

TRANSADVOCATE

Equivocation And Lies In Lisa Vogel's August 18th Statement

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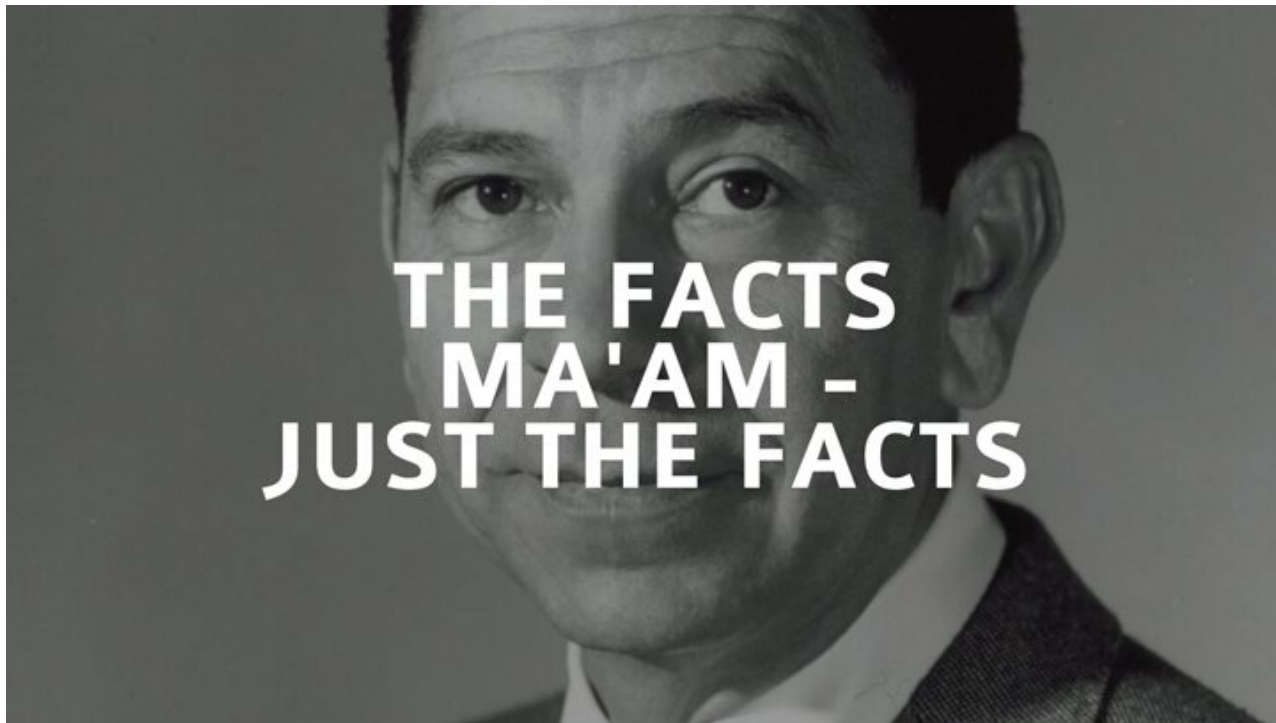
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Abstract

(Added emphasis to specific statements by Lisa Vogel and/or official MichFest press releases and documents is added throughout the piece with bolded orange text.) Lisa Vogel posted an official Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MichFest) statement on her Facebook page on August 18th, 2014. The statement is in regards to MichFest and the long-running womyn-born-womyn policy/intention [...]

Article



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Lisa Vogel posted an official Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MichFest) statement on her Facebook page on August 18th, 2014. The statement is in regards to MichFest and the long-running womyn-born-womyn policy/intention for the festival. It's been crossposted a number of times, including to the LGBT news site Between The Lines.



Figure 1. Lisa Vogel's Michigan Womyn's Music Festival Statement (August 18, 2014)

To begin with, the statement glosses over the history of why and how MichFest's womyn-born-womyn policy came into being, as well as telling a very significant lie about the history of what was clearly once not just an intention, but an anti-trans discrimination policy.

From a fact-checking perspective, the first point of Lisa Vogel's statement contains what reasonable people would consider a lie.

