DON'T STOP THE MUSIC
Roundtable Discussion with Workers from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

Ann Cvetkovich and Selena Wahng

This roundtable discussion offers a glimpse of one of U.S. lesbian culture's most important institutions, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2000. The festival emerged from 1970s lesbian feminism, which established women-only spaces and genres to nurture women's creativity and community. Its longevity and continuity are testaments to the dedication of Lisa Vogel, one of the festival's founders and its current producer, and of the thousands of women who have made the journey to “the land.” The festival carries enormous symbolic significance, even for those who have never been there; it often represents 1970s lesbian feminism, and all the opinions it generates, despite the fact that the festival itself has evolved and grown over the last quarter century.

As roundtable participants, we present an inside view of Michigan because we are all festival workers, part of the workforce of five to six hundred women who set up the festival every year for the five to six thousand festivalgoers. As members of this intentional community for a period of ten days to a month, workers play, fight, perform for each other, work extremely hard, and debate the state of the lesbian nation. The discussion here is not intended to be representative of the festival; in fact, it questions whether such representation is possible. Instead it is merely one of thousands of conversations among friends that Michigan inspires.

One reason for publicizing the festival through this roundtable is the controversy that arose at the 1999 festival over transgender inclusion and the festival's "womyn-born womyn" admission policy. In 1999 a group of transgender people and their allies set up Son of Camp Trans (the return of 1994's Camp Trans) outside the Michigan festival gates to draw attention to these issues. Members of Son...
of Camp Trans staged an action by entering the festival and taking showers in one of the camping areas. Later that day a verbal confrontation between different groups erupted near the Main Kitchen and eventually turned into an impromptu town meeting facilitated by Bob Alotta, one of the roundtable participants. As of this writing, following the 2000 festival, the debate about the festival’s admission policy continues, fueled both by last year’s events and by this year’s Camp Trans Y2K. A statement emerging from community discussion was distributed at the 2000 festival. It acknowledges the diversity of opinions in the festival community and affirms a commitment both to preserving “womyn-only” space and to challenging transphobia, stating that “claiming one week a year as womyn-born womyn space is not in contradiction to being trans-positive and trans-allies.” Even if the festival’s policy does not change, discussions of transgender politics have made an indelible impact on the community.

More than to offer a definitive position on the transgender controversy, our aim is to contextualize it by providing a picture of what Michigan means to those of us who have some history with the festival. The transgender debate is only one of many that have been addressed at the festival over the years: from S/M, which caused intense conflict in the early 1990s; to racism and the inclusion of women of color, which are ongoing concerns; to the lesbian baby boom and the increasing numbers of children and young people at the festival. As Gretchen Phillips suggests, the festival is a “petri dish” in which experiments are conducted and the festival’s culture evolves.

This conversation focuses above all on the special nature of the Michigan workers’ community and on how Michigan is perceived by those who have extensive experience there. Too often the festival has been written about in the media by first-time visitors. Our behind-the-scenes perspective means that we have said very little about the performances and cultural events of the festival itself.

Had we had more time, we would have talked about how performance is redefined at Michigan, where being onstage and being in the audience are like nowhere else. We also had too little time to spend on the festival as the site of a sexual public culture that rivals any gay male cruising ground. But we hope nonetheless that the discussion reveals the spiritual richness and collective energy that have kept the festival going for a quarter century.

A Note about Work Crews

Workers are organized in crews that come for a one-month “long crew” (two weeks prefestival and one week postfestival) or for a “short crew” of ten to fourteen days,
Long crews include Lace Hardware, which installs the tents for stages and brings in lumber and furniture; Land, which makes paths and prepares “the land”; Carpentry, which builds the stages and other wooden structures; Workers’ Kitchen (a.k.a. Gal’s Diner), which prepares food; Belly Bowl, which serves drinks and snacks; Garbage and Recycling; Sanitation, which takes care of Porta-Janes; Plumbing; Massage; Worker Support; Staff Services; Shuttle; Worker Childcare; and Health Care. Many other short crews handle the performances and the festies: Stage crews (for each of the three stages), Performer Support, Parking, Community Center, and more, including the Main Kitchen, which feeds as many as six thousand festies.

