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Repeating the cycle at MichFest: The clash of two feminisms

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Abstract

The yearly struggle the trans community experiences with MichFest has been taking place for so long, some of us have trouble remembering why MichFest's "womyn-born womyn" policy was such a painful issue for the feminist and trans communities in the first place. The very notion of "woman-born woman" is now so ubiquitous that many of [...]

Article



The yearly struggle the trans community experiences with MichFest has been taking place for so long, some of us have trouble remembering why MichFest's "womyn-born womyn" policy was such a painful issue for the feminist and trans communities in the first place. The very notion of "woman-born woman" is now so ubiquitous that many of us have forgotten that its roots span all the way back to when MichFest's organizer took part in attacking a feminism that was trans inclusive in a way that led to the attempted murder of a trans woman. Most of us have forgotten that before MichFest invited feminists everywhere to organize around the notion of "womyn-born womyn" in 1978, radical feminists were organizing around the notion of "woman-identified women."

In 1969, a certain group was being excluded from feminist spaces because they were viewed as not being “real women” by the largely heterosexual middle-class women who usually ran feminist spaces. In 1969, the group that was being excluded from feminist spaces because they weren’t authentic women were lesbians. Lesbians didn’t experience a system that produced “women” who relied upon men for their existence, who took the names of men, who provided free labor to men and who oftentimes birthed and raised a man’s children in the way heteronormative feminists of the era did. This difference inspired the larger feminist community to otherize lesbians, leading to feminist systems of lesbian erasure and exclusion.

For lesbian women, being viewed as inauthentic women meant facing exclusion within feminist spaces and only limited access to the women’s movement itself. Because lesbians by definition didn’t represent the experiences of middle-class heterosexual women, lesbians found themselves outside of a feminist movement that concerned itself with the experiences of middle-class heterosexual women. In 1969 Betty Friedan, the then president of NOW, tried to distance feminism from lesbians, delisting the Daughters of Bilitis as sponsors of the First Congress to Unite Women and inspiring Rita Mae Brown and other iconic lesbian opinion leaders to, as part of the radical feminist group the Radicalesbians, take direct action during the Second Congress to Unite Women in 1970. Consider the way being lesbian was viewed at that time:

Feminists have been called ‘lesbian’ long before they may have, in fact, considered its application in their personal lives; it has been an insult directed at them with escalated regularity ever since they began working politically for women’s liberation... But the threat of being called lesbian touched real fears: to the extent that if a woman was involved with a man, she feared being considered Unfeminine and Unwomanly, and thus being rejected. There was also the larger threat: the fear of male rejection in general since it is through a husband that women gain economic and social security, through male employers that they earn a living, and in general through male power that they survive, to incur the wrath of men is no small matter.

Acts of feminine transgression may take different forms. A woman may appear too self-reliant and assertive; she may work politically for women’s rights; she may be too smart for her colleagues; or she may have important close friends who are women. Often women have been called ‘lesbian’ by complete strangers simply because they were sitting in a cafe obviously engrossed in their own conversation and not interested in the men around them. (Curiously enough it is precisely on the most seemingly ‘feminine’ women that men will frequent this kind of abuse, since the purpose is more to scare the women back into ‘place’ than to pinpoint any actual lesbianism.) 1

Cycles of Lateral Violence

Inherent to the act of policing is a power differential. In constituency policing, one claims a power to assess, define and contextualize another through a subordination process that often relies upon dehumanization and deauthentication. Seeking power through subordinating others within your own constituency is a well-documented phenomena.

Minister John Vorster, the Dutch Afrikaners had themselves been an oppressed people. They had first come to South Africa in 1652 and had run much of the country for some time, but the British came and displaced them in 1820. After a long period of shaky peace, the two peoples had fought the Anglo-Boer

War of 1899-1902. The British won, which left a lasting bitterness among the Dutch Afrikaners. Why would the Afrikaners now turn around and oppress the South African blacks? Perhaps those who have been steadily oppressed look for another group whom they can oppress. 2

Lee Maracle described the experience of oppressing others within one's own constituency as a lateral violence: "Lateral violence among Native people is about our anti-colonial rage working itself out in an expression of hate for one another." While I am certainly not comparing the lateral violence lesbians experienced at the hands of middle-class heterosexual feminists to other historic types of lateral violence, I am taking note of the hallmarks of lateral violence. For instance, Maracle notes the insidious nature of lateral violence, "Our communities are reduced to a sub-standard definition of normal, which leads to a sensibility of defeat, which in turn calls the victim to the table of lateral violence and ultimately... corrodes the system from within." 3

It is the corroding effect to the constituency as a whole that is perhaps the most insidious aspect of this behavior. Dehumanization and deauthenticating of a lesbian woman's experience of being a woman in order to force her to assume a social context not representative of her truths, experience or class reality is an enfeebled attempt to grasp at empowerment through a form of lateral violence. This article is an examination of the ways oppressed people grasp at lateral violence as an enfeebled strategy of empowerment.

Rita Mae Brown, member of both the Radicalesbians and The Furies Collective, spoke of the cyclical nature of lateral violence thusly:

It was very clear to me, those women, most of whom were rather privileged and very bright, treated lesbians the way men treated them... [Betty Friedan] tossed me out and said that I was the Lavender Menace and she purged anybody she suspected of [being a lesbian] from NOW or from anything else. I just happened to be the first.

During this era, being a lesbian was akin to being an un-woman and produced a constituency of feminists split into two types: authenticated women who enjoyed visibility and inclusion within feminist spaces and the deauthenticated women who endured shunning and had to fight for their inclusion. During a 1979 speech given at the City University of New York Graduate Center, Monique Wittig -- the progenitor of radical feminism -- described this experience thusly:

Lesbians should always remember and acknowledge how unnatural, compelling, totally oppressive, and destructive being woman was for us in the old days before the women's liberation movement. It was a political constraint, and those who resisted it were accused of not being real women. But then we were proud of it, since in the accusation there was already something like a shadow of victory: the avowal by the oppressor that woman is not something that goes without saying, since to be one, one has to be a real one. 4

Wittig also spoke to a troubling trend she'd witnessed within the women's liberation movement by the end of the 1970s. For both Wittig and Andrea Dworkin, the move to root feminism in an inherent biological, psychic or mystical womanhood was appealing to the very supposed nature/god-created woman essence the patriarchy was built upon:

However, as Andrea Dworkin emphasizes, many lesbians recently have increasingly tried to transform

the very ideology that has enslaved us into a dynamic, religious, psychologically compelling celebration of female biological potential. Thus, some avenues of the feminist and lesbian movement lead us back to the myth of woman which was created by men especially for us, and with it we sink back into a natural group. Having stood up to fight for a sexless society, we now find ourselves entrapped in the familiar deadlock of woman is wonderful. Simone de Beauvoir underlined particularly the false consciousness which consists of selecting among the features of the myth (that women are different from men) those which look good and using them as a definition for women. What the concept woman is wonderful accomplishes is that it retains for defining women the best features (best according to whom?) which oppression has granted us, and it does not radically question the categories man and woman, which are political categories and not natural givens. It puts us in a position of fighting within the class women not as the other classes do, for the disappearance of our class, but for the defense of woman and its reinforcement.