1. Get Your Facts Straight

The first numbered section of the August 18th statement is entitled "Get Your Facts Straight." The second paragraph of the first numbered section states this:

Over 20 years ago, we asked Nancy Burkholder, a trans woman, to leave the Land. That was wrong, and for that, we are sorry. We, alongside the rest of the LGBTQ community, have learned and changed a

great deal over our 39-year history. We speak to you now in 2014 after two decades of evolution; an evolution grown from our willingness to stay in hard conversations, just as we do every year around issues of race, ability, class and gender. Since that single incident, Festival organizers have never asked a trans woman to leave the Festival. We have a radical commitment to creating a space where for one week a year, no one's gender is questioned - it's one of the most unique and valued aspects of the Festival. The Michfest community has always been populated by womyn who bear the burden of unwanted gender scrutiny every day.

Quoting from The Transadvocate interview of Janis Walworth:

In 1993, we went back [to MichFest] again. There were four trans women and me in 93. We were prepared to be thrown out. We again set up a table, like we had before [in 1992] and we proceeded to do our educational outreach.

Some people in the festival began harassing us and then around noon on Wednesday or Thursday, the festival security stopped by and told us that the trans women in our group would have to leave "for their own safety."

Lisa Vogel could make a technical claim that her statement in point one of her August 18th statement wasn't a lie since it was festival security that asked trans women to leave the festival, and not festival organizers, but festival security personnel officially represented the festival. And, festival security's actions did comport with official festival policy that was still in effect seven years later, being clearly articulated seven years in an official handout entitled Community Discussion On Womyn-Born Womyn Space (dated August 8, 2000):

5. These are our bottom lines:

- The Festival is intended for womyn-born womyn, womyn who were born and lived their entire life experience as female.
- We ask the transsexual community to respect this intention.
- We are committed to the position that no woman's gender will be questioned on the land. We have a commitment that Michigan remain a space that recognizes and celebrates the full range of what it means to be a womyn-born womyn - and that butch/gender-ambiguous womyn can move about our community with confidence that their right to be here will not be questioned.
- We also have an obligation to run the Festival in a way that keeps faith with the womyn-born womyn policy, which may mean denying admission to individuals who self-declare as male-to-female transsexuals or female-to-male transsexuals now living as men (or asking them to leave if they enter).

In 1993, MichFest security clearly followed MichFest policy when it asked four out trans women to leave the festival. This incident occurred two years after Nancy Burkholder was asked to leave MichFest in 1991. Getting the facts straight, Lisa Vogel was not telling the truth in stating no trans woman was ever asked to leave MichFest after Nancy Burkholder. If Lisa Vogel implied their lesson on expelling trans people from MichFest from 1992's MichFest onward, then that would be a false implication.

Referring back to the "Get Your Facts Straight" section of Vogel's August 18th statement:

The truth is, trans womyn and trans men attend the Festival, blog about their experiences, and work on crew. Again, it is not the inclusion of trans womyn at Festival that we resist; it is the erasure of the specificity of female experience in the discussion of about the space itself that stifles progress in this conversation. As long as those who boycott and threaten Michfest do not acknowledge the reasons why the space was created in the first place, and has remained vital for four decades, the conversation remains deadlocked.

That is another lie. Here are statements directly from Lisa Vogel over decades indicating that inclusion of trans people at MichFest is exactly what she was resisting.

From a 1991 statement to GCN over the incident involving Nancy Burkholder:

Some letters have been printed in the press in recent weeks regarding the womon-only policy at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival as it relates to transsexuals participating in the event. We would like to clarify our policy and explain the circumstances which brought it to light this last August.

In the simplest of terms, the Michigan Festival is and always has been an event for womyn, and this continues to be defined as womyn born womyn.

From a 1999 MichFest press release:

We are aware that some individuals associated with Camp Trans have not respected the Land as womyn's space. We know that many of you are angry about this, and have questions about whether this is a change of festival policy. There is no change in Festival policy, politics or intention regarding womyn's space. We too are angry that this has been disrespected, and we are dealing with it now the best we can. We want you to know that we always have been and always will be committed to the Festival as womyn's space.

