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The Curious Demands of the Womyn in the Woods: Unpacking the Statement of the Michigan Womyn's Musical Festival

By Guest

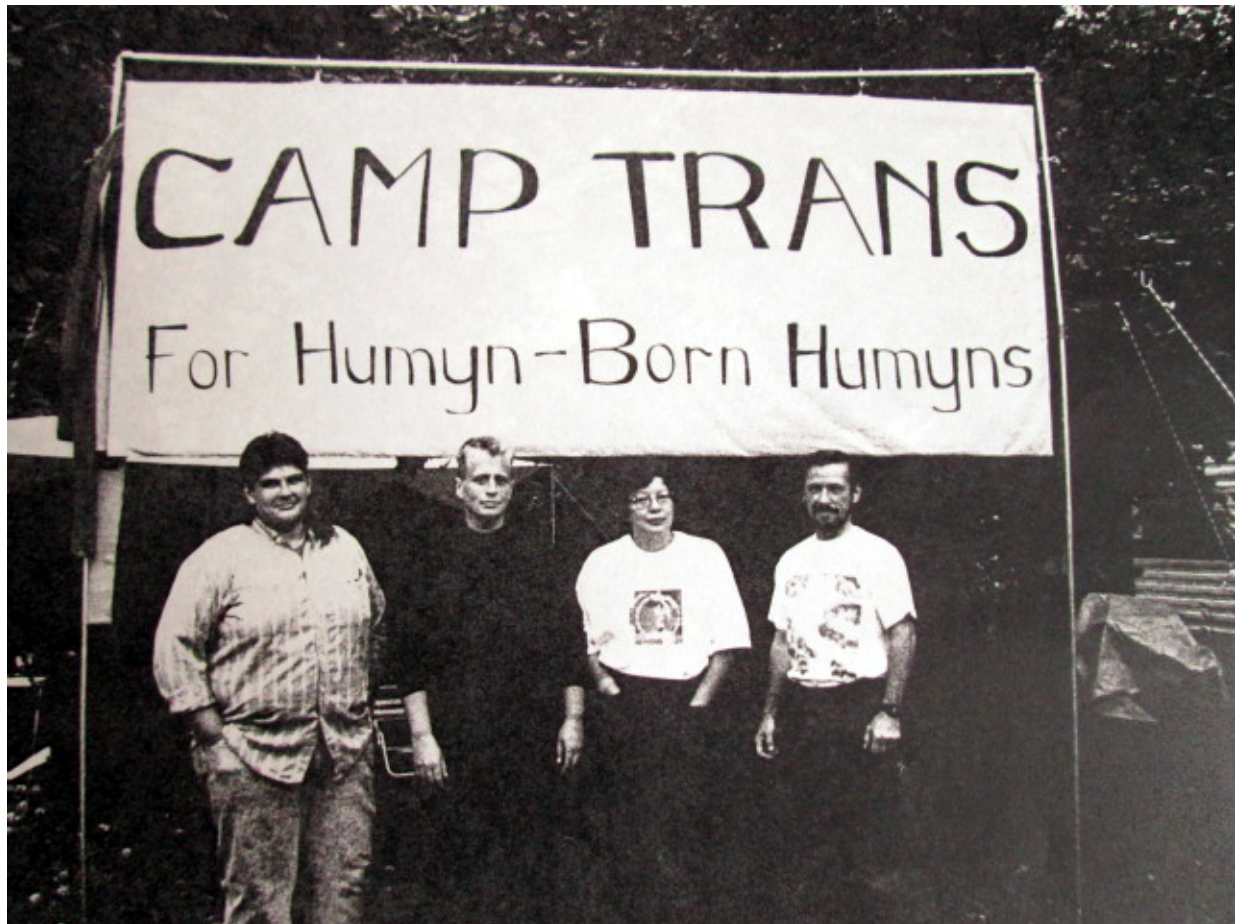
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Abstract

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Article



The Demands of Michfest's Lisa Vogel: A Response & a Good Faith Offer of Support

By Emmagene Cronin

The end of the 39th annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF of Michfest) has arrived, and the trans community has been left with a list of "demands" from the Festival itself. To the unknowing reader, this list would seem like the extension of an olive branch, and glimmer of hope for reconciliation between two presently oppositional factions within the feminist movement. The unfortunate problem is this isn't actually the case with the statement. There are several reasons that I make this assertion, which is quite different than we are being told. The most glaring being the uses of what I consider the worst piece of "journalism" that has been written about this "debate", that on its own has been enough to start a firestorm among the trans community. I would like to address more than just that though. Lisa Vogel, the event's organizer, is making less an attempt at reconciliation than she is actually making the claim that trans women's insistence on being allowed on The Land is somehow disrespectful and a refusal to honor cis women's lived experiences. This is just absurd - gender plurality, and the validity and value that it lends to all identities and experiences, is probably the one thing that the trans community seems to rally behind; it is the very glue that holds the greater trans community together. So to believe that full inclusion of trans women at the festival would cause that to go away is laughable.

