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#TERFweek: In stealth with the TERFs at MichFest

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Published August 17, 2014 | Updated March 31, 2026

https://www.transadvocate.com/terfweek-in-stealth-with-the-terfs-at-michfest_n_14401.htm

Abstract

I remember the first time I encountered Transgender Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) transmisogyny face to face. It was years ago in 2011 when I attended the 33rd Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF or MichFest) in stealth. If you're not on the up and up on what the MWMF is, this page will briefly catch you [...]

Article



I remember the first time I encountered Transgender Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) transmisogyny face to face. It was years ago in 2011 when I attended the 33rd Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF or MichFest) in stealth. If you're not on the up and up on what the MWMF is, this page will briefly catch you up to speed. At the time, I was a little naive as many of you reading this may be. Back then, I was unaware that some of my sisters could be so cruel, so discriminatory, so utterly ignorant, so hate-filled, and so blind to the privilege they wielded over a small number of their very own.

I didn't realize at that time how much influence TERF perspective had on some within the lesbian and feminist movements. But, I found out the hard way how tight of a grip many of my feminist sisters have with them, and how loose that grip was with me.

That time spent deep in the woods was a learning experience I will never be able to shake from my mind. I learned that women can be just as cruel as men. I learned that humanity's greed for power is what fuels the wrongs we inflict on each other. I learned not to trust some within the LGB community. I learned how cheap I was considered by many of my sisters who attended. See, they buddied up, smiled, sang songs, and roasted marshmallows with women who gleefully and purposefully sought to keep me separated by a discriminatory don't ask, don't tell 'intention.' It's a stated intention of Lisa Vogel, the co-founder and lead producer of the MWMF, who very much fits the description of a Transgender Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF).

This stated 'intention' serves to segregate black women, white women, disabled women, healthy women, lesbian women, straight women and any other type of woman away from transgender women from that festival if at all possible.

That means if I as Fallon Fox show up and attends that festival as an openly proud black woman, there's no problem whatsoever. However, I as Fallon Fox show up at the festival gates as an openly proud transgender woman, there will likely be problems. This is because, much like how some golf clubs discriminated against blacks with 'white only' intentions under the category of 'human' years ago - MWMF currently does the same thing with the current discriminatory 'cisgender only' intention (which they call 'womyn-born-womyn' intention) under the category of 'woman' today.



Figure 1. Michigan Womyn's Music Festival Poster (2011)

If you are new to this I bet you are wondering, "What? How could this happen yet again?" That's because those racists who discriminated against blacks at golf clubs back in the day didn't truly regard blacks as full humans who deserved equal access as all humans should in certain privately held events. Events that all humans could legally pay to attend. Similarly, those TERFs who discriminate against

trans women at MWMF don't truly regard transgender women as women who deserve equal access as all women should in certain privately held events. Events that all women could legally pay to attend.

In some cases, there are trans women who could be considered "passable" and slip in through the gates. In those cases, the bigots who sought to keep them out swore up and down that they could tell for sure which ones were the so-called "passable" attendees. "There's always a tell," they say. And, in those cases they are wrong. Much like my daughter who is considered ethnically black but could be considered "passable" because of her fair complexion, I am "passable" because of my looks, height, and voice. And I'm extremely happy that we lived in a time where it isn't as bad for her as it is for me in terms of discrimination and bigotry anymore. But, as we've all started to learn from TERF week, the TERFs are making it just about as rough in some feminist spaces as it would have been for my daughter so many years ago.

I know, I know. I can hear the voices already, "Fallon! Using race as an example is problematic! Black people don't take so kindly to showing how bigotry intersects! Watch out!" As a black woman, here's what I say to that: "Bite me!"

While many Caucasian people fear the backlash of showing how different styles of oppression intersect because they just might get it wrong, I am Black woman and I know my history. If there's one thing that I've learned over the years it is that all oppression hurts. And, if we never bring these points up we run the risk of not learning from past mistakes. So in the spirit of progress, let's take a moment to think about how racism, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny all intersect. Let's take a moment and realize that Transgender Exclusionary Radical Feminists are transphobic, that the bigots of yesteryear were racist, and that they both do similar things.

The current unfortunate reality for transgender women are oppressed, and this reality is kept in place in part with the help of some within the LGBT community. The LGBT community is a community that should certainly know better, but in many cases, it just doesn't. In order to help shed some light on TERF perspective and enlighten some who are unaware of what is going on within our community, I dug up a post from 2011. It's a post that I wrote on a private social media group where transgender and cisgender women were sharing experiences and debating the harmful discriminatory intention of MWMF.

If you ever wanted to understand why Fallon a Fox harps on this issue of MichFest and TERFs so much, if you ever wondered why transgender women feel it is important to have a TERF week, simply take a few minutes and read what was on my mind about my experience attending that transphobic festival.

