

BORN A WOMYN?: LISA VOGEL'S PARADIGM FOR TRANSGENDER EXCLUSION

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To some feminists, the name “Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival” (MWMF) represents female solidarity, empowerment through art, and liberation from the patriarchy. To many transgender activists, it represents an exclusive club of womanhood which enforces gender discrimination by keeping trans women out. For most laypeople, however, the name invokes a seemingly simple question: “Why is ‘women’ spelled wrong? Why the ‘y?’”

Part of it comes down to linguistic autonomy. In her *New York Times Magazine* article “Wears Jump Suit. Sensible Shoes. Uses Husband’s Last Name,” Deborah Tannen demonstrates the close interconnection between linguistic representation and the social world by claiming that the female, both in language and in life, is always seen as a noticeably “marked” variation on a male neutral. The “unmarked” words, which are “what you think of when you’re not thinking anything special,” apply to men, while feminine words have added linguistic “markers” like “-ess” that carry additional meanings, often connoting frivolousness or sexiness (Tannen).

While Tannen does not mention it, her theory applies to the word “woman” itself, a prefixed variation on the default base-word “man.” While “man,” as well as representing males, is a generic term for human beings (think “mankind”), women are defined linguistically not on their own terms, but by their difference from the male standard. Thus, the term “womyn,” through its differentiated spelling that removes the word “man,” is an attempt to reclaim gender identity outside the framework of male reference. Starting with their gender title, womyn can be defined not by men, but by themselves.

This type of female autonomy is at the core of MWMF’s goals. The festival is an annual event located in Michigan’s woodlands that is run, staffed, and attended exclusively by women, including many lesbian and queer women. It includes workshops and performances by female artists as well as communal living activities (“Michigan Community”). Founded in 1976, along with other similar festivals across the country, as part of a second-wave feminist separatist movement, it is concerned with creating an “autonomous space” for women to literally be away from the patriarchy and to express their gender as they choose (“Heated Debate”).

As a proponent of the right to define one’s own gender on one’s own terms, MWMF seems, at least on the surface, to be an unlikely opponent of the transgender women community. A key aspect of transgender rights (at least for those who do identify with a gender) is the ability to pick one’s own labels, as opposed to what gender theorist Judith Butler, in the introduction to *Undoing Gender*, calls “the unwanted

legislation of identity” (7). Typically, people are assigned a gender at birth by doctors, based on their physical sex, and carry that label with them for the rest of their lives. Transgender men and women, on the other hand, by claiming a gender identity that differs from what others have assigned to them, assert their right to choose representative words—their gender labels and pronouns—that best translate their internal sense of self into social and linguistic structures.

Given that most self-identified womyn did not grow up being referred to as such, and had to find and claim the term themselves, womyn are, at least in a linguistic sense, technically changing their gender identity, much like transgender women. Yet despite these similarities, the exclusion of transgender women has been a controversial but constant policy at MWMF (“History”).

Last year, in response to petitions for the festival to include trans women, festival founder Lisa Vogel released a statement confirming and defending the established policy: “The Festival, for a single precious week, is intended for womyn who at birth were deemed female, who were raised as girls, and who identify as womyn. I believe that womyn-born womyn (WBW) is a lived experience that constitutes its own distinct gender identity” (“Heated Debate”).

Most of the opposition to Vogel has focused on her discriminatory actions in excluding trans women, which is an important, valid, and practical focus. Equally significant, however, are the language and mindset that she uses to construct this exclusion, which offers insight into the ideological essence of Vogel’s feminism and its place in the contemporary world of intersectional activism. The term “womyn-born womyn” itself is packed with politically charged and seemingly contradictory meanings: “womyn” implies self-determined identity, while “born” implies biological determinism, and Vogel’s description emphasizes experience. How can someone at once claim the deliberately self-defined label “womyn” and also claim that she was simply born into it?

In some ways, using the term “womyn-born womyn” to describe the set of women who were determined to be female from birth is actually quite consistent with the idea of self-representation on one’s own terms. They could have used the synonymous term “cisgender women,” which was not in use at the time of the festival’s founding but could have been adopted later on. But that is a term that defines the group in reference to transgender women. While “cisgender” is not literally a marked form of “transgender,” and it would be wrong to imply that being transgender means being socially unmarked (in fact, most people regard being cisgender as so unmarked that they don’t even need a word for it), “cisgender” came into being specifically to be an opposite to the already existing “transgender,” to define people who are *not* trans (“cis” as a prefix is the linguistic opposite of “trans”) (Blank). “Womyn-born womyn,” not wanting to be defined in reference to transgender people nor to men, made sure that their term was self-defined and self-contained.

Moreover, even in her exclusion of transgender women, Vogel does, at least on the surface of her statement, have some respect for *their* right to self-identification. Unlike the majority of trans-exclusionary groups, the festival leaders never question that trans women are in fact “real” women. Rather than attempt to police the terms used to describe trans women, WBW simply have made a new term to define themselves. Whether this is a valid move to create solidarity among a particular group or a pleasant veil for discrimination is still questionable: constructing an “us” always involves implicitly constructing a “them,” and in this case, the “them” created by the invention of the term WBW seems very pointed.