—AC

Gretchen Phillips: I first came to Michigan as a festie in 1982, when I was nineteen. It blew my mind. So I returned for the next several years as a worker in the Workers’ Kitchen. Michigan really informed my goals around being a woman, and specifically a lesbian musician. I got busy touring with my band Two Nice Girls and stopped coming in the late 1980s. Then we played there in 1990 and 1991, which was a real dream come true for me. In 1993 I started working in the Kitchen again, and I’ve been there every year since, as well as performing in various capacities. I’m from Austin, Texas, and I’m white.

Selena Wahng: I’m in my thirties, and I’m from California. I’ve only been to Michigan once, and I worked on long crew on Lace Hardware and short crew at One World. I’m Korean American.

Bob Alotta: The year 2000 will be my seventh year. I’ve been on Gal’s for three years, twice on long crew and once on short crew. Prior to that, I was on Raffle, which is really the “performer’s girlfriend’s” job. So I’ve been on “performer support” for a really long time—five years! I’m a Sicilian, Sephardic, struggling-class maker of media in the rest of my life. I’m urban. I’m a New Yorker born and bred.

Kay Turner: I came to Michigan for the first time as a performer with my band Girls in the Nose in 1994 and again in 1995. One of my bandmates, Darby Smotherman, who had worked the year before, said, “You have to come early because it’s just so cool here, and you can volunteer and do something.” When I first came, I was sent to Parking, but I was loath to go there. Somehow I got reassigned to the Main Kitchen, and I loved working there. I’ve come back to the Main Kitchen as a short crew worker ever since. I am of Canadian and English white extraction, and I’m from New York now but lived for many years in Texas. I’m a folklorist, writer, and teacher in the rest of my life.
Ann Cvetkovich: I came to Michigan in my thirties, which is older than most first-timers, and I came somewhat skeptically, which has been important to my history there. I first came as a tentmate [a festie who shares a tent with a worker and thus has some access to the workers’ area]. I came back as a Performer Support crew member for a year. For the past five years I’ve worked long crew in the Belly Bowl, three as a crew member, one as a crew leader, and one as a co-coordinator with my friend Desiree Vester. I’ve also had the good fortune to perform three times as a go-go dancer—twice for Girls in the Nose and once for Lord Douglas Phillips.

I am a white Canadian of Anglo and Serbo-Croatian extraction who has lived in the U.S. for many years. Being Canadian is a relevant identity category at Michigan because there are a lot of Canadians who come to the festival. I am a professor, and leaving behind my identity as a professor at Michigan, as well as sometimes occupying it there, are both important.

Desiree Yael Vester: I turned thirty-two on 1 January 2000. 2000 will be my seventh year at Michigan. My first year was Worker Support, my second year was Box Office, my third year was Security/Communications, and since then I’ve been on Belly Bowl. I was a crew member one year, a crew leader the second year, and a co-coordinator with Ann Cvetkovich last year. I’m African American. My paternal family is Geechee (grandfather) and Mississippian (grandmother), my maternal family is from Jamaica (great-grandparents) and New Jersey (grandfather). All of my grandparents and both my parents were born in this country.

Work

AC: Working at Michigan has been special because it has allowed me to think about the place of work in my life and about new ways of working. I get to do manual labor at Michigan, which is not part of my life as a professor and has not really been something that I’ve wanted to do. It has been great to see the value of doing physical work. For example, it combines social life and work. My work as a professor can be very isolated. It’s very special to work alongside people and have work be fun because it’s social. Work becomes sexy because of the social camaraderie with your coworkers.

KT: Well, I’ll have to second that. Because I too come from a place of being a writer, someone who in my regular work life is often doing nonphysical or mental labor as what I give to the world. And it’s always a pleasure to come to a kind of physical labor at Michigan that doesn’t require thinking as much as it requires being in sync with others and being in sync with the land. And it’s really an impor-
tant part of my year to have a time that relieves me from the thought process as the primary way that I give to the world.

I’d also say that physical labor becomes erotic labor in an entirely unique way because it’s connected to the actual doing of something. For example, in the Main Kitchen, at the beginning of the festival season, we’re all lifting and hauling tables and chairs and firepit pots that are big and bulky and heavy, and people are pushing and pulling those things together. The ultimate result is the assembling of an actual physical landscape, and there’s something completely sexy about that labor of pushing and pulling things together; the coordinated heaving and hauling is a bit like the dance of lezzie life. It’s just fabulous. And it’s like nothing else I do the rest of the year, except the rather lonely physical activity of cleaning my apartment. Nothing sexy about that!

