Dear Queers



A love letter from Michigan

“A wise woman wishes to be no one's enemy; a wise woman refuses to be anyone's victim.”

Maya Angelou

“The connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet.”

Adrienne Rich

“Only by learning to live in harmony with your contradictions can you keep it all afloat.”

Audre Lorde

July 29, 2014

Dear Queers,

I've been meaning to write you this letter for nearly a year, but I keep putting it off. The thing is, I'm scared shitless that if I tell you my real honest truth you'll hate me, which leads to other, bigger fears, like the fear of isolation and the fear of dying alone in a dark snowy ditch. But we all know that the fear of people not liking you is perhaps the worst possible reason to not speak your truth, and so, with deepest respect for myself and for you and for the world we are creating together, I sit down to lay these words on the page.

I am writing to ask that you reconsider everything you've ever heard, read, or assumed about the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. I know it might seem very straightforward: Mich Fest does not recognize trans women as *real* women, and therefore chooses to exclude them. Supporting such an institution by attending or performing or working crew makes you a shithead and a terrible ally to your trans sisters. For over a decade, I was totally convinced of this.

When I was 19, I got pregnant in a cave outside Sedona. I was ill-prepared on various fronts to become a parents, but ready or not, I had an infant 9 months later. Two and a half years after that, my daughter informed me she was actually a boy. That's another story which I already wrote and published in a 2006 zine titled "Hatch! Mister Sister." The gist is he cut off his hair, refused to

wear anything girlish, and began introducing himself by an ever changing assortment of male names – Blake, Henry, Jack, etc. When he was in pre-school and I was still introducing him as my daughter, he began correcting me, by stopping his foot and shouting "I'm your SON!!" And so, by 2nd grade we had changed all his school records to reflect his male name and he was living full time as a boy.

I've noticed a tendency to romanticize this aspect of our lives – he the incredibly self-aware, highly articulate and enlightened trans kid; me the totally hip, super supportive queer mother; together having amazing adventures, all the while joking around and looking fly, but the truer picture, of course, is less idyllic.

In truth, I felt overwhelmed every day, and I was struggling with severe depression. In truth, I was really stressed out about stuff like getting the bills paid, was I

being a good enough mother, and would I ever find true love. I was doing sex work while he was at school to pay his Waldorf tuition, and trying my best to act cheerful when he got home. In truth, I knew I was being judged by my every move, as all mothers are, and it wore me down.

Meanwhile, I spent countless hours patiently educating other cis people, before trans kids were on everyone's radar, before Oprah and NPR were there to help me, back when his gender expression somehow indicated me as crazy and/or abusive. I sat down with every teacher, principal, social worker and camp counselor, doing trans 101 trainings on safe bathrooms, preferred pronouns, and how to deal with other students potentially finding out he is "actually a girl." It was painstaking and I got asked a lot of annoying questions, like "have you ever considered it's because he has no father figure?"

The only lesbians I knew back then were midwives. I loved them a lot and respected them greatly, so it really bummed me out when even some of them said essentialist things about his anatomy. "But, she has LABIA, are you nuts?" I knew many of these women went to Mich Fest, and thus I concluded that Mich Fest was an epicenter of transphobia, a gathering ground of lesbian bigotry, and no place I'd ever be caught dead.

Time passed, and then, I fell in love with someone who convinced me to come work short crew. I felt like a spy in the enemy camp that year. I was constantly on my guard, very careful not to get splashed with the Kool-aid; all the while collecting information about how the lesbians do it. The Capricorn in me noticed the intricate systems. I was impressed by the sacred order of how everything came together. Seeing how the stages got built and how the

cooking fires were kept alive all night left me in a state of awe. I walked away knowing that womyn could indeed run the world. I had forgotten that even mattered to me.

While I still had some trepidation, I came back the following year for long crew, and immediately had this crazy revelation that the lesbians matter. Perhaps this seems obvious, but for me it was a total epiphany. Having spent most of my adult life with radical faeries and queers, all I knew about lesbians was that they had no sense of humor and wore really ugly shoes. That they held their clipboards tight and their stale notions about sex and gender even tighter. Basically, I saw them as less evolved and way less cool than all other letters of the LGBTQ.

What I'm getting at here, actually, is the queer elitism that is so rampant right now. This is the part you may hate me for, but I think the calling out of bigotry has

become quite hypocritical. The word bigot means "having or revealing an obstinate belief in the superiority of one's own opinions and a prejudiced intolerance of the opinions of others." Frankly, I see the young, urban, often highly educated and mostly white queers being at least as guilty of this as the lesbian separatists. The recent attack on elderly trans women who choose to keep using the word "tranny" is another good example. I can't help but notice the common factor of these two groups is their senior age and their lack of male privilege. It seems very ironic to so aggressively attack the so-called bigotry of the two most vulnerable demographics of our queer pantheon. Is not the whole point of our activism to support everyone's right to freely be who they are?