What does feminist mean? Feminist is formed with the word femme, woman, and means: someone who fights for women. For many of us it means someone who fights for women as a class and for the disappearance of this class. For many others it means someone who fights for woman and her defense -- for the myth, then, and its reinforcement. But why was the word feminist chosen if it retains the least ambiguity? We chose to call ourselves feminists ten years ago, not in order to support or reinforce the myth of woman, nor to identify ourselves with the oppressor's definition of us, but rather to affirm that our movement had a history and to emphasize the political link with the old feminist movement.

Wittig then affirmed her radical-to-the-root analysis for a substantive liberation of women:

Once the class men disappears, women as a class will disappear as well, for there are no slaves without masters... I believe this is the reason why all these attempts at new definitions of woman are blossoming now. What is at stake (and of course not only for women) is an individual definition as well as a class definition. For once one has acknowledged oppression, one needs to know and experience the fact that one can constitute oneself as a subject (as opposed to an object of oppression), that one can become someone in spite of oppression, that one has one's own identity. There is no possible fight for someone deprived of an identity, no internal motivation for fighting, since, although I can fight only with others, first I fight for myself.

Radicalesbians introduced the ideas Wittig would later lament in 1979 to wider feminism in 1970: a conception of "woman" decoupled from the middle-class heterosexual woman's experience. This new vision of the "woman" was rooted in a shared class experience and was disseminated through a booklet titled, *Woman-Identified Woman* at the Second Congress to Unite Women. With the "woman" identity decoupled from the middle-class heterosexual experience, lesbian women were no longer relegated to an invisible status within feminism. By recognizing that all women shared in a common oppression, lesbian oppression could be rightfully recognized as a form of sexism. Therefore, anti-lesbian sentiment within feminism itself could be acknowledged as one point of oppression along a continuum of sexism which affected the lives of all women, lesbians and non-lesbians included.

"The 'woman-identified woman' defined herself without reference to male-dominated societal structures. She gained her sense of identity not from the men she related to, but from her internal sense of self and from ideals of nurturing, community, and cooperation that she defined as female."

While “woman” and “lesbian” identities would be critiqued throughout the 1970s by feminists, “woman” being conceptualized in a way that wasn’t primarily rooted in the experiences of non-lesbian women was a major shift for the feminist movement. This shift provided a theoretical framework for lesbian separatist spaces such as Olivia Records to exist. Olivia was founded in 1973 and the theoretical framework that shaped the women’s music collective was conceptualized through The Furies Collective:

Speaking for the Furies Collective, [Ginny] Berson claimed that sexism is the original oppression and that a particular kind of overriding political commitment to women was the only means by which sexism, economic injustice, and racism could be defeated... According to Berson, lesbianism is:

not a matter of sexual preference, but rather one of political choice which every woman must make if she is to become woman-identified and thereby end male supremacy.

The Furies envisioned a society where, little by little, women became woman-identified and combined their strengths in order to counteract the oppressive male power structure. [G]roups like the Radicalesbians were interrupting more mainstream feminist events in order to promote the same lesbian-feminist ideals referenced by Berson.

The founders of Olivia Records relocated from Washington, D.C., to Los Angeles shortly after completing production of their first album, oriented toward a lesbian-feminist philosophy that identified men as the oppressors and gender oppression as the root of all other oppressions... This business model represented a private-enterprise realization of woman identification in the sense that it was to promote the economic prosperity exclusively of women and was to expose lesbians to values meant to support their self-identity and encourage them to replace stifling dependence on men with empowering interdependence on women.

Olivia Records pioneered the women’s music movement of the 1970s. It was also the embodiment of the woman-identified woman ideal. While The Furies had pioneered the notion of women’s collectives through the woman-identified woman framework, Olivia took this framework to a new level, giving rise to an entire industry built upon a woman-identified framework, decoupled from the patriarchal notions of “woman.”

If the “woman-identified woman” framework was so successful, how did it turn into the now ubiquitous “woman-born woman” framework? What differences are to be found in a framework built upon common oppression and one built upon an asserted natural sex binary? What price did feminists and the trans community pay for this transition?

Repeating the Cycle

What does it say about the “woman-identified woman” framework when we recognize that the radical feminist Lesbian separatist Women’s music collective, Olivia Records was trans inclusive, paid for trans medical care, braved threats of violence from sex essentialist feminists and interceded in an attempted murder of trans collective member, Sandy Stone by a sex essentialist “radical feminist” group?

Whereas the “woman-identified woman” framework gave rise to Lesbian-feminism, feminist collectives and feminist institutions such as the trans-inclusive West Coast Lesbian Conference - at that time, the largest gathering of Lesbian Feminists ever - and the Olivia women’s music collective, this

framework experienced a nation-wide challenge when the organizer and several MichFest-affiliated acts published an Open Letter challenging the validity of a feminism that included trans women. Prior to the publication of this letter, Janice Raymond had made it known that Olivia was trans inclusive. Those who rejected the “woman-identified woman” framework of The Furies, Monique Wittig, Andrea Dworkin, The Daughters of Bilitis, the Radicalesbians and Olivia openly embraced a feminism rooted in biologism instead of a class consciousness. Dworkin would later confront this movement at a 1977 Take Back The Night event as being an anti-feminist movement that would shred the fabric of feminism itself. Dworkin described what it was like to openly confront this new feminism:

So I spoke, afraid. I said that I would not be associated with a movement that advocated the most pernicious ideology on the face of the earth. It was this very ideology of biological determinism that had licensed the slaughter and/or enslavement of virtually any group one could name, including women by men. (“Use their own poison against them,” one woman screamed.) Anywhere one looked, it was this philosophy that justified atrocity. This was one faith that destroyed life with a momentum of its own.

Insults continued with unabated intensity as I spoke, but gradually those women I liked or loved, and others I did not know, began to question openly the philosophy they had been applauding and also their own acquiescence. Embraced by many women on my way out, I left still sickened, humiliated by the insults, emotionally devastated by the abuse. Time passes, but the violence done is not undone. It never is.