DYV: I also think the physicality is a wonderful part of the work. I’ve been in library school the entire time I’ve been at Michigan, and it’s a very isolating degree to pursue because it really doesn’t relate to anything outside of librarianship. Getting to go to Michigan and to be around people all the time feels like a privilege. Most of the time at home I’m in an urban setting where work just feels like an obligation. Being a working-class person, I feel like I know how to work hard. That’s the one thing I’ve always known how to do; no one had to teach me how to do that. But when I’m at home I’m doing it for my survival, and when I’m at Michigan I get to do this thing that I know how to do and don’t have to think about, and it’s for lesbians. It’s for women.

Working there is also profound because you know the immediate fruits of your labor. You fill the icebox, and then you get to go, “Oh, we filled it.” You know how many bags there were, you laughed and made funny remarks along the way, and then it’s done. Every task has a beginning and an end. It’s instant gratification. You made the coffee, now the coffeepot’s full, and you get to watch people drink coffee that you just made.

One of the very first things I saw on the land when I got there was a woman from Lace Hardware in boots and panties and a tool belt. And I thought, “What the hell! She’s going to get her titties caught in something!” There’s an element of performance in sledging and chopping down trees. One of the most profound moments of that was when the rain came in on the Night Stage tent during a performance. The tent was falling down, and all these really well-dressed women whipped off their high heels, ran up to the stage without a moment’s thought about their hair or their outfits, and just started pulling on ropes. It wasn’t just amazing because they knew what to do; it was amazing because how often do you get to see
women move that fast in tight miniskirts, hike them up, and then pull on a big thick rope? That’s part of why work is different at Michigan.

SW: Unlike what Kay said, I have seen women doing manual labor, because I lived in South Korea in the early 1970s, from the ages of five to eight. At that time industrialization was just starting to happen in Seoul and other large cities. So, for instance, my grandmother’s house was on the edge of the urban area of Seoul, but there was no indoor plumbing, and that area of the city was rapidly shifting from rural to urban, like many Third World cities in the past few decades. It was common for women to build their shacks, grow all the food, and take care of the animals in the villages and in the more rural areas of towns and cities. And that was something that affected me.

In our working-class apartment building all the kids would just run around together, and everyone’s doors were open—I’d just go around and visit all the apartment neighbors, and it was so much about connection. I can’t say that “Korea is erotic”—that’s really problematic. But I’m wondering about that idea of connecting and how it affects sexuality.

BA: Our work is holistic. It isn’t that you work separately and then you come together and see the people with whom you might have sexual relationships. It’s all connected. And there’s the sense of working toward something bigger than yourself. So you’re never just filling the coffee, you’re never just hammering something. This hammer is the thing that’s going to make this other thing go up. That gives everyone an enormous sense of freedom. There’s no unemployment at Michigan. Your function is stated. “What do you do? I’m on Gal’s.” Okay, all right, now come up with the rest of yourself, right? Achievement there is a very different thing.

I have an interesting amount of manual and nonmanual labor in my work experience. I’ve been working since I was fourteen years old. I know how to work—that’s what I know how to do. I work pretty hard. I do production work, but also I work in a restaurant, where I do whatever you need to do. I’d never thought I would go to Michigan, in part because I thought it was a bunch of rich, white kids who didn’t have jobs and how nice for them. And who thinks I can take a month off to go do anything?! I really like to go and just do my job.

GP: I have been so completely spoiled in the other world by working at Michigan. My expectations are that I am treated extremely well, that people wonder how I’m doing emotionally, that I have camaraderie with the people I work with, and that we are all working together for a common goal, which is to get the job done and have fun along the way. Having worked there starting when I was twenty has com-
pletely changed me in terms of what I expect of the jobs that I get paid for. Comparing a fun job where we sing and play all the livelong day and a shitty-ass job where I get a bunch of money—I will always pick the fun job.

KT: Once money is removed, work and the love of work can come forward for their own purposes, and those purposes often do release desires that one would never know one had in the workplace.