That use of gender pluralism is also hypocritical. She is saying we must honor and value her lived experience, but that is only possible if our valuable experiences are not present. This theme consistently places trans women apart from cis women putting us in a position where we are quite literally outsiders and second-class women - it is a construction of an exclusive and universal experience of womanhood and sisterhood that trans women are forced to sit down and be quiet about, which is by no means praxis of the gender pluralism she presents. This statement is in no way a departure from the often-used rhetoric of Michfest. All of this stemming from the festivals "intention" that it must remain solely for women assigned female at birth. We are being told - I believe rather disingenuously - that there is a way out, and these are the "demands" to achieve that. If this is somehow the case, I am willing to take the first step to make that a reality, but first we need to evaluate these demands and bring them out in the light of day, where we will all be able to see in actuality that the first step forward I present is most likely going to be an act in futility.

A Little More On General Themes

This theme carries on the exclusionary ideology of years past from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. In the statement Vogel dismisses the intersectional identities and great complexity of all women's experiences for the adoption of universality that erases that individuality and complexity for many women - cis and trans alike - in order to maintain a position for the continued discrimination and expressed transphobia of trans women. It also implies, quite heavily, that because there is somehow a universal women's experience, and trans women being assigned male at birth, that we have no concept or understanding of what being a woman really is, or in slightly different terms, what it is like to be under the boot of someone else.

Further, the statement sets up a dangerous double bind for trans women. Either we agree with the Festival's standpoint and its position (also giving it legitimacy) by creating a hierarchy of women's

experiences by “honoring” only the assigned female at birth identity that effectively erases the individual and often painful experiences of trans women under the damaging system that is patriarchy, or we disagree with the position and do the same for the wide and intersectional experiences of cis women. This has been how the “debate” on trans inclusion has been constructed for years. I, for one, am not about to throw any woman’s valuable experience aside in order to play along with that narrative.

Besides the statement creating a double bind in which trans women are being forced to navigate, this line of thinking is also the commission of a laundry list of logical fallacy; I will point several of these out as I move along. I have formed this essay in two parts. The first will be a critical analysis of this most recent statement from the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. I will deconstruct the points and offer my lensed decoding of this text in hopes that it will bring the essence of the document out into the sunlight where we, as an overall feminist women’s community, comprised of cis and trans women, can judge it for what it is. I will then move on to the second part of this essay that will answer the call from Lisa Vogel, presenting the festival a clear way past this, allowing all women involved to mend fences, build bridges, and otherwise become a united force. For the moment though, I’m going to shift back to the first objective to address most of the statement and its points before we get there.

We Can Hear You, And We Understand What You’re Really Saying

The title of the statement, “We Have a Few Demands of Our Own”, sets a definite tone while also building the foundation for a double bind that flies in the face of reasonable dialogue with the trans community. While I do not speak for the entire trans community, I can say that the few outright demands that I have seen are not representative of the conversation the overall trans community and its allies have been having about the festival. There are two things that have been quite prevalent coming from the critics of the festival and our supporters though. A consistent dialogue that has published in many leading publications from Autostraddle, the Advocate, The Huffington Post, and even right here at the TransAdvocate, have sought to point out transphobia and transmisogyny. This is in addition to advocating zealously for the end of an archaic policy, or rather “intention”, that has no place in the fight against patriarchy. I would like to see all of that change, and I will provide a way of doing so in the response.

The very essence of the statement from the Michigan Womyn’s Music festival clearly reflects an assumption that Vogel is speaking for a majority of festivalgoers, and her continuation and enforcement of the “intention,” reflects the greater community of participants. This is not the case and in reality it is clear that she doesn’t speak for more than a small group of women. As early as 1992 patrons were being asked about what their views were on allowing trans women to attend the festival. And the response? Well to boil it down, it shows that Vogel and the “intention” are doing the exact opposite of what the majority (73.1%) of the sampled population of attendees believed should be done - the dominant majority being in favor of trans inclusion.