She then directly critiqued this new feminism rooted not in a shared class struggle, but in biology:

Recently, more and more feminists have been advocating social, spiritual, and mythological models that are female-supremacist and/or matriarchal. To me, this advocacy signifies a basic conformity to the tenets of biological determinism that underpin the male social system. Pulled toward an ideology based on the moral and social significance of a distinct female biology because of its emotional and philosophical familiarity, drawn to the spiritual dignity inherent in a “female principle” (essentially as defined by men), of course unable to abandon by will or impulse a lifelong and centuries-old commitment to childbearing as the female creative act, women have increasingly tried to transform the very ideology that has enslaved us into a dynamic, religious, psychologically compelling celebration of female biological potential.

It is shamefully easy for us to enjoy our own fantasies of biological omnipotence while despising men for enjoying the reality of theirs. And it is dangerous-because genocide begins, however improbably, in the conviction that classes of biological distinction indisputably sanction social and political discrimination. We, who have been devastated by the concrete consequences of this idea, still want to put our faith in it. Nothing offers more proof-sad, irrefutable proof-that we are more like men than either they or we care to believe.

Was Dworkin being hyperbolic when she said that death would follow under the rubric of this feminism? Is it fair to consider how this feminism informed the events leading up to the death of Filisa Vistima? Is it fair to consider how this new feminism informed the events that lead up to the revocation of public and private funding for trans health care in the US? Is it fair to consider how this feminism informed the events that lead the members of Olivia to face threats of violence or to have one of their own targeted for murder by a “feminist” group?

In 1977, feminists informed by the woman-identified framework were publicly repudiated by a feminism

informed by a woman-born framework:

[Figure] Woman-Born Feminist Framework: Open Letter published in Sister, 1977

Some of us have already [worked with trans woman Sandy Stone] without the knowledge that this person was not [sic] a woman. When we did discover the truth about Stone and tried to discuss this with you, we were told that you considered him [sic] very much a woman, a lesbian, and that you trusted him [sic] 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.

Consider the difference between the above women-born biologic experience framework and Olivia's response, representing the women-identified class experience framework:

Because Sandy decided to give up completely and permanently her male identity and live as a woman and a lesbian, she is now faced with the same kinds of oppression that other women and lesbians face. She must also cope with the ostracism that all of society imposes on a transsexual. In evaluating whom we trust as a close ally, we take a person's history into consideration, but our focus as political lesbians is on what her actions are now. If she is a person who comes from privilege, has she renounced that which is oppressive in her privilege, and is she sharing with other women that which is useful? Is she aware of her own oppression? Is she open to struggle around class, race, and other aspects of lesbian feminist politics? These were our yardsticks in deciding whether to work with a woman who grew up with male privilege. We felt that Sandy met those same criteria that we apply to any woman with whom we plan to work closely.

As to why we did not immediately bring this issue to the attention of the national women's community, we have to say that to us, Sandy Stone is a person, not an issue.

All of us are looking forward to the day when work can begin on our studio and Sandy can start training other women. As we do of each other, we ask everything of Sandy, and she gives it. She has chosen to make her life with us and we expect to grow old together working and sharing.

The woman-born Open Letter sounded a warning shot across the bow of the very feminism that won lesbians a place of the feminist table. The feminism of The Furies, the Raicalesbians, Wittig and Dworkin was put on notice: "women" would no longer be a political group united by common oppression. Instead, "woman" would become a discrete biological group with inherent experiential traits that no trans woman could ever have.

[Figure] Sandy Stone at the Olivia Collective

Unfortunately, the Open Letter that Lisa Vogel signed publicly announced that Olivia's trans collective member, Sandy Stone, would be going on tour with Olivia:

We were told that Stone was going to be doing sound at an upcoming concert billed as a women-only event. This seemed an odd choice, since there are more than a few competent women sound technicians in the Bay Area. In this instance a transexual was taking away work away from women who have to struggle to gain access to these skills and whose opportunities are extremely limited.

The news was received by feminists who embraced the woman-born framework with varying degrees of hostility. Stone recounted the events that lead up to the attempt on her life:

[W]e were getting hate mail about me. After a while the hate mail got so vicious that the mail room made a decision to not pass that mail along to me. This was vile stuff. A lot of it included death threats. They would let me know about the death threats after a while. The death threats were directed at me, but there were violent consequences proposed for the Collective if they didn't get rid of me.

The more hate mail that arrived, the more we could perceive that there was organizing going on, outside of the Collective, that had to do with transphobia and with isolating trans people wherever they popped up. I was not alone.

This pattern escalated. We were organizing what was for us, a major tour. We wanted to tour the country and provide women's music for women in major cities along our route. It was the first time anything like that had been attempted. We had an entire network of lesbian separatist producers, people who could organize local logistical support, people who could advertise tickets and handle the selling and we wanted it to be completely done by women.

[W]e had gotten a letter telling us that when [our tour] got to Seattle that there was a separatist paramilitary group called the Gorgons. The Gorgons was a group of women who wore camo gear, shaved their heads and carried live weapons. We were told that when we got to town, they were going to kill me. [W]e began checking this out and the women who had booked the hall for us said, "Yes! These people are real and you guys had better do something about this because they're serious!"

We did, in fact, go to Seattle, but we went as probably the only women's music tour that was ever done with serious muscle security. They were very alert for weapons and, in fact, Gorgons did come and they did have guns taken away from them.

I was pants-wetting scared at that event. I was terrified. During a break between a musical number someone shouted out "GORGONS!" and I made it from my seat at the console to under the table the console was on at something like superluminal speed. I stayed under there until it was clear that I wasn't about to be shot... Not that it would have done me any good to be under there.

The Cycle Continues

The propagation of lateral violence is only possible within feminist spaces when these spaces lose the class perspective Wittig, Dworkin, Olivia, The Furies, and the Radicalesbians promoted. Whereas lesbian women were once ejected from feminist spaces for not being authenticated through a "real" women's experience (the middle-class heterosexual women's experience), MichFest women embraced discrimination against trans women for not being authenticated through a "real" women's experience (assigned female at birth). Just as it was presumed by middle-class heterosexual women that a lesbian woman's experience of objectification and oppression was fundamentally different from their experience as women, MichFest presumes that a trans woman's experience of objectification and oppression must be fundamentally different from their experience as women. The othering trans women face at the hands of MichFest women resulting in trans erasure and exclusion is but another iteration of the othering lesbian women faced at the hands of middle-class heterosexual women resulting in lesbian erasure and exclusion.