AC: It’s really key that pleasure and work can go together. Capitalism divides people, it divides tasks in our lives, and it compartmentalizes our world. Michigan puts them all together—manual labor, mental labor, and emotional labor; work and leisure. It makes me hopeful in a way that I would never have imagined possible. Whereas Gretchen was saying she felt she’s been spoiled for the real world, I want to stress that the experience of work at Michigan actually enables me in my other workplaces, in part by raising my level of expectation.

DYV: It really is a work exchange. You’re not actually working for nothing. You’re working for the gratification of getting to work and the prestige that goes with that, but you don’t have to worry about money, food, shelter, or clothing. Every possible thing that you could need during the course of the day is provided to you either by the festival or by women on the land. That allows you to take pleasure in the work, not just in other people. You can actually take pleasure in learning how to make coffee, or whatever the task is, and not have to worry about any of your basic needs. It changes the way you see the value of your own labor: not only do you have higher expectations, but what you consider to be work is different after having worked at Michigan.

BA: At Michigan I do this thing that I consider a really intimate, loving act, which is cooking, and I do it in a group, which is unreal, because it’s something I always do alone. I always see it as a giving and receiving act that is so predicated on love. So it’s very interesting to do that work and learn from other people around that. I come from a combination of cultures where things don’t leave the kitchen table, and so to work constantly around the kitchen table is very interesting. That names the rest of my experience for the month. When I come home, I expect more from people, not just my work environment. I have also learned something valuable in that I have learned how to have fun. I’m a pretty fun person, but I’m also often not fun—because I’m a New Yorker, because I’m stressed out, because I have to go to work.

KT: I wanted to say something about the whole issue of butch/femme on the land in terms of work. I think it’s a false dichotomy, because I have certainly walked
into the Belly Bowl and seen a woman serving coffee and felt as charged in that moment as I might have by seeing a woman dig out the firepits in the Main Kitchen. My feeling about the butch/femme thing is that it has much to do with first-time festivalgoers seeing that everyone is walking around without their tops on; they see breasts all over the place and it immediately translates into an erotic charge.

SW: I just want to clarify something—the crews don’t pan out such that people who work in the Belly Bowl or who cook are the femmes and the people who do physical labor are butches. The crews are all mixed. Also, I can’t support the terms butch and femme as the only ones used to account for all the varieties and calibrations of dyke masculinities and femininities.

BA: Right, but at first there are assumptions that you make, and then you’re hit with pretty obvious examples that go against that.

GP: There are the two fashion statements—there is wearing boots and just an apron, and then there are boots and just a tool belt! It’s two different things, but eventually you realize . . . it’s just the boots!

Community

DYV: There’s the presumed community—that is, we’re all living in this one place, and we live like a small village, and everything is communal. Every single aspect of your life, with the exception of sleeping, and sometimes including sleeping, is communal. But that presumption of community also brings with it an anticommmunity feeling. You spend a lot of time at home wanting to get to Michigan so you can get to be with everybody all the time, and you spend a lot of time at Michigan trying to find time to be by yourself. Trying not to be part of the community!

I have always loved the lesbian ghetto; I believe in the ghetto. I think lesbians should live in ghettos as much as possible, particularly lesbians who don’t have money. So, I like the ghetto of Michigan. I like having a neighborhood that I go to almost every year. But I think there can be a false sense of community that then becomes an invasion of privacy.

GP: At Michigan you’re always learning how to live better. Every year you see what you need to work on, like, damn, I don’t know how to shop for myself. Same thing about having alone time, same thing about being overwhelmed by being around people. An enormous part of it is gaining the wisdom to know that you gotta have your alone time.
KT: The work that I do as a folklorist is so much concerned with definitions of community and tradition and what it means historically for different kinds of people to form communities along traditional ethnic, tribal, and familial lines. Michigan becomes a study of the meaning of community and the definition of community that is in formation and in flux at all times. And yet I wouldn’t want not to recognize that Michigan has a very definite place in the history of lesbian community and the larger notion of what that means simply because there was—generally speaking—no such thing seventy-five years ago. Every lesbian couple was an isolated couple. Coming together in a bar scene was one very small way to approach the idea of what a community might be. And that was so desperately about having any kind of identity, any chance to have sex with another woman. If you just look at the twenty-five-year history of this festival within the context of lesbian history in the West, it’s a remarkable community that, falsely or not, still does have a tremendous impact on the history of being lesbian and gay and queer in the world because of the very fact of its existence. And as a space where sexuality and eroticism can be freely played out and determined as a community goal, as part of what we come there to do and what is assumed as part of our tradition.