Being framed as it was, the very title of this statement creates a situation of conflict in which trans women have no possibility of winning; we are instantly placed at a disadvantage because we are implied to have been making “demands,” of the festival. This assumption creates an atmosphere of conflict where the trans community, and trans women specifically, can be further differentiated because of a supposed male privilege we are displaying. I believe Zoe Steinfieldtsaid it best when she wrote about the idea saying, “We’re not demanding they let us in, but that they stop pushing us out. We’re not invading

women's spaces with men's bodies, we're women banished from our own spaces. Any woman with a body has a woman's body." For what is being presented as renewed civil discussion, with demands to recognize truths, the very beginning of this statement is working against that. An all of this is just in relation to the title.

I would like to say that I appreciate- the trans community would probably agree - that the festival is finally acknowledging its ejection and abandonment of Nancy Burkholder in 1991; Nancy is a woman that wanted nothing more than to be a part of the healing and supportive atmosphere where women can gather and just be, while unpacking a lifetime of oppression and experiencing a special love that only sisterhood can provide, especially at an event like this. It takes a lot of guts to offer an apology for something that was so damaging, and has now affected so many on such a wide scale. I do hope that Nancy is able to read that first point and find a little bit of closure.

Even with what I hope is a sincere apology, we need to further evaluate what was said with it. The statement remarks about the incident by saying, "Since that single incident, Festival organizers have never asked a trans woman to leave the Festival." At the very least there are four other documented cases of the Festival asking trans women to leave the Festival. Those incidents all occurred in 1993, two years after Nancy Burkholder was removed from the festival. Again, in 1999, the festival did the very same thing, right after it subjected a 16-year-old trans woman to two hours of verbal abuse and death threats from festival goers; it specifically removed the armband from the trans child, but left the bands on the wrists of the Lesbian Avengers protecting her. I believe that the circumstances of this violent encounter, at the very least, rose to the level of child abuse, if not also false imprisonment. In addition, as recently as 2000, the festival had established that they would continue to do just that. This establishes that the MWMF has sought to remove trans women on multiple occasions, so claiming that it's not out questioning a women's gender, or is something other than a legitimate ban on trans women is false and gas-lighting trans women. In addition, this also establishes that even if that were somehow one isolated incident, the festival has always remained ready to remove a trans woman for simply being trans, and that is not in line with a claim that "no one's gender is questioned". What is even worse is that these instances occurred with threats of violence and aggression against these trans women attached by patrons of the festival. I believe the trans community knows the facts, and the festival needs to reevaluate and "get your their facts straight".

The rest of the Vogel's first demand carries with it quite a different tune. Over the last few revisions of Michfest statements, there has been a softening of the language used for the express exclusion of trans women from Michigan. However, one can easily parse through the content of the remaining portion of the point and see it for what it really is. Vogel starts off by stating, "Michfest recognizes trans womyn as womyn - and they are our sisters. We do not fear their presence among us...", while it great that some of the most marginalized women in the world are actually being recognized by the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival after nearly 40 years, these words are little more than lip service to, and gas-lighting of, trans women. If this were the true belief of the festival, its participants, and Vogel (remember back to the point about quantitate statistics for the inclusion of trans women.... See what I just did there?), that presence wouldn't be banned through "intention". While the festival may in fact not fear our presence, it certainly seems to fear that our presence will "erase their lived experience as women assigned female at birth", however unrealistic that may be. So, if the festival is unafraid of us; believes that we are women with valuable experiences; and our presence (as we are already there) is

not of issue, that it makes little sense to have an “intention” because it is antithetical to what’s actually being said and happening according to Michfest. Autumn Sandeen writes more about this here. What’s really going on here is contained within the next few sentences.

Vogel writes in the point that “[w]hat 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.” This is implying that trans women disrespect and seek to erase the constructed universality that Vogel presents - often with an appeal to nature fallacy, which is coded in such a way that it also creates a false dichotomy of women’s experience. First, this implies there is a fundamental difference between the experiences of trans women and the experiences of cis women - fundamental difference is something that is also a common theme in MWMF statements and has been used for decades, you can read more about that here. The simple fact is that there are vast arrays of experiences among women that can’t be formed into an overly reductionist view of experiences being one or the other. Human experience is complex and intersectional; women’s experiences, as one of the most oppressed groups of human beings, are even more complex.

Vogel is also very careful to use the phrase “being born and living as female”, dragging out much of the previous rhetoric used to express that trans women are not female, and are therefore incapable of being subject to the very same oppression that cis women are, necessitating their exclusion from The Land. Feminist women of color, such as bell hooks, have been calling attention to the erasure of the intersectionality of race for years by the greater feminist community, so I am not about to do that here, she and others have covered that topic well enough on their own. Though, it is necessary to point that this is the express use of universality and essentialism that rejects the theory of Intersectionality and gender pluralism. This marginalizes entire groups of women by erasing their experiences, which is pretty much the exact opposite of what Vogel says about it. There is a serious flaw in logic here.

