, and with everyone else who needs healthcare.

Given all of this, it is a little ironic to me that Professor Joanne Boucher's main argument in her recent talk was that trans healthcare is subject to commodification under capitalism. This point is indisputably true and utterly banal. Birth control is also sold as a commodity, despite being necessary healthcare for many. In Canada, dental healthcare is far more commodified than trans healthcare is, with wisdom tooth removal costing thousands of dollars, for instance. What Boucher misses is

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that liberation for trans people would mean overcoming the very medical commodification she claims we perpetuate.

Trans people are not to blame for the commodification of healthcare – we're disproportionately affected by it. It is a classic reactionary position to blame the oppressed for the conditions of their own oppression. This is an attempt to resolve the anxiety produced by crises in capitalism through scapegoating a particular minority group. Moral panic is one word for it, though this term misses the fact that this reaction is often its own constructive project, an attempt to promote the interests of one group, or one set of gender and sexual norms, through the mass suppression of others.

To counter this, we need our own power. Not just power to fight back against transphobia, but to advance a different kind of world. In our roles as workers, students, and as community, we create the world we live in – none of it functions without us. This is a source of power. If a university administration, for example, is not acting according to the values of the vast number of students, faculty, and other workers who make the university run – those groups have the option to stop the university from running through strike action until demands are met.

We often don't feel like we have this kind of power. Poverty, isolation, and lack of support force us into situations in which we have little say over the kind of work we do, the kind of actions we can take, and the kind of communities we can create. It is only by building solidarity with one another that we take steps towards our collective self-determination. When we make connections about how our lives are subjugated by the same systems and show up for each other with the understanding that none of us are free until we all are, we make things possible which are impossible on our own.

### **About the Author**

Misha Pensato is a trans writer and activist from Winnipeg. She is an editor at Midnight Sun Magazine and is currently working on her first poetry manuscript. You can find her poetry and essays in CV2, Xtra!, Briarpatch, openDemocracy, and elsewhere.

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### **References**

[1] Ozten Shebahkeget, "Despite protest, drag queen storytime event a source of pride, Headingley librarian says," *CBC News*, Aug 15 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/drag-queen-story-time-headingley-library-1.6936496>.