MichFest has spent 40 years propagating a type of feminism rooted in biologism, not class experience. Many of us are familiar with this fact because in 1991, MichFest ejected a trans woman named Nancy

Burkholder for not being the right kind of woman. A 1991 letter from Lisa Vogel and Barbara Price published in the Gay Community News represents the first known print publication of the “womon-only policy” defined as “womyn born womyn” which described a trans woman as a “transsexual man:”

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. We respect everyone’s right to define themselves as they wish.

It’s unfortunate that our choice to offer the Michigan Festival as an event for womyn-born-womyn is being construed by some as a position on the merits of people making individual choices on how to live. We only mean to define who this event is for. We hold dearly our right to make this determination and in the same regard we believe that is the right of every other womyn’s institution and community to define these issues depending on their own particular needs and concerns.

We regret that the circumstances at this year’s festival may have been a result of a lack of current public information on this policy. We think it is understandable that our priority would not be centered around who our event is “not” for, and we have deliberately refrained from placing our focus in that direction, though we have always been definite about our policy when asked.

When it was clear this summer there was a known transsexual man [sic] attending the event, the festival security staff dealt with it [sic] as respectfully as possible. 5

Most trans people know that in response to this anti-trans discrimination, Camp Trans was established. In her academic book, *Gender Hurts* TERF opinion leader Sheila Jeffreys demagogued the establishment of Camp Trans thusly:

The prominent US male-bodied transgender activist, Rikki Wilchins, now describes himself [sic] as a ‘male-to-female-to-male transsexual’, and has given up any attempts to look ‘feminine’, though he [sic] still uses the women’s toilets. 6 Wilchins is the founder⁷ of the transgender activist group Transsexual Menace; the campaigning group GenderPAC, which promotes the right to ‘gender’;⁸ and the encampment that lays siege to the Michigan Women’s Music Festival, Camp Trans.

Attendees say that this experience [of the MWMF] can be ‘empowering in recognizing the diversity of womyn’s bodies and their beauty outside of conventional norms of attractiveness’. This was particularly the case in terms of the communal showers under the trees where women did not have to be ashamed of their bodies. Moreover, the festival offers a space where women can be freely loving and affectionate towards one another in ways that heterosexual people take for granted, engaging in ‘same-sex intimacies through holding hands, kissing, etc. in all of the festival spaces’ free from men’s insults and threats of violence. These are all activities that women, and lesbians in particular, cannot feel safe or comfortable to engage in when in male company... For all these reasons, transgender activists want access.

[T]he siege of the festival began in 1993 when some transgender activists set up ‘Camp Trans’

opposite the entrance to the festival to protest the policy of not admitting self-identified transgenders [sic]. Camp Trans was repeated in 1994 and then went into abeyance until revived in 1999 as Son of Camp Trans by the activist group Transsexual Menace and the transgender activist organisation, GenderPAC. The founder of both these organizations is the male-bodied transgender [sic], Riki Wilchins, who identifies as a male-to-female-to-male transsexual. 9

So ubiquitous are the bones of this narrative that some readers may be surprised to learn that it was not a trans woman, but a cisgender radical Lesbian named Janice Walworth who organized the outreach and education campaign that came to be known as Camp Trans. Note that in Jeffreys' academic narrative, gone is the reality that Camp Trans became an event that happened outside of MichFest due to threats of violence by adherents to the woman-born framework. Instead, according to this narrative, someone who's apparently not sure if she's trans - but nevertheless, by herself started GenderPack, the Transsexual Menace and Camp Trans - organized a "transgender siege" to gain access to lesbians who come to MichFest to make out. As you can guess, practically nothing about Jeffreys' Camp Trans narrative is accurate. Consider the following account from the cisgender woman who started it all:

Janice Walworth: I had been a friend of Nancy's for a while before that. She and I had both gone to the festival in 1990 and there were no incidents. So, she had come there in 1991, I was there also, she had come with her friend. Laura and I had seen Nancy at the beginning of the festival, and then I didn't see her again, for several days. I began to wonder -- of course, there are so many people in there, it's easy enough to not run into people -- but, I had really been keeping an eye out for her and had not seen her. Finally, Laura found me and told me what had happened.

I then called Nancy and talked to her about it and we agreed that it was important for as many people as possible to know about this and I spent the rest of my time at that festival talking to people and just letting them know what had happened. And most people I talked to were horrified. I remember talking to one person - someone that I had known personally for a long time - whose response was, "Well, that's the way that it should be." So, there was a range of responses, but really, most people I talked to were like, "REALLY?!? That's unbelievable!"

So, that was the initial response to what had happened. It was in 1991 when Nancy was thrown out. We were just all in shock about it and we were just trying to let as many people as possible know about what happened. After the festival, we began a letter-writing campaign, writing gay newspapers and stuff like that, just to make sure that people knew.

One might inquire why Jeffreys felt it was important to the integrity of the woman-born framework that a cisgender radical Lesbian feminist named Janis Walworth not be the individual who organized the outreach and education effort that came to be known as Camp Trans. Why did Jeffreys feel it was important to the woman-born framework that just one apparently confused trans person be designated as being the one trans person responsible for organizing the outreach and education effort that came to be known as Camp Trans? Why did Jeffreys feel it was important to the woman-born framework that the threats of violence that forced the outreach and education effort outside the gates of MichFest be erased? Moreover, why did Jeffreys feel it was important to the woman-born framework that the 1992 MichFest survey which found that a significant majority of MichFest attendees wanted trans women at MichFest be erased from her MichFest/trans narrative?

Walworth: In 1992 it was decided that - I mean, I had been talking with Nancy and with some other trans activists - we decided that somebody needed to go back to the festival and let people know what was going on and to make our voices heard so that we could start doing some education.

So, I went back there and I went there with Davina Gabriel, my sister went with me, another woman named Brandy and another woman from Kansas City. So, the four of us went and we had a lot of literature. I had written up what I called, Gender Myths - they were just a short statement of some belief some people held about trans women and men and then under that, the Fact, a little paragraph explaining what was factual - and we had these printed up in bright colors and we posted those in the port-o-potties. We went around every day, with handfulls of these things. I mean, a lot of people put literature in the port-o-potties because, while you're sitting there, it's something to read. So, we posted these Gender Myths in ALL the port-o-potties. They got torn down on a regular basis, and so we went around, every single day, and posted them again, sometimes twice a day.



Figure 1. IMG_1904

We also had a table out at the area called One World, which is the area for literature, and they have tables set up there so that people can put up literature there. People usually just put literature out and walk away. We actually took a table and brought some chairs and sat behind it and talked to people as they went by, which was kind of unheard of in that area, at the time.



Figure 2. Gender Myth Set

We had a box at our table so that when they got done with the survey, they could drop it into the box. Every night we took the survey all the way back out to my car and locked them in the car because we were afraid that somebody would vandalize them if we left them out. Other tables had surveys that were left out so that people could just do them around the clock, but we were afraid that if we left them unattended, something would happen to them.