She then continues on by stating that, “...it is the erasure of the specificity of female experience in the discussion of about the space itself that stifles progress...”, further implying that debate about the “intention” and gaining inclusion into a space where trans women belong, as women that suffer the same patriarchal oppression as our cis sisters, somehow seeks to erase cis women and their experiences. Again, I would like to point to gender pluralism for this statement. The trans community rallies around the value of all identities, so it would be extremely counterproductive, as well as damaging, if we were to be doing what she is insinuating. Trans women are not stifling any female experience by being in attendance at the festival and discussing experience, it is quite the opposite. We are embracing all women’s identities and lived experiences and seek to do just that on The Land. Further, trans women have been in attendance from day one; we have not hindered the ability to successfully celebrate any experiences in that time. So what progress has really been stifled here?

The statement goes on to say that, “As long as those who boycott and threaten Michfest [trans women and their allies] 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”. I would say this is rather facetious. We know why the festival was created in the way it was - one reason was to outright exclude trans women. This points to the hierarchy that the festival creates by discriminating against trans women with transphobic policy (excuse me, I meant to say “intention”). You are right Lisa, that has

been your goal for the last four decades, I'm sure Sandy Stone would agree; you went out of your way to attack a space that completely accepted her, demanding that she be removed, which makes your intention and reasoning abundantly clear. This space was created to exclude trans women, which is transphobia and transmisogyny at its finest. It is also the reason why this "discussion" is happening in the first place. How would it even be possible for us not to have acknowledged that?

The statement goes on with the heading of its second demand, stating that the trans community, and its allies, must "Acknowledge the Validity of Autonomous, Female-Defined Space", which further illustrates the transphobic policy of the festival. However, that's where the point gets clouded as what directly follows the heading raises several questions; points out the doublespeak inherent in the statement and point by placing ambiguity into the statement, thus allowing the argument to be shifted away from the festival. Vogel write in the first lines that, "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." So after this passage, we are left to wonder who is acceptable and who isn't because this appears to say everyone, besides men, are welcome. It's an expertly crafted passage that illustrates the cryptic nature of what Michfest, and Vogel, (we know that's actually not the case with festivalgoers though) has to say about the festival. You could easily be left to believe that trans women are actually welcome and has nothing to do with the intentional exclusion of trans women. So to the casual observer that is completely unaware of the history behind statements like this, it would appear that the issue is really with the critics of the policies (excuse me, "intention") of Michfest and not the festival itself. By constantly dancing around with ambiguity, the festival is able to constantly shift away from answering critics, while never actually moving away from its discriminatory position. If you place the onus on someone else, you completely avoid having to actually deal with the issue, and that's just what's being done here.

This is followed by another section that effectively serves as a way to side step by avoiding elaboration on reasoning. The point posits that, "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." This is something that the trans community does not deny that the festival believes. However, what the trans community questions is how this wouldn't be able to be achieved while also honoring the lives and experiences of trans women, and also how it would actually necessitate the continued exclusion of trans women. Again we can circle right back around to the idea of gender pluralism to address this.

There is a continued use of erasure and disrespect throughout years of statements, but those are conveniently, like this one, left completely unsupported in order to avoid questions in reasoning. Vogel is framing this in such a way that she never directly has to establish a line of reasoning for how this would be the case, and shuts down discussions by stating that is the focus, and that it. This is also use of special pleadings to make a case - yet more fallacy. It is establishing which arguments that the Michigan Womyn's Music festival will be engaged in, further emphasizing the double bind it places trans women in, effectively saying, "we might engage you in conversation, but it's on our terms or it's not happening at all".

You can read a little bit more about what that section means for, and about, trans women in this article by Parker Marie Molloy.

As a critic of the festival's policies, I'm calling attention to the discriminatory nature of the "intention" and its innate transphobia. It uses language, such as this statement, to allow it to then argue on the idea that it's really about lesbian culture and that the intention isn't actually what drives the festival, though it is clearly such and the reason a growing list of prominent equality organizations have called for a boycott of the festival. With that, if I, a lesbian trans woman (or any other woman according to what the festival says) wants to participate in an environment and culture that I hold dear to me, I can quite easily be told that the festival is actually about women assigned female at birth and I'm not invited. In addition, as it is framing this in a false dichotomy with really only two possible options for discussion, MWMF is able to claim that any other criticism would just be derailing the conversation, which pushes the onus back on the trans community to defend. This entire essay is part of doing exactly that, in addition to an attempt, further on, to establish a way out.