Also from the 1999 press release:

"We recognize that the Festival and Son of Camp Trans symbolize and express divergent views on the larger gender discussion that is going on in lesbian and gay communities. We support this larger discussion and value and respect the transsexual community as integral members of the broader queer community. We ask that they in turn respect womon born womon space.

"We believe that individuals and organizations who are committed to disrupting or destroying womyn-born-womyn space are acting with ignorance and complete disregard for the legacy of misogyny and sexism that still pervades our daily lives. Just as many Womyn of Color express the need for 'room to breathe' they gain in Womyn-of-Color space away from the racism that inevitably appears in interactions with a white majority, womyn born womyn still need and value that same 'room to breathe'.

From the 2006 MichFest press release, quoting Lisa Vogel.

As feminists, we call upon the transwomen's community to help us maintain womyn only space, including spaces created by and for womyn-born womyn. As sisters in struggle, we call upon the transwomen's community to meditate upon, recognize and respect the differences in our shared experiences and our group identities even as we stand shoulder to shoulder as women, and as members of the greater queer community. We once again ask the transwomen's community to recognize that the need for a separate

womyn-born womyn space does not stand at odds with recognizing the larger and beautiful diversity of our shared community.

The inclusion of trans womyn at MichFest is exactly what Lisa Vogel, speaking for herself and for MichFest, has resisted.

The womyn-born-womyn policy was clearly -- from inception -- designed to erase trans women's/trans females' experiences as women's and females' experience. From inception, it also is about Lisa Vogel empowering herself to decide for all Michigan Womyn's Music Festival attendees whose life experiences are female and whose life experiences are male.

And, that leads to what Vogel states in the next sentence of "Get Your Facts Straight" section in Vogel's August 18th statement:

The truth is, trans womyn and trans men attend the Festival, blog about their experiences, and work on crew. Again, it is not the inclusion of trans womyn at Festival that we resist; it is the erasure of the specificity of female experience in the discussion of about the space itself that stifles progress in this conversation. As long as those who boycott and threaten Michfest do not acknowledge the reasons why the space was created in the first place, and has remained vital for four decades, the conversation remains deadlocked.

The reason the policy was created in the first place is because trans women were considered to be men and therefore not welcome in women's space. There are direct statements from Lisa Vogel and/or Michfest identifying trans women as men.

From the 1991 statement to GCN:

When it was clear this summer there was a known transsexual man attending the event, the festival security staff dealt with it as respectfully as possible....

Again from the 1999 MichFest press release:

In response to the presence of men on the land, several Festival participants chose to leave the Festival earlier than planned.

From a 2006 press release, quoting Lisa Vogel:

"If a transwoman purchased a ticket, it represents nothing more than that woman choosing to disrespect the stated intention of this Festival."

These points of view about trans women being men and/or male align are in alignment with a June 1977 letter to Olivia Records' collective. That letter, signed by Lisa Vogel and 21 other trans-exclusionary radical feminists, demanded Sandy Stone be expelled from the Olivia collective. From that letter:

Some of us have already [worked with trans woman Sandy Stone] without the knowledge that this person was not a woman. When we did discover the truth about Stone and tried to discuss this with you, we were told that you considered him very much a woman, a lesbian, and that you trusted him more than middle class, heterosexual women. This was very painful to hear and indicated a great lack of respect and love for women and our struggle.

We do not believe that a man without a penis is a woman any more than we would accept a white woman with dyed skin as a Black woman. Sandy Stone grew up as a white male in this culture, with all the privileges and attitudes that that insures [sic]. It was his white male privilege that gave him access to the recording studio and the opportunity to gain engineering practice in the first place. He has never had to suffer the discrimination, self-hatred or fear that a woman must endure and survive in her life. And he cannot possess the special courage, brilliance, sensitivity and compassion that derives from that experience. How can we share feelings of sisterhood and solidarity with someone who has not had a woman's experience?

Lisa Vogel in her "Get The Facts Straight" statement doesn't acknowledge that perhaps the most significant reason why the space was created as a womyn-born-womyn space in the first place was because of her belief that trans women are males, and that trans women's life experiences aren't female experiences, but male experiences.