Figure 3. IMG_1899

I have the results. We did a total of 633 surveys and there were about 7,500 attendees that year which gave us a response rate of 8.4%. The margin of error was 3.8%. We did this right [laughs]. In answer to the first question (Do you think that male-to-female transsexuals should be welcome at the MWMF?), YES responses were 73.1%; NO responses were 22.6% and the other 4.3% were things like, “I’m not sure” or simply did not answer.

Walworth returned to MichFest in 1993 with friends but was told by festival representatives that they should leave because they were in physical danger.

Walworth: In 1993, we went back 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 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.”

Tensions were definitely rising, we were told. We had scheduled to do some workshops and some folks were definitely hostile. We were told that, for our own safety, the trans women would need to leave the festival as soon as possible. It was a situation.

An outside education and outreach camp was created even though the MWMF Leather Dykes said they would provide body guard protection for Walworth’s team. It was decided that avoiding violence was the best course of action to take and thus, in response to impending sex essentialist feminist violence, what would become Camp Trans was born in 1993.

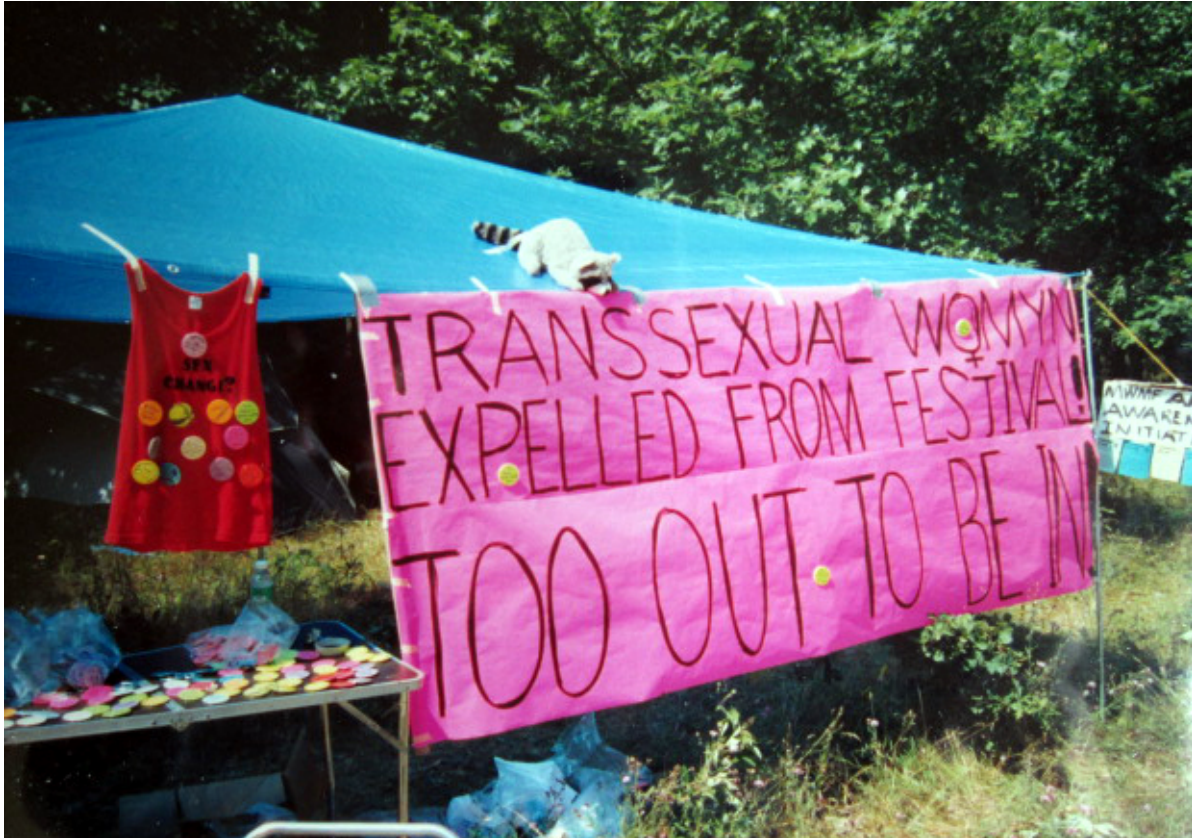


Figure 4. IMG_1863

How does Walworth's woman-identified narrative differ from Jeffreys' woman-born narrative? Does the propagation of a narrative that seeks to otherize trans people as confused interlopers move the feminist, trans or MichFest community any closer to reconciliation? True reconciliation isn't an erasure of our history. Reconciliation is a commitment to owning some painful truths about our history. Reconciliation is a conscious act of forgiveness, not forgetfulness.

Just as MichFest needs to own the fact that a trans kid's life was openly threatened before she was expelled from the Land in 1999, the trans community needs to own that cis and trans members of BashBack! caused havoc for both MichFest and Camp Trans in 2010.

In 1999, Camp Trans -- popularly known as "Son of Camp Trans" -- was largely facilitated by two chapters of the Lesbian Avengers and as part of the group's action, they brought a 16-year-old trans girl to the MichFest ticket booth and informed them that everyone in the group was from Camp Trans. Moreover, they explicitly stated that some of their group was trans. While MichFest sold everyone in the group tickets, the moment the group of Lesbian Avengers entered the gates, sex essentialist feminists began trailing the group shouting, "MAN ON THE LAND!" This continued until the sex essentialist feminist group turned into a mob that had surrounded the trans youth, yelling and shouting at her until MichFest security moved everyone to a tent where the trans youth was made to stand in front of the large group of sex essentialist feminists who spent the next two hours berating her. One adult openly threatened the life of the trans kid without consequence. Afterwards, the traumatized youth was marched to the gates of the festival and expelled. I interviewed the Lesbian Avengers about

their experience:

S. [Lesbian Avenger]: About 10 TERFs were waiting for us when we came in. The whole ‘MAN ON THE LAND!’ started as soon as we walked in. I mean, at the time, we’re kids, we’re teenagers and these are all adults. I mean, when I think about it now, it was just so fucked up. We were trying to give out t-shirts and stickers about being inclusive. But, it was getting bad.

K. [trans girl in the group]: A huge crowd of yelling people formed around us and I started crying at that point. It got so loud that Nomy Lamm, who was performing there as part of Sister Spit, came over and stood up for us... The crowd and me were walked over to a tent area. The way that it worked was that there was a queue of people who were going to get to say whatever they wanted to say. I remember, specifically, one woman looking right at me and telling me that I needed to leave the Land as soon as possible because she had a knife and didn’t know if she would be able to control herself if I was around her.