So with all this, trans women have been forced into a position where we have no possibility of success (that double bind I keep mentioning), unless we take option four, which I will discuss in a later response to the statement. By now you should have a pretty good idea about what this statement is about, just you wait though, there's more!

The point goes on to cement the reasons why the trans community, and its allies, rightfully believe that the statements of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and its organizer are transphobic and transmisogynistic. After engaging in a constant movement of the goalpost that forces the trans community to constantly be in a reactionary position, the statement dives into one of the worst pieces of "journalism" about the "debate" between the trans community and TERF's- TERF is short for Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists, you can read more about them here at the TransAdvocate in the #TERFweek articles. Michelle Goldberg's article in the New Yorker can easily be seen as possibly the most one-sided pieces of "journalism" that have been written about this "debate" and has garnered a list of responses, specifically challenging it, from Columbia Journalism Review, Bitch Magazine, Autostraddle, New Statesman, the Advocate (here and here; you can see Serano's initial reaction on her blog) and Park That Car, to name just a few. Personally, I would just label this as a piece of propaganda supporting transphobia that's just masquerading as objective journalism, but I'm sure making claims like that requires some explanation and why its use by Vogel is so offensive.

Michele Goldberg presents her article as if it were objective journalism covering roughly a half-century of a dispute between trans activist and trans-exclusionary radical feminist. However, she spends only a couple of sentences on discussing the reality of trans women that culminates in a reduction of our existence to feelings, instead of the actual nature of Gender Dysphoria. This would be no significant issue if she hadn't also spent the next several paragraphs detailing some of the more offensive TERF ideas about trans people. Further, Goldberg devotes a significant chunk of the paper demonizing trans activist protesting TERF events, while completely disregarding the significant length TERF's have gone to in order to curtail rights for the trans community. She goes on to provide quotes for many prominent TERF's, but focuses on less than credible sources for trans statements like Twitter and Tumblr when prominent trans women were readily available to match the caliber she presents for TERF's, even adapting arguments of people who believed that they were trans, or that support TERF ideology, as representative voices of the trans community (similar to "ex-gay" individuals arguing about LGB rights). The article makes mention of Julia Serano, but only after essentially "slut shaming" her in order to discredit her statements. Additionally, Goldberg rejected much of the

conversation about TERFs and the very real damage that they create in the trans community, which Serano mentions in her blog I posted earlier. This extremely lopsided article also often misgenders trans individuals; when coupled with the presented idea that femininity is constructed and therefore suspect (and may trans women being feminine), Goldberg effectively discredits the trans sources she uses in favor of TERFs. If you would like a better analysis to this article I suggest a read through of the link in my previous paragraph.

Besides the glaring problems with the article, Vogel takes an already out of context claim, and goes even further out of context with it to assert that the trans community is, as she puts it, creating “pressure for erasure of a specifically female reality” by seeking to have trans men be labeled as, well, men. It makes perfect sense why a trans man, or non-binary individual, wouldn’t want to be labeled as a woman, but the Michfest statement twists that to become a reason why creating a space centered on the exclusion of trans women is necessary.

Later in her second point she goes on to write that, “If it is considered transphobic to talk about our pussies, our vaginas, or to even use the word female as specific to sex...” and, “What has our movement come to when the mere articulation of your own experience in your own female body is denounced as an injury to another?” Here again, she is putting the onus back on the trans community, and here is where I’m going to insert a bit of my direct response - more will follow at the end of this analysis.

Lisa, it’s not transphobic because you have a, as you put it, a “pussy” or that you talk about it, it’s transphobic because of the way its used to define what a woman, or even what female is. That is denying the very existence of trans woman by constructing a neat little box that not even all cis women fit into. I refer you back to Zoe’s statement about bodies mentioned earlier. I believe, and I’m sure the majority of the trans community (as well as feminist and queer communities) would agree, that you should be able to talk about your pussy - or any other cis woman, trans woman, trans man, or non-binary person about hers (or his and theirs) whenever you want to. As a matter of fact, I encourage it! I would gladly sit and participate in a chant, song, or dance about it! I absolutely love body positive things like that! It is vital that we all are able to discuss our bodies, as well as the experiences and expressions surrounding them, but that can’t be done at the expense of others, especially your trans sisters - people who desperately need the support of a strong feminist woman like you, and the event your organize. Doing those things, however, at the expense of trans women is transphobic in addition to being transmisogynistic. It’s an example of your privilege as a cis woman that you think you have the right to define your comments as transphobic or not. This is no different than a man telling a woman that his comments may, or may not, be sexist or misogynistic. The bearers of privilege are not the arbiters of what is to be considered oppression, which can only be left for the oppressed to decide.

