

The Hijacking of Lesbian History

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"If you destroy an entire generation of a people's culture, it's as if they never existed."
— Film trailer for *The Monuments Men*, 2013

THIS YEAR, as America's two oldest women's music festivals—Michigan and National—prepare to celebrate landmark fortieth anniversaries, a number of powerful organizations have signed a petition against the Michigan festival, endorsing an economic boycott of all artists who perform there. Though a life-altering destination for four decades of lesbian artists and activists, the Michigan festival's legacy has recently been reduced to one contentious issue: the question of trans inclusion. To clarify the policy: the festival *does not ban, inspect, or expel transwomen*. Its intention is to be a temporary gathering for women to address diverse experiences of being born female. It asserts that being female-assigned at birth fosters a unique identity. And as a weeklong, clothing-optional campout, it's a trusted sanctuary for the countless women and girls who have survived male violence in a traditionally heterosexual relationship. Many have testified that they can only regain a relaxed sense of physical safety during their annual retreat at Michfest. The last festival of its kind, Michigan has indeed consistently privileged, and celebrated, women and girls born biologically female.

Michigan's critics view the festival's impressive survival into its fortieth year as a trans-phobic failure rather than as a lesbian success. Complicating this era of tension between the T and the L is the powerful, still-evolving tool of social media that permits sloppily researched and even slanderous journalism to be recycled as factual, ingraining myth as truth. What I am archiving now, pretty much daily since HRC and GLAAD initiated a festival boycott in July 2014, is an almost gleeful barrage of name-calling, as well as anti-lesbian violence that has attracted little editorial oversight. Calls for the festival's destruction resound in anonymous postings ("Burn it down." "Thank God these dinosaurs will die off soon." "I can't wait for all of them to die."). Smears and stereotypes applied retroactively to any woman who ever camped at a festival also appear in credited political blogs. The reframing of festival artists and folksingers as hatemongers and KKK-like segregationists is being transmitted in cyberspace at a pace no one historian can correct, easily circulated for decades to come, in contrast to the slim historiography of memoirs published by lifelong festiegogers and performers. Thus the actual images and narratives from festival workshops, performances, and dialogues will scatter to

private collections like my own without ever being entered into the record of what we know about lesbian lives from recent history; but the newly constructed term "TERF"—Trans Excluding Radical Feminist—will live on as the problematic definition of those who attended festivals in our time.

TERF is an important new slur, emblematic of the unresolved tensions between our LGBT community's L and T factions. Popularized in recent years by trans rights advocates, the term TERF has enjoyed increasing usage in LGBT journalism, gender studies, and social media. It began as a legitimate means of isolating and critiquing the work of a very few controversial feminist authors, namely Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys, whose published writings clearly expressed a rejection of transwomen as a viable class of women. TERF quickly became a way for critics to separate "good" radical feminists from "bad." It joined the lexicon of insults progressives call each other, such as PEP ("Progressive Except on Palestine"). Indeed, some Jewish lesbians lament the dubious change from being called dyke and kike to TERF and PEP.

But this is more than just linguistic infighting. As a litmus test, TERF is a unique new insult for non-transgender lesbians

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by other LGBT activists, and it bears monitoring. Those women relegated to the TERF bin of bad feminism are now being subjected to traditional sexist canards, including charges of unattractiveness, mental instability, and penis envy. Writer Jim Goad, for instance, referred to Sheila Jeffreys as "the British Andrea Dworkin, born with a

face that is nearly as objectionable as Dworkin's." Babs Siperstein's August 30 piece in *Bilerico*, titled "TERFs: All the Rage This Summer," alleged that real women wouldn't enjoy camping at an outdoor festival anyway, but that TERFs were "a loosely organized collective with a message of hate" comparable to the Westboro Baptist Church. "It's pathetic and perverted behavior. Their actions often incite others to discriminate, the definition of a hate group. What drives them—penis envy?"

On August 15, Dana Beyer, executive director of Gender Rights Maryland, published a *Huffington Post* blog titled "TERF Wars: Trans Women and Feminist Extremism in Context." Presented as a science-informed research piece, Beyer's column began by declaring, "There is a war raging between a subset of radical lesbian feminists called TERFs," establishing as factual the idea of a collective group with this name. Beyer defined second-wave lesbian feminists as women who joined the religious right in order to deny health care to transwomen, due to "deep feelings of worthlessness and insecurity," and that "this generation schooled by Janice Raymond and Mary Daly lives on, fighting a rearguard action and continuing to destroy the lives of people. The generation of radical scholars who be-

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