2. Acknowledge the Validity of Autonomous, Female-Defined Space

This is the section in Lisa Vogel's August 18th statement is where her equivocation over the terms trans women (in various spellings and forms) and female are visible and notable. On one hand she acknowledges trans women are womyn, but then on the other hand with clear intentions fails to respect that trans women are females that have female gender identities.

Michfest is widely known as a predominantly lesbian community. This does not mean that heterosexual womyn, bisexual womyn, or those who do not share this identity are not present or welcome. But for a week, we collectively experience a lesbian-centered world; we experience what it feels like to be in a community defined by lesbian culture.

As stated in the 1977 letter to the Olivia Records collective that Vogel signed, she rejected the idea that Sandy Stone was a lesbian trans woman because the signatories to that letter stated that trans women were men.

Continuing from the August 18th statement:

There are trans womyn and trans men who attend and work at the Festival who participate in the Michfest community in this same spirit - as supporters of, rather than detractors from, our female-focused culture. The presence of trans womyn at Michfest has been misrepresented as a kind of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." But the real issue is about the focus of the event, a focus on the experience of those born female, who've lived their lives subjected to oppression based on the sole fact of their being female.

The clear implication is that trans women aren't female.

Vogel articulated this belief that trans women are men in a 2005 interview with Amy Ray of the indigo girls. She explained why the womyn-born-womyn policy was articulated as policy in 1978.

Amy Ray. When did you develop your policy, like your specific policy, for example, "women born women?" Did you feel a need to have it after the first year?

Lisa Vogel. The first year we articulated it was 1978.

Amy Ray. So after 2 years?

Lisa Vogel. Yeah. There was not a trans movement but you know there was a dynamic that was happening, and there certainly was an issue, and there was a dynamic that was kind of two-fold. There was this whole process that was happening about questioning women of color, butch women of color. Women would come up to me, "there's a man on the land." And the first question out of my mouth became, "is she a woman of color?" Because white women who weren't used to being around African-American women, specifically, or Mexican-American women, would read butch African-American women as men. And that was a real dynamic thing that was happening in the seventies. I mean, just bluntly. And because there hadn't been a lot of, I can say from my experience anyways, there wasn't a whole lot of interracial community action happening. And I think the festivals were really part of making that be so, but it wasn't very "so" at first.

The explanation given in 2005 indicates that the policy was instituted at least in part because she was concerned that butch women of color might be perceived to be men, to include transsexual women.

In an April 12, 2013 email entitled "Letter To Community," Vogel restates the impetus of what she now refers to as the womon born womon/womon born female intention.

When we started Festival 38 years ago, we did so to make a home and a space where we could grow our own definition of female identity. At the time, the mere idea of a female identity autonomous of male identity was revolutionary. Over the course of nearly four decades, we have continued to discover, (re)define and live out what it means to be womon-identified and to recognize and honor diverse gender expression among womyn.

This sounds much less harsh than the language of "We do not believe that a man without a penis is a woman any more than we would accept a white woman with dyed skin as a Black woman" that she signed onto in 1977 -- a year before the womyn-born-womyn policy was first articulated for MichFest.

Vogel began equivocating over trans women and female in 2006, She no longer calls trans women men; however, at no point since 2006 can one find reference to Vogel referring to trans women as female. The equivocation between calling trans women "womyn" and not calling trans women "female" is visible and notable.

The first reference where Vogel referred to trans women with either of the terms womon or womyn is from the 2006 press in which she stated:

"If a transwoman purchased a ticket, it represents nothing more than that womon choosing to disrespect the stated intention of this Festival."

Referring back to the April 12, 2013 letter to community, Vogel equivocated over trans womyn and female. She did this while also notably calling for womon-born-female/womon born womon to be respected as a gender identity. {Hypocritically, she called for this on this occasion (as well as on a number of other occasions) while not respecting the gender identity of trans women whose gender identity female -- she doesn't call trans women female, and it appears to be something she does with clear intention.}

The Festival, for a single precious week, is intended for womyn who at birth were deemed female, who were raised as girls, and who identify as womyn. I believe that womyn-born womyn (WBW) is a lived experience

that constitutes its own distinct gender identity.