Cristan Williams: WHAT? How did people react to that death threat?

K: Because of the way they were queuing, as soon as one person stopped speaking, another would start, so nobody said or did anything about the death threat. At that point, I checked out. At first I was sobbing and [B] was holding my face close to hers, telling me that it would be over soon, but then I just checked out.

S: The moderator did nothing. It was just a mud-slinging, hatred pouring out. It was just like one by one by one being like, ‘You’re a rapist! You’re raping the Land! You’re destroying womanhood! I don’t know what I’m going to do to you!’ - it was just violent, hatred, and I know that most of it was geared at [K]. I was up there being attacked, but I wasn’t getting the brunt of it. This went on for at least two hours. At least 30 people were allowed to speak at us, but there were around 75 under the tent, and if you included the people around the tent who were watching and listening, well over 100.

I asked Lamm about what she had observed before L was forced to stand before the sex essentialist feminist mob to be publicly threatened and castigated. She said that she had known the Lesbian Avengers were going to be there and found them as the sex essentialist feminist mob began to assemble.

Lamm: I was all ‘Oh I’m so happy to meet you’ and then all the sudden it was like we were surrounded by people screaming at [K], this one woman in particular was going “What is your point? Why are you here?” and I remember standing in front of her and spreading my arms to keep people away from [K] and I was like “She doesn’t have to talk to you! She doesn’t have to answer your questions! She’s doing a workshop tomorrow, go to the workshop if you want information.” [T]hese women came screaming towards us yelling “We are being raped right now! Penises on the land!” and shit like that.

Williams: Can you talk about how you felt in that moment, standing there with your arms out protecting her from these people?

Lamm: I think I just felt really protective. I was like, “No way! Huh uh! You’re not gonna fuck with this brave [kid] who put herself on the frontlines here!” I felt angry that people couldn’t see that this was a person, a vulnerable young person... I can’t imagine how traumatic that must have been for her.

Lamm’s courage didn’t evaporate once [K] was physically safe. During her set on the MichFest stage,

she publicly took a stand against the woman-born Intention.

Lamm: When I was on stage I said, “I just want to say that including trans women in this space is not going to take anything away, it’s going to add to it. I’ve been in women-only spaces that include trans women and that’s been my experience.” I was surprised that a bunch of people stood up and cheered. It made me feel hopeful.

In a press release dated August 24, 1999, MichFest organizer Lisa Vogel addressed what occurred to the trans youth thusly:

A number of spontaneous gatherings developed where participants discussed and debated the presence of the Son of Camp Trans activists and their actions. Volunteer facilitators helped to structure discussions so that various viewpoints, including those of the Son of Camp Trans, could be heard. The Son of Camp Trans activists scheduled a workshop session for Saturday at noon in the workshop area, and various Festival participants announced their intention to hold community meetings at different locations on Saturday.

In 1999, a surgically transitioned male-presenting trans man was allowed to purchase tickets and attend the MichFest since he was a “born-woman” and, according to the “woman-born” framework, was still a biological woman. When Vogel recounted the story, the trans man became two nude trans woman and all mention of the Lesbian Avengers had been edited out. When other supporters of the woman-born policy recounted the story, the nude person became a man who was waving his erect penis about: “By far the biggest confrontation took place after rumors began circulating that a man waving his ‘erect penis’ had showered in a communal stall.” 10

However, the animus inspired through erasure and demagoguery reached a new and painful level for both MichFest and Camp Trans in 2010. According to the Camp Trans wikipedia entry, a wall in the MWMF kitchen space was graffitied with “Real Womyn Have Cocks” and a flyer was distributed that said that “tranny-cock” represents real womanhood. However, according to Jeffreys’ narrative, the events of 2010 were far worse than graffiti and a flyer. Jeffreys, citing a TERF blog named “Dirt from Dirt,” made the fact claim that Camp Trans itself became a “transgender siege” of armed combatants who opened fire, used chemicals as weapons, cut MichFest waterlines and gave multiple people PTSD. While neither Camp Trans nor MichFest itself substantiated these claims, there is some truth to Jeffreys’ narrative. The truth Jeffreys’ narrative speaks to is a trans woman was nearly bashed, MichFest workers were viewed as placating the male basher and the fallout internal to Camp Trans destroyed the Camp from the inside. An old blog entry from the now defunct organization Bash Back! offers the following account of what happened in 2010:

Conflict begins at the annual vigil at MichFest gates: after being approached to turn his engine off while a history of Camp was being recounted, a tow truck driver threatens two trans people’s lives, aggressively misgenders a trans woman, and ultimately wields a large tow chain threatening to kill all of the trans people who had surfaced to protect their friends. MichFest workers act as barriers between Camp-goers and the driver all while commending the him for his valor. All of this, in many ways, is a regular occurrence for those who unthinkably defy the gendered violence of society every day.

A Camp Trans organizer recounted the events thusly:

[L]arge numbers of people at Camp were emotionally traumatized. Accounts I've heard or read agree that several Camp Trans attendees were threatened, one attendee was degendered, and that the festival workers seemed to side with the tow truck driver...

Bash Back!, a group known for its inflammatory discourse, was highly critical of Camp Trans' lack of response to the attempted bashing. The group belittled the fact that some trans women were triggered by the truck driver's violence and by the Bash Back! members' insistence that Camp Trans itself conduct an immediate counteraction. A Camp Trans organizer noted that the group's aggressive members tried to threaten and bully Camp Trans membership into supporting the group's ideology saying, "This year... we saw a small group grab power through physical intimidation, threats of violence against the rest of camp, and silencing tactics." As some noted, after being exposed to this group's lateral violence, it was debatable if trans women would return to the camp. In fact, 2010 marked the end of Camp Trans. Within the Bash Back! comment section, a member took credit for the "tranny cock" flier.

While Jeffreys represented Camp Trans itself as being mobilized to lay "transgender siege" to the MichFest, what we can be certain of is that:

- Members of Camp Trans experienced male violence that they felt was not acknowledged by MichFest representatives;
- Members of Bash Back! engaged in lateral violence against Camp Trans membership; and,
- Members of Bash Back! made an incendiary flyer and possibly engaged in graffiti.

Certainly graffiti and incendiary discourse were acts Bash Back! was known for. However, Jeffreys' narrative erases the way lateral violence inspires more of the same. The biased narratives of both Jeffreys and Bash Back! prevent reconciliation by poisoning the discursive well. What the members of Bash Back! did was deplorable and the attendees of Camp Trans, and certainly those MichFest women who encountered incendiary fliers and/or possible graffiti, have some common pain around what occurred. Jeffreys, however, claimed that the Camp Trans "transgender siege" failed after a "new wave" of feminists - committed to reifying the woman-born framework - had begun to assert their ideological framework. Had demagoguery been less important than reconciliation, I wonder where we'd be today.