But in reality, this idea of self-determined gender is too simplistic—or, as Butler would call it, a “fantasy of godlike power” (3). While Butler considers gender to be established through a constant performance, or “doing,” this does not mean that it is created and controlled only by the performer. Instead, people are “done by norms” (3), or socially conditioned into culturally established gender roles, and from there must practice “improvisation within a scene of constraint” (1), or making choices based on the knowledge of what is expected from their gender. Therefore, the choices that people make about their gender identity or expression are not actually independent, but always made in reference to an external social structure. Agency, within a social context, is real, but autonomy is impossible.

The word “womyn” itself exemplifies this limited freedom. “Womyn” seems less like a radical redefinition of gender labels when we consider that all but one of the letters remain unchanged from the traditional spelling. The “y” can be thought of as a limited improvisation within the constraints of the rest of the established term. Womyn may be reclaiming gender for themselves, but they are hardly redefining it. MWMF may allow members to own and freely express their gender within the context of the festival, but only after using a normative definition of who is a woman to establish membership. Womyn may be rebelling against gender norms, but they cannot be uninfluenced by them.

Tannen, too, recognizes the impossibility—for women specifically—of escaping the frame of reference of restrictive gender norms. The presence of these norms means that women will always be marked, whether they choose to follow the norms or not. She uses female titles, such as Ms., Miss, and Mrs. as an example. Traditionally, women have had no choice but to be marked by their relationships with men: married or unmarried, Mrs. or Miss. Even titles that try to escape that established dichotomy, however, are marked by their rejection of it. “Ms.” marks a woman as “either liberated or rebellious,” and even “Dr.” carries connotations of “uppity” or “an overachiever” (Tannen). (Ironically, her title inherently references the norm of disclosed marital status by drawing attention to her deliberate avoidance of it.)

If independence means being socially unmarked, womyn cannot achieve it. That alternative spelling is certainly not what most people think of when they’re “not thinking anything special”: for those who recognize it, it marks a particular brand of

radical feminism and a deliberate rejection of male influence. Womyn may voluntarily wear these labels with pride, but they have significance only because pre-existing norms are there for them to reject. Without the “godlike power” to create a world where gender expectations do not exist, womyn are marked by the way they choose to improvise around them.

Vogel is not just aware of the role of social norms in establishing a person’s gender: she even uses “lived experience”—or as Butler might call it, the experience of “being done by norms”—as a membership requirement, beyond self-identification. She is interested in assembling women who “at birth were deemed female, who were raised as girls,” and therefore have had the same gender done to them. She gives special consideration to the gendering done by norms, as opposed to individuals. While trans women have undone and redone their initial gendering to arrive at womanhood, this is not the same, according to Vogel, as having womanhood done *to* you from the beginning.

It is important to note that Vogel differs from the more common, essentialist views of other trans-exclusionary feminists that Butler describes, who accuse trans women of an “‘appropriation’ of femininity, as if it belongs properly to a given sex, as if sex is discreetly given, as if gender identity could and should be derived unequivocally from presumed anatomy” (Butler 9). Not only is Vogel opposed to policing feminine qualities, she also never references anatomy and never claims that vaginas or chromosomes are the defining factor for WBW (despite the biological connotations of “born”). She cares about the experiences that result from gender assignment based on sex, not about the sex itself.

Why are gender assignment and upbringing so important to Vogel? One reason is simply that they exist—and, right or wrong, have a very real effect on a person’s experience. To use Tannen’s terminology, if we consider gender assignment to be a “mark,” then it carries numerous additional meanings throughout a woman’s life. Even as she argues that discussions of “gender discrimination” must include transgender and intersex issues, Butler cautions against viewing any of these movements as “postfeminist,” because female-specific activism is still needed (8-9). She considers it “unacceptable to propound a view of gender discrimination that did not take into account the differential ways in which women suffer from poverty and illiteracy, from employment discrimination, from a gendered division of labor within a global frame, and from violence, sexual and otherwise” (Butler 8-9). Given that most of these women have been involuntarily placed into this disadvantaged female role from birth, it makes sense that Vogel does not want to ignore the significance of assigned female gender, even if she overlooks the additional violence and discrimination that trans women face.

Moreover, while the normative system of gender assignment may be restrictive and oppressive, it is good for organizing groups, and Vogel, who is focused on community-building, needs this. It is understandable that, as someone who has committed her life

to making womynhood a communal experience, Vogel would maintain a mindset that focuses on gender as something social (shaped by external markings and constraints) as opposed to individual and internal (determined by how a person feels and identifies). In a blurry sea of women with varied backgrounds, expressions, and inner feelings, involuntary societal marks seem like an easy way to determine who belongs and a solid point of connection among the community.

For Vogel to accept trans women, she will first have to accept that gender, even on a social level, is not solid, but changeable. Butler describes gender as a “historical category” that is “open to a continual remaking” since conceptions of who and what are masculine and feminine have been redefined over time and space (9-10). This does not, however, mean that gender categories are disappearing or becoming irrelevant anytime soon. An identity does not have to be static to be socially real or meaningful: just ask a woman who has re-marked herself as a womyn or an assigned male who has re-marked herself as a woman. In either case, her life is very much influenced by the social and political meanings that others attach to her new identity. If Vogel’s festival needs to exist in reference to a socially imposed scene of constraints, she shouldn’t worry; those constraints will still exist, but they can be nudged open a bit to allow room for more women to join in the improvisation.

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