By Artemis Lyre (Fallon Fox) on Tuesday, September 20, 2011, at 9:35 pm

I'd like to share with you some of my feelings and experiences concerning my attending this latest MichFest. But first, to give a little bit of background, I will start out by describing my relationship to my girlfriend and then go into my experience. (Given the recent internet actions that most of us are aware of I shall change the name of a few characters to protect anonymity.)

There was an all-women's event that I met my girlfriend (Janice) at in the beginning of 2010. It was an empowering experience filled with all different types of very strong and passionate women from across the united states and Canada. At the time she did not know of my Post-operative Transsexual status. We talked, hung out, got to know each other a little bit, practiced and competed in the sport that we

both are passionate in and love, and were intimate with each other. For months we chatted on the phone and had visits with each other. The day came when I decided to tell her about my past. When I did nothing changed, for she understood and felt that I am the woman that she was starting to fall in love with regardless of how my body was in the past. She loved me as the woman that I am, and the past was trivial and irrelevant to her. Later, we moved in together and since we have been in a loving strong relationship.

I first considered coming to fest through word of mouth from Janice. About a year or so ago before we moved in together she told me of the two times in 2009 and 2010 that she had attended fest before she met me. "You should come with me the next time I go!" she said. From the description of her experience, it sounded like a place I would like to be. She told me stories of the workshops where they talk about women's issues, the not having to wear bras or shirts if I didn't want to. I was told of the smiling and how nice everyone was to each other, the deep meaningful discussions, the artistry presented there, how freeing and safe it made her feel to be in a community of all women. How she was able to convey and express the struggles and triumphs of her life, share everything she wanted to share, receive everything she wanted to receive, around nothing but women. Women who understood her. I believe she was telling me all of this, expressing the goings on of MichFest because she felt that I belonged there. In her mind, in our day to day interactions with each other with society, with the past women's event, with everything she knew about me, she knew I belonged there with her. I decided then and there with her description of all that I may find - that I would go with her the next time the festival occurred. When MichFest 2011 came around I went. But, I walked away from it with a far different experience than my girlfriend did on her first festival.

Janice did tell me that there was some sort of controversy concerning MichFest. That there was a policy that got changed to an intention. Being a post-operative transsexual myself I did a little bit of research on the MichFest website. I went to the forums there and took a peek so that I could read for myself what was going on. What I read there made me think twice about going. Women who didn't want women like me there were going to be wearing red in protest of us being there. Some said they would seek ejection of any transsexual, post-operative or pre, if they were to be found out. I felt that I didn't want to cause any trouble if my Trans status were to be brought out. Which I thought would be unlikely. In a way, I wanted to counter the red shirts by joining with the Trans Womyn Belong Here (TWBH) group along with Janice. She had decided to join with them. But, I decided that I just wanted to try to enjoy fest as she did the first time she went. After all, that was supposed to be the point in the first place.

Janice arrived the first day of MichFest. But, I unfortunately could not make it until Friday because of work. She was waiting for me there somewhere on the land and I was to wait and meet her there at the entrance upon my arrival. It was night time when I pulled up to the gate and attempted to buy my ticket. I was greeted by the women there with smiles. They took me to the tent where I purchased the famous orange wristband. One of the women was wearing a bright red shirt. I cannot be sure if she was with WBW group as many people may like to wear red. But, it did make me uneasy at that moment because of the possibility of what her mindset could represent. Janice had not arrived at the gate yet. So, there were several younger women sitting by a fire near the gate I had spotted who invited me over to talk with them and eat marshmallows while I waited for her arrival. About forty five minutes passed by and we sat and chatted small talk about fest, where we were from... etc. One of them was wearing one of those

red shirts also. I didn't really expect any negativity from any of them. After all I was sure that they wouldn't know that I have had a full gender change. I haven't been read as a TS woman in years and I normally pass under the radar as far as I know with no problem.

That is pretty much how the rest of MichFest went in my interactions with people. I met and talked with a lot of different women there and from what I could tell nobody questioned if I was TS or not. I really don't think anyone knew. I interacted, sat in the crowds with everyone else at the music stages, stood in food lines, washed dishes, took showers with no curtains, right alongside of all the other women there. This is how it has been for years since I transitioned either on or off of the land.

But, just because I was there and I wasn't being questioned does not mean that I was totally comfortable while being there. There were people there with red shirts and red patches. I started to see them everywhere. I recall again the MichFest forum that those in opposition should wear anything red to show their support for the womyn born womyn (WBW) transgender exclusionary policy. I started to see red everywhere. It was hard to pick out who was actually wearing red in support of WBW or those wearing red because they just happened to like the color. A bit of paranoia started to set in. What would these women say if they actually knew that at one point in my life I was male bodied? Would there be any more smiles? Would they kick me off of the land? Would they grab their children and run away from me thinking I would do some sort of harm to them? Would they attack me? Because they did not know I was a transitioned woman things were ok. But, what if?