End the Cycle!

Since the mid-1970s, the feminist community has faced a struggle between those who regarded "woman" as a political class that face in the hear-and-now a specific and shared oppression and those who regard "woman" as a discrete biological group and who oftentimes work to reify the idea of a "natural" sex binary. Consider the following from Andrea Dworkin's partner and radical feminist author John Stoltenberg:

I am honestly perplexed that a radical feminist politics of abolishing male supremacy should need to rest upon a biological determinant at all. Does one need to believe there is such a thing as a biological black person in order to know that white supremacy and its corollary race hate must be eliminated? Of course not. People with radical, to-the-root politics get that the purpose and function of white supremacy is to construct, assert, and maintain whiteness (which likes to think of itself as having an unequivocally physiological basis in the human genome somewhere but is in fact just phony-identity-defending hatred).

Exactly the same justice-based, social-constructivist radicalism applies to manhood (which likes to think of itself as the birthright of biologically real men but is in fact just phony-identity-defending hatred). What's driving both systems of dominance--white supremacy and male supremacy--is nothing innate in human nature; it is the drive to reify an identity construct that exists only through institutionalized dominance and acts of power over and against. But the problem of these two essentialisms--race and sex--goes beyond being analytically false and useless. As pet principles upon which to base an effective politics that has revolution and liberation as a goal, they are not only shortsighted but counterrevolutionary: Insisting on there being biological blacks plays into the malevolent cultural delusion there are and should be biological whites, which is precisely the fallacy white supremacists want to reify. Similarly, insisting on there being real biological women plays into the cultural delusion that there can and should be real biological men--a notion that my life partner Andrea Dworkin saw through before I met her and that I began to repudiate shortly after knowing her.

Radical feminist pioneer Catharine MacKinnon made similar claims in two recent interviews:

Williams: Some assert that some women/females can have a penis and that some men/males can have a vagina. What are your thoughts about that?

MacKinnon: I am aggressively indifferent to it.

Williams: Do you think the "sex" binary is a social construct?

MacKinnon: Actually, I first argued that sexuality is a social construct, which is a good deal further along the same lines than this pretty obvious observation.

Williams: In other words, if the very notion of a biological sex binary is constructed, that would necessarily mean that any sexuality predicated upon the myth of the sex binary is also constructed? Are you saying that neither concept exists outside of culture?

MacKinnon: Right. And that culture is among other things misogynistic to the core, and misogyny is sexualized, that is redundant. [source]

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To me, women is a political group. I never had much occasion to say that, or work with it, until the last few years when there has been a lot of discussion about whether transwomen are women.

I always thought I don't care how someone becomes a woman or a man; it does not matter to me. It is just part of their specificity, their uniqueness, like everyone else's. Anybody who identifies as a woman, wants to be a woman, is going around being a woman, as far as I'm concerned, is a woman.

Simone de Beauvoir said one is not born, one becomes a woman. Now we're supposed to care how, as if being a woman suddenly became a turf to be defended.

Many transwomen just go around being women, who knew, and suddenly, we are supposed to care that they are using the women's bathroom. There they are in the next stall with the door shut, and we're supposed to feel threatened. I don't. I don't care. By now, I aggressively don't care. [source]

Monique Wittig wrote:

It is we who historically must undertake the task of defining the individual subject in materialist terms. This certainly seems to be an impossibility since materialism and subjectivity have always been mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, and rather than despairing of ever understanding, we must recognize the need to reach subjectivity in the abandonment by many of us to the myth “woman” (the myth of woman being only a snare that holds us up). This real necessity for everyone to exist as an individual, as well as a member of a class, is perhaps the first condition for the accomplishment of a revolution, without which there can be no real fight or transformation. But the opposite is also true; without class and class consciousness there are no real subjects, only alienated individuals.

Dworkin seemed to concisely answer Wittig in *Right Wing Women*. She first addressed the radical notion that “woman” must not be defined in terms of biological function or sex:

In proposing “the individuality of each human soul,” feminists propose that women are not their sex; nor their sex plus some other little thing--a liberal additive of personality, for instance; but that each life--including each woman’s life--must be a person’s own, not predetermined before her birth by totalitarian ideas about her nature and her function, not subject to guardianship by some more powerful class, not determined in the aggregate but worked out by herself, for herself. Frankly, no one much knows what feminists mean; the idea of women not defined by sex and reproduction is anathema or baffling. It is the simplest revolutionary idea ever conceived, and the most despised.

She then specifically contextualized “women” as being that which it truly is: a political sex class.

One other discipline is essential both to the practice of feminism and to its theoretical integrity: the firm, unsentimental, continuous recognition that women are a class having a common condition. This is not some psychological process of identification with women because women are wonderful; nor is it the insupportable assertion that there are no substantive, treacherous differences among women. This is not a liberal mandate to ignore what is cruel, despicable, or stupid in women, nor is it a mandate to ignore dangerous political ideas or allegiances of women. This does not mean women first, women best, women only. It does mean that the fate of every individual woman--no matter what her politics, character, values, qualities--is tied to the fate of all women whether she likes it or not. On one level, it means that every woman’s fate is tied to the fate of women she dislikes personally. On another level, it means that every woman’s fate is tied to the fate of women whom she politically and morally abhors. For instance, it means that rape jeopardizes communist and fascist women, liberal, conservative, Democratic, or Republican women, racist women and black women, Nazi women and Jewish women, homophobic women and homosexual women. The crimes committed against women because they are women articulate the condition of women. The eradication of these crimes, the transformation of the condition of women, is the purpose of feminism; which means that feminism requires a most rigorous definition of what those crimes are so as to determine what that condition is. This definition cannot be compromised by a selective representation of the sex class based on sentimentality or wishful thinking. This definition cannot exclude prudes or sluts or dykes or mothers or virgins because one does not want to be associated with them. To be a feminist means recognizing that one is associated with all women not as an act of choice but as a matter of fact. The sex-class system creates the fact. When that system is broken, there will be no such fact. Feminists do not create this common condition by making alliances; feminists recognize this common condition because it exists as an intrinsic part of sex oppression. The fundamental knowledge that women are a class having a common condition-- that the fate of one woman is tied

substantively to the fate of all women--toughens feminist theory and practice. That fundamental knowledge is an almost unbearable test of seriousness. There is no real feminism that does not have at its heart the tempering discipline of sex-class consciousness: knowing that women share a common condition as a class, like it or not.