The third point of the statement is largely an appeal to emotion that focuses on the oppression of women (it’s being implied to only cis women again), as some type of acceptable excuse to exclude trans women, while also essentially telling trans women that they are completely incapable of ever being subject to that oppression - you can read more about that idea that Vogel is othering trans women in the article by Parker Marie Molloy written for the Advocate I linked to earlier. The way Vogel does this is by saying, “We built this space around the fierce solidarity of female experience that has always been and continues to be deconstructed into invisibility; where that unique experience is relegated to a place of dishonor. Whenever females honor ourselves, wherever we take up space, and sit collectively in

the source of our collective power, we are burned and stoned, both literally and metaphorically.” This statement creates a situation where exclusion is not only possible, but also warranted, even though in reality it is a denial of the same oppression trans women face because we are also women.

The next point asks critics to “Turn Your Energy Towards the Real Enemies of Female and LGBTQ Liberation.” What follows constitutes the essence of the first paragraph in the forth “demand” on the list. She writes,

“While the abuse and disenfranchisement of womyn and girls escalates around the world and LGBTQ people experience life-threatening harms, LGBTQ organizations have turned inwards on a curious target - a weeklong music festival that does not ban or exclude anyone...”

This is the insinuation that the LGBT community is doing something other than exactly that. Further, this passage on its own is probably one of the most offensive, and curiously laughable, assertions in the entire statement. The very fact that trans women are seeking inclusion at the MWMF, or any other trans-exclusive space, shows just how offensive it is because it is nothing more than an outright rejection of what actually happening in the trans community, and the larger LGBT community. We are quite literally doing exactly the very things we are being criticized for apparently not doing, which is the end of a music festival disenfranchising women and girls. Now I anticipate questioning along the lines of, “well that’s not really about trans women”, to which I immediately respond with Vogel’s own words of “Michfest recognizes trans womyn as womyn”. Finally, its also another example of several logical fallacies that seeks to take the spotlight off of the discrimination of Michfest, by forcing the onus back on the referenced communities.

She then goes on to say, “Equality Michigan and the organizations endorsing its petition... are targeting Michfest with McCarthy-era blacklist tactics.” What’s perplexing about this statement, and actually rather comical once you realize what going on, is that it’s quickly followed by saying,

“We call on the constituents, donors, and dues-paying members of the LGBTQ institutions targeting Michfest to hold them accountable for this misuse and misdirection of organizational resources, and to withdraw their time and dollars from these organizations until the targeting of Michfest ends. Sisters - we urge you to redirect your money to organizations that speak to your lives and speak for you.”

If that is not a boatload of hypocrisy, I’m not really sure what would be. Vogel argues that critics are using tactics to change the “intention” of the festival, but she then immediately turns about face and demands the same be done to critics. By saying that the trans community is using “McCarthy-era blacklist tactics”, the festival is also sidestepping, or rather outright avoiding, why petitions and calls for boycotts were started in the first place - opposition to the transphobic policy that the festival labels as a simple “intention”. It is predicated on the same type arguments that people use when they make Hitler or Nazi reference... and that’s just sad and pretty damn silly. It’s also another convenient way for MWMF to again accuse the LGBT community of not being the advocates it should be for women and LGBT people.

The fifth and final point of the statements is one where Vogel and the Michigan Womyn’s Festival begin to outright mock trans women. It starts off by making a call to “Join the Conversation, Not the Digital Sound Bite War”, which on its own is also rather duplicitous, as it would require trans women to actually be allowed and welcomed on The Land. In addition is rather hypocritical because a post to Facebook is

the exact opposite of that. We are then asked to consider that the “Michfest community welcomes conversation; we do not stifle it.” It goes on further to say,

“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...”

I want to take a little bit more time to unpack and analyze this last point because it’s important. We are led to believe that the trans women already in attendance are all welcome, and that the festival welcomes the conversations that come with them. There is one pretty significant problem with this. The festival still stands behind the “intention” as recent August 1st, and has made clear its “intention” does not include trans women because we are not women assigned female at birth. Now how on earth are we supposed to engage in conversation on The Land, in person, if were left standing in the rain forever outside of it?