The intention of this festival, as we all know, has been a source of deep controversy and bitter resentment

for at least 18 years. We have spun out in every direction, always landing at about the same place – exhausted and unresolved. I realize there's not much more to say on this, so instead, let me remind us of our common ground.

Queers, we've been fighting courageously and taking a stand for the freedom to express our true selves as safely and openly as possible. Due to our diligent hard work, trans folk have far more power in the world today than they did 15 years ago. This is awesome and something to be celebrated, and yes, the struggle continues.

Let's not forget that the lesbian separatists also did just this. They took a stand during an era when being butch meant risking getting your head bashed in by cops just for walking down the sidewalk. They arose from a time when having sex with other women was considered a disease, and could get you institutionalized. They laid the

foundation for queer studies departments that today's college students have the privilege of taking for granted. They were the gender outlaws who redefined what it meant to be female, and they often had to fight harder than you or I can imagine for their simple right to exist.

There are many womyn here who feel fiercely protective of their right to come gather in cunt-only space for one week in August. While I, like many of my peers, would love for this space to openly welcome all women and all trans folk, and I believe strongly that shifting the intention to be inclusive has tremendous potential for healing, I also support whole-heartedly the rights of dykes and all women (and everyone else for that matter) to throw a party and invite whoever the fuck they want.

I'll bet my motorcycle and a winning lotto ticket that every year, Lisa Vogel gets a mountain of letters from

rural, working class lesbians who insist that the intention remain or they won't come. Tell me this queers: do you care about this festival enough to come in their place? Or is this simply a matter of principle? Let's be pragmatic for a moment. If you really want change to happen, you gotta stop being right and come do the work. It's only your presence, your questions, your willingness to listen and your desire to build relationships that can make the deep and healing change possible.

Right now, I'm sitting in my tent surrounded by oak trees and ferns. Off in the distance I hear chainsaws and hammers hitting stakes. It's my 3rd year working. When I pulled onto the land 10 days ago, I started crying, or I think *balling* would be the more accurate word. It caught me completely off guard. It was like this wave of relief swept over my body. For the next 4 weeks, I wouldn't be

gawked at or yelled at by dudes. I wouldn't have to brace myself waiting for the light to change when 3 men in a truck pulled up next to me at night. I wouldn't be shamed for having emotions, or told I'm just "on the rag" when I dare to have an opinion. Instead, I'd be riding around in flatbed trucks filled with hay and smart, sexy babes. I'd be stacking firewood in the sunshine wearing only my gloves, boots and cut offs shorts. I'd be in the land where beards are worn with pride, fat is truly fabulous and old ladies dance naked in the afternoon, tits hanging low, and this is seen as beautiful, not disgusting or shameful.

In a world where patriarchy is still imbedded so deeply in the fabric of our collective being, it's hard to imagine a realm outside of that. You cannot comprehend the value of this place until you come breath it in, sweat it out, and walk alone with it through the woods at night.

This festival has been a vital lifeline to countless women from so many walks of life. I am deeply grateful to have finally landed here, and I hold firmly that you can be an excellent trans ally and still come be with dykes in the woods. To spend our precious time arguing over whether cis women or trans folk are more deeply oppressed is a major distraction, a waste of our collective vitality, and a total drain on our political potential.

No one is served by victimization. All of us benefit when we learn to walk with heads high and hearts open. This place is not perfect, it's not a utopia, it's just a bunch of wild womyn figuring out how to love ourselves and exist together as best we are able.

& SO – MY QUEER SISTERS! If you've ever had the hankering to be here or heard the howl calling, get your

ass here in 2015. Nothing lasts forever, and this could be your last chance to come witness what 40 years of womyn in the woods feels like. You don't need to figure it all out, just buy yourself a ticket and come while you still can. It'll make sense later. I wish someone had convinced me of this 20 years ago.

My pet name for Mich Fest is the House of Divine Order. Believe me, the deep lez woo is something fierce. I want us freaks here, with our wide open, shameless hearts. Come feel it for yourself. It's okay. We've got the power.

With mad love and deepest faith in all of us,

Mary Doyle

To read an official letter to the community
from Lisa Vogel on the festival intention, go to:
www.michfest.com/lettertothecommunity050914.htm

To order more copies or request the print-it-yourself PDF,
email me~ DIRTYWERQ@gmail.com