The fundamental truth hidden by sex essentialist feminism is that my fate as a trans woman is absolutely tied to the fate of sex essentialist TERF women who enjoy assaulting my selfhood through constructing a forced social context for me to occupy by using male pronouns, my old name and old pictures. My fate as a trans woman is absolutely tied to the fate of MichFest women who assert that my mere existence represents a violence against all MichFest women:

Transgender politics impact all women because we are coerced into accepting something that is not real, but that has real consequences in our abilities to organize away from men. If even one man, dressed as a woman comes into our women-only spaces, the whole experience of that space is transformed by his violent presence... Transactivism impacts women's ability to unify and show solidarity even when there are no "trans" people present. Just the idea of "transgender rights" as a legitimate front for social change is harmful to women's solidarity and movement. It is so sad and infuriating, that even lesbians are calling other lesbians "hateful" if they question the good of transgenderism [sic]. 11

My fate as a trans woman is absolutely tied to the fate of TERF women who gain a certain pleasure from assessing, belittling and berating my body. My fate as a trans woman is absolutely tied to the fate of TERF women who wish that I were dead or feel they have a right to shoot me on sight. And, my fate as a trans woman is absolutely tied to the fate of MichFest women who assert that women like me dominate and oppress MichFest women by existing:

A man demanding to be seen as anything other than a man is oppressing the woman he [sic] is talking to when she resists or questions his [sic] "gender identity." Transgenderism [sic] is an oppressive ideology that hurts girls and women the most because it does not allow us to speak in our own terms about ourselves or about male violence and dominance in our lives. Women do not oppress men ("trans women" are men) because we are not in positions of gender power and privilege in society. Merriam-Webster's dictionary online defines the word "oppression" to be a: unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power b: something that oppresses especially in being an unjust or excessive exercise of power. 12

There is no such thing as "trans", other than it exists as a social phenomena that intentionally or unintentionally, promotes male rule of our lives and separates us from our connection to ourselves and the laws of nature. 13

Moreover, no matter how much TERF or MichFest women might reject, attack and mock women like me, the fate of TERF and MichFest women is nevertheless tied to the fate of all women, even trans women like me. Regardless of the animus TERF and MichFest women have, we together face a specific kind of oppression and should this oppression suddenly disappear tomorrow, we would share in a specific kind of liberation. This is the truth that bridged the "real woman" gap between middle-class heterosexual feminists and lesbians in 1970 and it is the truth that the Daughters of Bilitis, the West Coast Lesbian Conference and Olivia embraced. The denial of this truth represents the fundamental conflict inherent in MichFest's women-born framework.

When I look at the shared history between the MichFest, trans and feminist communities, I see a pain crying out for reconciliation. As a trans woman and feminist who grieves the harm exclusionary systems have inflicted upon the feminist, lesbian and trans communities, I find the yearly reenactment of feminist systems of exclusion too painful to continue and too painful to ignore. I believe that the conflict within the MichFest, trans and feminist communities is closer to reconciliation than at any time during these many decades of animus. MichFest now recognizes trans womyn as womyn and since 1999, has not ejected a trans womyn from the festival. However, there is but one last step that only Lisa Vogel herself may take: as the festival organizer, Vogel must clearly, directly and unequivocally state that trans womyn who identify as being born womyn are welcome within the MichFest space. Vogel has spent decades -- on multiple platforms -- clearly defining what the womyn-born framework means and how it's intended to be applied within feminist spaces. As a community we must value a reconciliation that's built upon a firm foundation of honoring some painful truths of shared suffering with direct attention so that we might clearly see the cycles of lateral violence we collectively reenact year after year.

To that end, the TransAdvocate has asked that our names be removed from the Equality Michigan petition calling for a boycott of MichFest as our good-faith effort to engage MichFest in dialogue with the goal of a reconciliation that will bring an end to decades of trauma for the MichFest, trans and feminist communities. For the next 6 months, it is our goal to try to negotiate with MichFest through direct dialogue; should MichFest choose to squander this opportunity for reconciliation, we will know that -- even in the face of the progress made -- MichFest entered negotiations in bad faith. There is but one major step left that only MichFest itself can take: unequivocally state that trans women who identify as being womyn-born womyn are welcome at the festival.

1. Koedt, Anne. "Lesbianism and Feminism." In *Notes From the Third Year*, 84 - 85. NY: Notes From the Second Year, 1971.
2. Crompton, Samuel Etinde. *Desmond Tutu: Fighting Apartheid*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2007. 12.
3. Maracle, Lee. *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism*. Vancouver, B.C.: Press Gang Publishers, 1996. ix, 11
4. Italicized words indicate words Wittig spoke with emphasis.
5. Vogel, Lisa, and Barbara Price. "Festival Womyn Speak out." *Gay Community News*, November 10, 1991.
6. Wilchins to Janice Raymond, in person: "You say we want to 'pass' as women. Well, I don't pass. I wear this Transexual Menace logo every place that I go. Between the two of us, only you pass as a woman. If, as de Beauvoir held, 'One is not born a woman, but becomes one,' if femininity is an invention of men foisted on women, if feminine behavior is a learned cultural performance of hair, clothing, voice, gesture, and stance so one is perceived as a female, then by presenting yourself as a woman it is you who have been co-opted into traditional sex roles, you who serve their institutions, and you who are performing here." - *Read My Lips: Sexual subversion and the end of gender*, p 68
7. False: Wilchins was a co-founder. Denise Norris and Wilchins together co-founded the Transexual Menace, a direct action activist group. GenderPac grew out of the Gender Lobby Days Wilchins and Phyllis Frye conducted and was co-founded by Wilchins and other trans activists like Dionne Stallworth. The claim that Wilchins was the individual who founded Camp Trans is known to be false by

anyone who does a cursory google search.

8. False: "That was the founding of GenderPac, to pursue a national civil rights movement for gender freedom." See: Krupat, Kitty. *Out at Work Building a Gay-labor Alliance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. 97.

9. Jeffreys, Sheila. *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*. NY: Routledge, 2014. 166 - 167.

10. Cudnik, Doreen. "TG Activists Clash with Women's Music Festival Organizers." *Gay People's Chronicle*, September 3, 1999.

11. Pettersen, Thistle, ed. *Sparks from the Flame: Radical Feminist Greetings & Messages for MichFest 2014*, for Womyn by Womyn, July 14, 2014, 31.

12. Ibid, 32.

13. Ibid, 33.

Suggested citation

Cristan Williams. "Repeating the cycle at MichFest: The clash of two feminisms." *TransAdvocate*, April 12, 2015.
https://www.transadvocate.com/repeating-the-cycle-at-michfest-the-clash-of-two-feminisms_n_15109.htm