It also tries to sidestep the argument about it with phrases like, “transgender womyn choose to attend the Festival in the belief that the intention includes them”, forcing trans women to decide if they are going to subscribe to the beliefs of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival and its intention, or outright “disrespect” and erase “being born and living as female” by choosing to attend. Its important to note that the festival is completely silent about whether it believes the intention includes those trans women that do believe it includes them. I find that rather convenient. It then becomes rather glib for the festival to say they want us to show up and participate. How are trans women suppose to come to the festival and participate in discourse if its intent is to not have us there in the first place? Why focus on the details though, they’re not really that important, right? With that, this is where I would like to move onto a response with the intent on doing exactly what Lisa Vogel is asking; now let’s move this conversation forward.

Round And Round We Go, Will We End Up On The Land? Nobody Knows!

I’m sure some of the people reading this are asking what was the purpose of writing all of that. That’s a good question, and it is one I am going to answer. For longer than I have been alive there has been a festival in Michigan that has been like no other. This festival has been revolutionary in many different ways; for better or for worse many of those reasons have helped define herstory. I would love to be able to spend time writing about it because it has been truly amazing, and it is worth writing about, but that will have to come at a later time. I can, however, say that this festival is a beacon for womyn of all shapes, sizes, colors, and origins in the cold dark night. It is a place where womyn can come together as sisters to let out a collective roar letting the world know they are there, they are strong, they are alive, and they will exist on a chunk of land as one in direct opposition to everything life has told them. This festival opens its arms to womyn from all walks of life and allows them to share their amazing stories, as well as share in their suffering. It provides a place for womyn to heal, to create a better self, and to know that when they leave they will never be alone. It is one of the last bastions of true sisterhood and is a collective voice left in the world today, and that not only important but also revolutionary and essential.

This festival in the woods of Michigan is a piece of Land that is unique in many extraordinary ways, but unfortunately, some are such in less than honorable ways. For 39 years the Michigan Womyn’s Music

Festival has turned its back on a group of its sisters - those that are trans. It has told us, flat-out, that we are in no way womyn - we are men and that would never change because it was an undeniable truth. A countless number of narratives have been presented, in many ways much like the one above, that have been used as justify turning away some of the most marginalized women in need of support and the love that the festival has, in many ways, been known for. It has removed trans womyn from the land and abandoned us, though it claims no such thing now.

The festival has changed its tone slightly over the years, but one thing has always stayed the same; no matter how it is dressed the festival has always made it clear that we, as trans womyn, are not womyn like them and because of that we will never be welcome. We cannot know their suffering because we had come from a different path. Now we are told that we must recognize truths and hear demands and we are to erase our memories and experiences and believe them when they tell us that we have only misunderstood. This is why I write all of this. We do understand, and we see the truth; we know what has been done.

This statement is a clear example of what MWMF really thinks about trans womyn. It took me all 10 minutes to read through this statement and see it for exactly what it is in all of its disingenuous glory. This is not only disingenuous it is an insult to intelligence. We are supposed to look at this and see something other than what it is; to believe that would even be possible tells me that you, Lisa Vogel, think we are completely incapable of basic reason.

Lisa, this has dragged on for 39 years. You are now saying that you welcome us, that you encourage debate on The Land and out in the world, and that we are finally women in your eyes. I want to believe you; I want to fight the system and not my sisters. So we will pretend that your call that I have deconstructed is exactly what you say it is, and not what it can be seen for above - I need you to show me how wrong I really am. I'm more than willing to say that what was contained in my analysis of your words was a mistake, that I was wrong, and that you are really taking the road to heal wounds and move forward as a united group to fight the world in front of us that has pushed us down for eternity, and that you welcome our conversation in our communities and upon The Land. So I will answer that call and abandon reason in an attempt, and hope, that you are true to your word.

We understand the demands you make. Nobody wants to erase who you are or disrespect that very existence. We actually want to celebrate that with you and believe that that is entirely possible to do together at the festival, but we can't do so if you continue to erase ours. If you continue to maintain that we cannot celebrate and rebel together with you, then you need to let us in and show us just how that would be the case.

What follows is a way for you to make good on your claims and show the world just how serious they are - it is a way to move forward and heal. The plan that I purpose to you is a difficult one, but if you are actually sincere and your words are true, it will be one that can be achieved and we will all be better in the end for having done so. So seeing as how we are in this new business of making demands, I guess I can make a few of my own and hopefully prove myself wrong.

