

At the Forks: Where Indigenous and Human Rights Intersect

Volume 3

Journal site: <https://ojs.lib.umanitoba.ca/index.php/forks>



Tempest in a Cupcake

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I originally planned to attend Dr. Boucher’s talk in person, but in a very 21st-century compromise, it ended up on Zoom. It was a bit of a scramble. When I say I “attended,” I had a piece in my ear, listening and engaging with the talk while eating cupcakes at the counter event, which I found quite interesting. At 60 years old, I come from an academic background where I don’t discuss talks or events without attending and understanding the content. Thus, I engaged with the talk, which has broader ramifications and specific terms that are important to consider.

One significant term is “free speech,” derived from the US concept of the First Amendment. Like the other three amendments that follow, it involves the citizens’ relationship with their government, particularly when the government becomes tyrannical, which may or may not be happening in the United States. These words are used vigorously in this context. It’s clear to me, especially when dealing with my young students, that they have a different concept of what free speech is, what academic freedom means, and what people should be allowed to say. By “should be,” I don’t mean censorship or jailing people, but rather whether things are appropriate and safe.

Regarding the talk itself, I believe Professor Boucher would deny being transphobic or that the talk was transphobic. However, the talk seemed altered and shortened. She had planned a longer talk, but through various compromises or insistences, it was foreshortened. I suspect some of the language that might have been used was more couched and vague. The entire talk was based on a risible concept: that trans medicine might be a good racket from a capitalistic standpoint. One should be cautious about the commodification and medicalization of certain kinds of medicine when pharmaceutical companies and doctors have a vested financial interest. She frames trans medicine as new technologies, even though some form has been around since at least the 1930s.

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The idea that a surgeon would wake up in the United States, where insurance companies are cutting coverage for almost everyone, and think “trans medicine might be a great racket” is absurd. This implies that the tail is wagging the dog, coming from the top down. There were many jokes about the privilege of those identified as male convincing the healthcare system to do all the things done for trans people, rather than it being a fight from the bottom up. This is a fundamental misunderstanding.

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helping trans people from a structural, industrial, medical standpoint. We are begging for everything. We got some advantages, and then they were taken away. The context of the talk felt very Janice Raymond-y, falling under the idea of “the transsexual empire” or the “transsexual industrial complex,” which grossly overstates our voice and power in society. Almost every single one of her points could be easily knocked down. To her credit, she opened it up to questions and answers, engaging with three or four of my questions, though I didn't like her answers.

Mostly, the talk was about her saying she had every right to say this because she could, which was her rather arrogant response. Academic freedom is delightful; she can do whatever she wants. The word that didn't come up but was always in the background was tenure. Once someone attains tenure, they can say and do whatever they want, and the university has no power to rein them in. There's a case at the University of Pennsylvania where a law professor says tremendously inappropriate and disgraceful things daily. We all have histories of this. I went to a school where a teacher boasted daily about being a member of the Hitler Youth. The question is, should the university do something about it? What can the university do?

In this particular case, the University of Winnipeg did something predictable: they did a bunch of contrary things, wasted time, clutched their pearls, wrung their hands, got confused, and came up with a compromise that pleased nobody. As a group and as individuals, we must confront ideologies head-on, explaining and educating people why the things being said, especially by those with academic credentials like a PhD, are risible, silly, and often based on cherry-picked facts. As a general rule, we should engage with people who are against us rather than ignore them. At that cupcake party, there were times I felt uncomfortable with some comments about this professor and their talk, especially by people who hadn't attended the talk or didn't know the professor to make ad hominem comments. That's why I think it's more appropriate that I say some of these things. I would be happy to say them to the professor if we ever meet and have a conversation because I did my homework.

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In conclusion, we must find a way to accept that there is a differentiation between how younger and older generations define academic freedom and free speech. Beyond the single issue of transness, we need to address these issues and determine where we stand as a society. Free speech is fundamentally important. Those who cry most about free speech on the far right are often the ones most likely to end speech when they gain the power they desperately aspire to claim.

About the Author



Lara Rae is a comedian, instructor, and writer. She transitioned in 2015 and her experience is told in her play *Dragonfly* available in print and audio book format. *Dragonfly* is winner of the Chris Johnson Manitoba Book award for Best New Play.

Lara is the co-founder of the Winnipeg Comedy Festival. She was the first trans woman to guest host CBC's flagship news program *The Current* and was one of the developers of the international hit series *Little Mosque on the Prairie* for which she was nominated a Gemini and shares three Canadian Comedy Awards and the Prix Roma Italian screenwriting prize. She has taught trans culture and literature at the University of Winnipeg in the gender studies department and has an honorary PhD in Literature from the University of Manitoba.