As we struggle around the question of inclusion of transwomyn at the festival, we use the word intention very deliberately. Michigan holds this particular lived experience of womanhood as honorable, meaningful, unique and rich. Our intention has always been coupled with the radical commitment to never question any woman's gender. We ask the greater community to respect this intention, and to value the complexity and validity of every gender identity, including that of WBW. The onus is on each individual to choose whether or how to respect that intention.

She also equivocated over the words trans womyn and female in a May 9, 2014 statement.

We have said that this space, for this week, is intended to be for womyn who were born female, raised as girls and who continue to identify as womyn. This is an intention for the spirit of our gathering, rather than the focus of the festival. It is not a policy, or a ban on anyone. We do not "restrict festival attendance to cisgendered womyn, prohibiting trans women" as was recently claimed in several Advocate articles. We do not and will not question anyone's gender...

Trans womyn and transmen have always attended this gathering. Some atted wanting to change the intention, while others feel the intention includes them. Deciding how the festival's intention applies to each person is not what we're about. Defining the intention of the gathering for ourselves is vital. Being born female in this culture has meaning, it is an authentic experience, one that has actual lived consequences. These experiences provide important context to the fabric of our lives, context that is chronically missing from the conversation about the very few autonomous spaces created for females.

She equivocated very clearly in her August 1, 2014 statement, indicating that trans womyn's experiences aren't female experiences.

The experience of being female, like the experience of being trans, informs how we become the womyn we are.

It equivocation indicates that Lisa Vogel believes that there are female women (womyn-born-womyn) and male womyn (trans womyn). The equivocation is clearly is intentional: it's visible in the title of the second point: Acknowledge the Validity of Autonomous, Female-Defined Space.

Also found in point two is Lisa Vogel objecting to the womyn-born-womyn intention being referred to as a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy.

There are trans womyn and trans men who attend and work at the Festival who participate in the Michfest community in this same spirit - as supporters of, rather than detractors from, our female-focused culture. The presence of trans womyn at Michfest has been misrepresented as a kind of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." But the real issue is about the focus of the event, a focus on the experience of those born female, who've lived their lives subjected to oppression based on the sole fact of their being female.

Calling the womyn-born-womyn intention a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy; however, isn't without historic context. Again, from the 2000 official MichFest Handout, line item 5 contained these two bullet points:

- We are committed to the position that no woman's gender will be questioned on the land. We have a commitment that Michigan remain a space that recognizes and celebrates the full range of what it means to be a womyn-born womyn - and that butch/gender-ambiguous womyn can move about our community with confidence that their right to be here will not be questioned.

- We also have an obligation to run the Festival in a way that keeps faith with the womyn-born womyn policy, which may mean denying admission to individuals who self-declare as male-to-female transsexuals or female-to-male transsexuals now living as men (or asking them to leave if they enter).

One can argue that at the moment that womyn-born-womyn only attendance is an intention, but as a part of MichFest history it's clear that at one point it was very much a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. If this is about "getting the facts straight," then the historic context of why the womyn-born-womyn policy is being called a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy is one of the relevant facts.

3. Acknowledge That Michfest Creates Spaces That Do Not Exist Elsewhere.

In this section of her August 18th statement, Lisa Vogel acknowledges that her intent to create "female" space at MichFest -- space that excludes those she considers male womyn -- is a failure. From the first numbered section of her August 18th statement.

The truth is, trans womyn and trans men attend the Festival, blog about their experiences, and work on crew. Again, it is not the inclusion of trans womyn at Festival that we resist; it is the erasure of the specificity of female experience in the discussion of about the space itself that stifles progress in this conversation. As long as those who boycott and threaten Michfest do not acknowledge the reasons why the space was created in the first place, and has remained vital for four decades, the conversation remains deadlocked.

Even knowing her intention doesn't create the space she intends, she holds firm to the intention.

It should be noted here that a significant number of trans women acknowledge the reason why they are excluded from the intent of womyn's/female space of Michfest; these trans women know why they were excluded since the womyn-born-womyn policy was first articulated in 1978. The reason is found in the 1977 letter to the Olivia Records Collective that Lisa Vogel signed: "We do not believe that a man without a penis is a woman any more than we would accept a white woman with dyed skin as a Black woman."