Hets get to act it out every day on the streets in every place they live. They act out the rituals of their erotic desire for each other. We’re just starting to be able to do that in the world at large. But Michigan is a remarkable place in the sense that initially it was a chickfest. It still is, and it always has been, deeply about being able to realize desires as lesbians through some notion of community.

BA: What is this community predicated on? That there is an idea of a greater good, or a greater cause, and also a mystery about that. Who really wants to know what goes on in the office? On some level you don’t want to know, because it’s a burden. Instead you get to know, “I’m making kale.” But there’s still this “it,” this faith in something that, whatever it may be, we’re doing. As workers, the only thing we know for sure is that there is a verb. We just know that there’s something that needs to be done. And we have to do it. It’s a community completely predicated on acting for a month. It could be performing, or witnessing that performance, or participating in a workshop, or doing your task.

That’s part of why there’s sexual experimentation. I’ve never gone there as a single person, so I don’t know what that would be like, but I’ve gone there coupled in monogamous and nonmonogamous relationships. It has been very lonely in a monogamous relationship, because I felt that I didn’t get viewed as a sexual being. It was difficult because there was all this energy and I wanted to participate in that.
There's some action that it's understood you will participate in. To be actively sexy and to recognize the sexy, which I think we hold up as the divine, particularly there. There is something about worshipping and faith and stepping out on faith. We take risks that we wouldn't otherwise take, and we have conversations we wouldn't otherwise have, and we do work that we wouldn't otherwise do, because somebody's going to be there, somebody's literally in the moshpit. And so we're fulfilled in a way that we are not necessarily fulfilled in the rest of our lives.

AC: My sense of the monogamy/sex thing is a little different. I've gone with a girlfriend every year and I haven't had sex with other people, but I've had incredible emotional intensity with many other people, and that is part of the specialness of Michigan to me. Going there over time, I'm especially aware of it as a community that exists just not in space but in time, grounded in relationships that I have been able to build with people over the years.

When I first was there, I had both skepticism and ignorance about lesbian feminist separatist space. I came with a lot of baggage from my academic feminist theory background. But I have been really humbled by learning how lesbian feminist separatism is such a dramatic underdescription of what goes on at Michigan.

Just as work has changed its meaning for me there, so too has love. Even being in a couple changes its meaning in a place where you have so much community. It makes me very aware of how the romantic couple is significant in a world that does not leave a lot of time for building bonds and friendships with other people. Ideally, I would like an emotional plenitude in which my girlfriend wouldn't be the only person I would go to for intimacy.

But community is also built from one-on-one relationships. That is one of the scary things at Michigan. One of the mistakes you can make is to believe that we all love each other, and we are all sisters, and that suddenly you are going to be taken up into the fold of this beautiful collectivity. There are moments that can feel like that, but they are often the product of building particular relationships with people that accumulate over time. There's no magic or immediate "we are all one" feeling.

KT: Even though sexual coupling is the performed ideal, it's really in great part emotional coupling that happens over time and in specialized situations. On crew, emotional coupling sometimes becomes sexual coupling—it's part of the "serious fun" we can have at Michigan, although it can lead to "serious trouble"! But emotional coupling is, I think, much more seriously compelling. It can last for years and is truly at the heart of what makes a crew feel like family, a community of trust and obligation within the larger festival/worker community.
SW: When I went to Michigan, I was dating a woman and was part of a couple, and—for the record—I did not have sex at Michigan! I felt really strung out after a while because my partner wasn’t there, and for various reasons I also felt inhibited from having sexual encounters. It was really discombobulating for me, because there was all this flirtatious energy and I was getting weird vibes from people. No one would tell me if they had a girlfriend or not, or if they were monogamous or not.

But I did start feeling an intimacy at Michigan. For instance, I was thinking about how we all shit together and about all these subtle smells we share from living together—all the nuances of different sensory exchanges. One night I was walking to my tent, and someone was in her tent with someone else, having an orgasm. I could figure out from how she was moaning that it was someone on my crew, and it was really weird how I could identify and know it was this person whom I had just met! But I also acknowledge that it was my first year, and I haven’t built up an accumulation of one-on-one relationships. I felt distressed at times from not having the sexual couplings that can sometimes replace the anxiety that emerges from all the intensities of living and working together at Michigan.