I do believe I could if I had wanted to... If I could ignore the situation, if I could shut out the pain in my heart from the non-acceptance, just walk around the festival and attend workshops, converse and educate myself, and enjoy the music and sisterhood without notice like some others have, are, and will do if I wanted - if I could do that emotionally. WBW would not be in opposition to my presence no? Why is that? How could that happen? When the hounds sniff me out they pass me by. When I am greeted I am greeted with smiles and open arms. When I am met by women and I can interact, I can breathe into the air my heart and soul. That air is breathed in the hearts and souls of the women there, and inside they know me... their hearts, souls, and mouths say "woman." There is no calculation of who I am when they don't know my past. No looking me up and down to try to dissect some aspect of me that could be taken and put in the category of male or manly. I find all of this concerning people who have a negative perception of passable transsexuals when they UNKNOWINGLY meet them ironic. Ironic it seems that when they don't know you are trans, they *know* that you are a woman. But, if they find out about your birth, they say that they *know* that you are not. The clouds around your persona seem to start to darken and your womanhood, in their eyes, disintegrates. That is, if they know.

I remembered what some of the women in opposition said; what they were scared of. Some of the fear had to do with rape. This concept feels like a knife shoved into my stomach every time I think of it. That some women put me in the same category as a rapist or think that I may be one. They voiced concern about TS being around children there at MichFest for this reason. It took me back to when I first started my transition. Back to the town I grew up in and came out to my family. People found out and would keep their children close to them. I felt that I had to try to keep my distance from children just so people wouldn't worry that I would infect them with something or worry that I would do something strange to them. I thought, "What if these women knew that I have a daughter myself, that I have been raising her as a single mother?" I don't have, and have never had, ANY desire to do anything sexual with

any child. The thought of women looking at me as some sort of predator saddens me and almost brings me to tears when I think about it. I wondered to myself, "How would these women feel if they were looked upon as potential threats to children in or out of MichFest? If the very real potential existed where some women at MichFest would watch their every movement closely. If they happened to walk by a child, take a shower next to a child, or just simply walk by one." I began to become quiet and shy when talking to people even around TWBH allies. I felt uncomfortable walking with my lover when she wore her TWBH shirt in fear of somehow somehow being outed. I just wanted to be there, enjoy my time, and breath normally. I attended a workshop "For Trans Allies". There was a lot that I wanted to say and get off of my chest about the experience I was having. But, I just could not bring myself to speak about it even in that workshop because of my uncomfortably with what was going on with MichFest and not being discovered.

I heard a lot from women there who discussed that Trans women have been on the land since the beginning. I wondered if it was the same for these Transsexuals? I wondered if they received smiles and open arms when people had no idea that they were Transgender? Did they attend workshops, interact and stand with other women with issues that we all face, at the same time experiencing fear of being found as TS and shunned? How many of us have come to MichFest and experienced this? Who were they? How many years did they come? Were they still there, hiding their TS status like me?

After fest was over and I returned home, more thoughts came to mind. I actually felt more comfortable in my daily routines in normal society than at MichFest. There aren't people walking around with red shirts or patches in protest of TS holding a job with other women, going to the bathroom with other women, taking showers in locker rooms with other women etc. (Not that I know of at least.) Some people do not like or agree with TS living their lives. TS are fired from jobs, verbally abused, and attacked every day. But, the opposition is not as openly blatant as what I have seen at MichFest.

I would at some point like to return to a fest which would welcome me in with open arms even if they knew about how I was born. A time where I could come to experience, learn, and share my heart and energy with all of the women there comfortably. I thought that MichFest would be something I would have been interested in when I first heard about it. But, now that I have been there and felt tinges of negativity for me and other women like me, I feel that if the day comes where we can share our love, intellect, and talent without the negativity I would want to be there all the more. Could we one day dance with the rest of you? Could we one day smile and learn from each other there? Could we one day, when all is properly understood, perhaps be on the stage like the beautiful women of color that I got a chance to see this year. Those women of color who from what I hear have had their own struggle with MichFest. Could we one day be there with them singing proudly that we are all women. That's the vision in my head when I sat there the last night of music. The vision made me smile for a little bit when I was sitting there. But, at the moment it is just that - a vision, a dream. I believe Janice wants this even more than me. Because she sees who I am, that I belong, and she sees all that could be.

At the moment I am debating with myself if I will attend fest next year. Right now I am leaning towards no. Which I am sure those who are opposing my attendance want. Normally I just do not care what other people think. I am a woman regardless of potential ignorance and I would fight to the death my right to be in this place or that one. But, having attended, I don't like the idea of MichFest being the place for fighting. I don't want to fight other women there. I just wish peace at MichFest. I just wish to be a

part of it. I just wish understanding, especially there. That continues to be my wish.

Suggested citation

fallonfox. "#TERFweek: In stealth with the TERFs at MichFest." TransAdvocate, August 17, 2014.

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