The policy was created, and the intention of that policy remains, because Lisa Vogel believes (and has explicitly stated in 1977, 1991, 1999, and 2000) that trans women are men and/or males.

The space created was exclusionary of trans women she stated she believed were men.

4. Turn Your Energy Towards the Real Enemies of Female and LGBTQ Liberation.

From a civil rights perspective, the womyn-born-womyn policy/intention of MichFest is a real enemy of female and LGBTQ liberation. Failure to acknowledge that trans women are female and belong in women's spaces -- especially in the context of the intersection between women's and LGBTQ community -- is a failure to acknowledge discrimination and segregation based on gender identity.

And, the early statements and actions related to MichFest's womyn-born-womyn policy indicated it was enforced segregation (here, and here). That Lisa Vogel believes that trans women should self-segregate only removes the "enforced" from the womyn-born-womyn segregation policy.

Martin Luther King Junior spoke to segregation.

Segregation is the adultery of an illicit intercourse between injustice and immorality.

Fighting against segregation and discrimination in intra-LGBTQ community spaces -- specifically in an intersectional lesbian and feminist space -- is fighting a real enemy of female (to include trans women as females) and LGBTQ liberation.

5. Join the Conversation, Not the Digital Sound Bite War.

Commenting on the title of section 5 of the August 18th statement, this response from The Transadvocate is long form and substance based. It's not a "digital sound bite."

And within section five, Vogel states:

We are fierce allies to and members of the trans and broader LGBTQ movement - but our alliance cannot and will not be premised on our continued erasure.

This is a point similar to the one she made in the first section.

As the 39th Festival closes and we turn our hearts and minds to our landmark 40th anniversary, we reiterate that Michfest recognizes trans womyn as womyn - and they are our sisters. We do not fear their presence among us, a false claim repeatedly made. What we resist - and what we will never stop fighting - is the continued erasure and disrespect for the specific experience of being born and living as female in a patriarchal, misogynist world.

In point one, Vogel acknowledges that trans women attend MichFest each year. The question at this point for Vogel would be this:

"Has trans women's participation at MichFest to this point erased womyn-born-female?"

If womyn-born-womyn haven't been erased at MichFest, as Vogel appears to be stating hasn't happened as yet, we at The Transadvocate don't see how removing the womyn-born-womyn intention will erase womyn-born-female.

We at The Transadvocate have suggested in the past and suggest again, that an alternative way to ensure that any real womon born womon gender identity could be acknowledged and not erased at MichFest. And, that way is to set aside a section in the festival for women-born-female just as there is a section in the festival set aside for womyn-of-color. In setting aside an honored space for womyn-born-female, the experiences of womyn-born-womyn could be recognized as a gender identity and honored in the same way that the experiences of womyn of color recognized and honored within its set aside, honored space.

We turn to our LGBTQ community and say: we hear your truths; we ask you to acknowledge that you hear ours. Listen to the voices of the tens of thousands of women who call Michfest home. Join the conversation in person in your home communities, not exclusively through social media platforms or online petitions. We invite our sisters to participate in this conversation in person on the Land. Make room in your heart to hold difference of opinion and disagreement - this is the challenging path to honoring true diversity. We turn to our LGBTQ community and ask you to unite with us in the belief that

we can work together as a movement and stand together in solidarity. We ask you to work with us, not against us.

So directly to Lisa Vogel from me:

Trans women attend MichFest, but by intention aren't welcome at MichFest. If trans women honor your request to self-segregate, then we can't have a discussion face-to-face as you suggest.

So, I invite you to come to trans space: I invite you to come to the Transgender Leadership Summit held in California each year and join with trans women in a break-out-session to discuss the womyn-born-female intention. There we could have a discussion face-to-face and not online; we wouldn't violate your festival's intention. And, you wouldn't violate any intention of that summit.

Allow me to remind you of something you told Amy Ray in 2005:

We've been process monsters from the start because it is first and foremost a community event where it is the community's process that will really bubble up to the top, and the right thing will happen.

So come, my community sister, let us reason together. The right thing to do, I believe, is bubbling to the top, and we can have a public, face-to-face, honest discussion about that.

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