GP: Plus you get to let off some steam. In terms of community, I really feel that Michigan is a petri dish where we’re doing all sorts of experimenting. We’re trying to see what’s going to grow if we try something in this other way. There’s so much experimentation, because it’s viewed as a space outside of space, but people really bring all their accompanying baggage. One can learn to enjoy Michigan better the longer one goes. It’s too enormous to be gotten and understood in any concise way until you’ve really invested some years and built one-on-one relationships. I find that being around a bunch of lesbians can make me really anxious and make me really want to drink. What the hell is that about?

Because there’s so much experimentation, people will say, “I’m not going to sleep around.” Or else they’ll go, “I never sleep around at home—I’m going to sleep around!” Then, there’s lots of conflict because people are trying things out and they’re going to be clumsy and make all sorts of mistakes. That isn’t wrong, that’s how we learn.

One of the main things that is constantly being worked on there is respect. What does respect mean in a one-on-one encounter? I have learned so much about how to listen on the land. It is the place where I can really study love and where it’s fine to talk about it all the time.

KT: Structurally, the crew becomes the minipod of love. Whether you find your crew the very first year you come or whether you go through a process of elimina-
tion, if you stay long enough, eventually you do find your minipod of love. The general audience might not understand that, even if we as workers are six to seven hundred strong, the strongest identity anyone can have is with her crew.

There are certain members of my Main Kitchen crew who are so dug in. My coordinator has been there since the second year of the festival, and she’s never been on any other crew. People know her, but she doesn’t necessarily care to know anyone else, except people who come through the Kitchen. And the people who come through the Kitchen and stay are the people she really loves. The people who come and go, she could give a damn about.

Michigan creates a unique structure in which experimentation with the meaning of love can occur both in a coupled way and in a small ensemble.

Conflicts and Safe Space

DYV: I didn’t really get to experience Michigan until my first year in the Belly Bowl, because it was the first year that Michigan felt like it was mine, that it wasn’t something that someone could take away from me. Finding the crew that I could be on for twenty years and not really care allowed it to feel like home and to feel normal. The space in between the times I went to Michigan felt shorter, and [the festival] felt like it was a part of my regular life.

In terms of community and people talking about racism, for my first three years I would think, “Why do people care? They’re only here for a week—who cares if there’s racism on the land? You’re only going to be here for, like, five minutes! There’s racism in the world!” But then the same year that I was on Belly Bowl, I decided it was important enough to me that I had to count how many times someone did something offensive to me. And then I had to include other people in the process. Because you know, you can. That’s part of the complexity of the community. Processing is an integral part of being at Michigan. It’s not just a nice thing you should do. It is assumed that if something happens, you will work it out. You’re not going to leave until you work this shit out. It can feel oppressive, but in the face of having someone not do that, you would opt for it. You can’t get the normativeness of it and the self-consciousness of the community unless you come over a period of time. Every single little thing has a reason and a story and a legend and a creator. You cry a lot and you ask yourself, “Why am I crying, what am I crying about?” You’re asking other people, “Why am I crying?” because you have no idea. Is it because of the sunset or because I like the dinner?
GP: I also think that love is very anxiety-producing. There’s a total misunderstanding about love being like, “Ooh, and then this thing washed over me.” It’s actually very sadness-producing.

AC: People have the false expectation that somehow the safety of Michigan will mean that they won’t have problems. In fact, what Michigan enables is for shit to come up. For example, one of the things that happened around Camp Trans was that lesbian processing met direct action as these two progressive ways of thinking about how you make change happen.

BA: You’re involved with something that’s maturing, so you’re maturing inside of this other thing that’s maturing. That involves the process, and you can’t not show up. That’s how your shit comes up. Or you think it doesn’t, and it’s bulging out of your left ear.

KT: That’s a good definition of safe space—that maturing can happen and your shit can come up. As opposed to having a safe space that’s a barricade. We enter this space that is safe by virtue of our choosing and choosing to create it as safe. It’s not an asylum.

SW: I see the processing as an engine that facilitates the maturing process. People have brought up the idea of feminism. I would say Michigan came out of seventies white feminism, but I also feel that because of how we live together there and how material and emotional capital circulates in that space, it is a kind of postcapitalist enterprise. It’s a response to late capitalism and industrialization. I wonder how this response to industrialized capital is also linked to something like, say, postcolonial endeavors.