- Let us all in if you are truly unafraid and welcome us among you, that will not be difficult. Even if this were only for a year, you would let trans women in, open and proud, and we will show womyn across The Land just how wrong many of the assumptions about us are. We will show that we care deeply about our cis sisters and value their complex experiences stemming from having been assigned female at

birth, as we value our own. We will share our own experiences and use them for a new way forward. On top of that, we will finally be able to show how all of our intersectional lives - cis and trans - make us unique, but also altogether similar. You say, “We invite our sisters to participate in this conversation in person on the Land”. We will do so, and have wanted that for quite some time, but that cannot happen while the intention still stands. As a trans woman, I cannot turn my back on my sisters. It’s got to be all or none because that is the “challenging path to honoring true diversity”, and I believe you are completely capable of making that happen. If you believe this is an impossibility, then I “ask you to work with us, not against us.”

o I am prepared to bring at the very least 250-500 trans womyn, and however many come along with them (cis or trans), to the Festival in 2015. This should not be an exclusive number, but just those specifically with the intent of being on the Land for this important paradigm shift; I’m sure many will come independently. This will be as one cohesive unit, independent of the New Narratives supporters. I do not object to them being among us, as their voices are also valuable, but they do not represent the wide diversity of trans womyn and are only a fractional portion of it.

o I further propose that this group of women, coming together as a unit, be removed from the sliding scale and charged the full price of admission for the week of the festival. We know that the festival has been struggling, and we want to help renew that energy.

o I suggest that to make this a reality, we take up the conversation in the community; and you, with the womyn you choose to have help represent your voice, meet with myself and other trans womyn to develop a strategy for making this an amazing experience for cis and trans womyn alike. The creation of a strategy will allow us to accommodate for the full diversity among all that participate in discussion on The Land. It will also allow us to develop way in which there are no sacrifices of experience that I know is a chief concern of yours.

o We too ask that while on The Land you “Make room in your heart to hold difference of opinion and disagreement” because it is bound to happen as we take those first awkward steps together.

o I will immediately suggest the creation of a “sanctuary”, similar to the one you have already created for womyn of color, should cis womyn so choose to use it if they are overwhelmed. However, I believe that by the end of the week we will find that this is not necessary. I also suggest similar be made for trans womyn for the same reasons, and I also believe that will become unnecessary. This conflict has gone on at the festival, and elsewhere for decades, and there have been sisters wounded on both sides that may temporarily need that place to collect themselves.

o I propose that all women on the land also work together to stop “Second Closet” violence by creating a workshop to address it, as I have noticed you have not done so thus far. It is something that is pervasive in our culture, but yet never acknowledged. As safety is always a concern, this is imperative. I also ask for the creation of a safe space for survivors of this violence that includes trans womyn. This violence can be triggering at times, and a place to handle that trigger will help.

o I purpose the creation of a workshop focused on dispelling many of the myths about trans womyn, staffed by trans womyn.

o Most of all I propose we have fun and cherish each other’s presence, celebrate each other’s experiences, and speak about our bodies and honor all forms that they may take.

o The creation of a quantitative and qualitative study to understand if the festivalgoers currently share your opinion that trans women should not be present. I believe that a mutual third party should perform this study so that it ensures neither of us feels slighted by the results. If this is truly a communal space where womyn are represented accordingly, then that final decision would be applied out of necessity. I would suggest making this a mandatory element of the 2015 ticket sales so that the widest and most accurate sample population could be attained.

- I am prepared to launch a Kickstarter campaign specifically for the purpose of raising the funding for this comprehensive survey.

o If you can make good on what you say and put force behind it, I will personally contact those that boycott you and speak this new truth that you really do accept trans womyn on The Land, value us as womyn, and welcome our presence.

o Finally, I will contact the many performers that have removed themselves from the festival with you and ask them to make an unforgettable return.

I believe that if we accomplish this, we can work together to ensure that this festival outlasts us all as it continues for many years to come. I see not just a 40th, but also a 100th anniversary as a distinct reality if we can get there together. So, in the end, Lisa, I reiterate that I ask you to make good on the demands that you have made and show the world that I am wrong - I would gladly accept that - an if this isn't a possibility that your claims are sadly disingenuous as my analysis shows, and we will continue on the way we have for four decades, but I doubt the festival would last that long. However, if that's to be the case, I do have to say that I doubt trans womyn will give up or ever go away. The choices are yours and I extend our olive branch and glimmer of hope. This does not have to be a situation where we both continue to lose. If we make this plan a reality, we will all come out ahead.

Emma Cronin is a thirty-something trans woman student, scholar, and activist of feminism and LGBTQ issues, currently attending the University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh with majors in Environmental Studies and Women's and Gender Studies. Emma has future plans on claiming a legal education to further her ability as an activist and is building a network for a possible run at a national political office. She spends a great deal of time connecting disadvantaged LGBTQ and other economically challenged individuals with much-needed resources and is currently creating a trans education, leadership, and resources program for her region in Wisconsin. You can regularly find her engaged in debates with other students about the wonders of feminism, and encouraging young women to be loud, opinionated, and in your face.

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