BA: There’s something so dismissive about saying it came out of seventies feminism, because it assumes that that’s dead, and it also assumes that “we” cannot participate in that. By virtue of who’s sitting at this table, it’s not some stale seventies feminist event (as if that were a bad thing).

KT: To start using this “seventies feminism” mentality undermines something I feel both politically and personally about my own history and the history of many women I’ve worked with over many years. I think that Michigan did grow out of seventies feminism, but it could never be captured under that label, unless you knew how many different kinds of women were struggling to put Michigan on the map as part of a larger struggle that was truly a struggle! So I don’t really want to sit at the table with the backlash against seventies feminism.
SW: For me as an academic, terms such as postindustrial or postcolonial do have meaning. They represent histories and movements grounded in intimate lived exchanges. Using these specific terms is what I do day to day, and that is what I get paid for. Throwing this jargon around is my way of giving myself to others and sharing my care, because hopefully it does have meaning and resonance not only for myself but for other people as well. It’s easy to dismiss jargon, and I try to be really careful how I use it. I really felt my experience last year was about expanding what I thought Michigan was, and also expanding what I learned when I took “Women’s Studies 101,” which often fits into a white seventies feminism model where everyone has read the same six books. But my experience at Michigan was much more expansive, even in an intellectual way.

GP: One important thing I want to point out is that Michigan is not really a capitalist venture. It has been portrayed that way in order to vilify it. But if it were really about capitalism, one of the first things they would do would be to sell alcohol, as other women's festivals have done. They would take money from Absolut and Skyy vodka in return for sponsorship. There are a million different ways the festival would run if it were only about making a profit. It’s about something less tangible than money.

DYV: I came to Michigan through the Lesbian Herstory Archives and through being a women’s history graduate student at Sarah Lawrence. I spent a year studying a group of lesbian feminists called the Furies. Part of what drew me to Michigan was the fact that I thought it would be a bunch of lesbian feminists from the 1970s and that I’d get to do the thing that I would have done had I been old enough in the 1970s. For me, the 1970s exemplifies at least the talk of women getting together across racial and class lines to change the world, and I feel that is so much part of what makes Michigan and needs to continue there.

During the transgender debate, part of what was frustrating and what pained me was that this history feels personal to me. The complexities of lesbian feminism in the 1970s are so underrated when cast as “the radical lesbians versus the lesbians who want to be part of NOW.” I think that complexity has allowed ACT UP to exist, it’s allowed direct action to exist, and I think it’s really interesting that direct action would meet processing in the way that it did [in the Son of Camp Trans action], since both things come from the same political perspective and from the same people.

That was why so many women were torn with Camp Trans—they wanted to respect the right of direct action, but they just didn’t think it was appropriate at that time or in that way. That’s what’s so hard about putting these envelope terms
on Michigan—the very thing that people criticize Michigan for is the thing that allowed that action to happen without that sixteen-year-old [Cat, a self-identified male-to-female transgender person] getting the shit kicked out of him/her.

When white people go to a black church, they want the experience of being in a black church, which is a very particular experience. While black people didn’t create the church, obviously, and there are other kinds of churches that have music or black people, you go to a black church for a specific experience. That’s why women go to Michigan. They’re looking for that all-women experience, whatever it means to them, or they’re looking for that overly sexualized experience. They have that expectation, and they’re not going to just any festival.

SW: But is lesbian feminism now the same as lesbian feminism in the seventies? It can’t be, right? It’s something different. I want to interrogate how it has changed, what it has learned over the past two generations.

GP: But isn’t that what we’re saying happens at Michigan? The context is created where there will be critique, which is not in any way an indication that it’s wrong or that the experiment was faulty in the first place. It’s just the beginning of an interrogation of what sisterhood means, an interrogation that is unique, especially compared to how guys communicate.

AC: The trans moment represents part of a bigger picture of what queer politics has meant in the late eighties and nineties. For many of us, it has shuffled how we affiliate and what our different communities are. I think there is really interesting dialogue in lesbian communities right now about a range of trans issues, and Michigan is actually one of the significant places where that dialogue is happening. I don’t know where trans inclusion fits into the spectrum. What people have been saying about the need to hang on to or defend robustly certain versions of seventies lesbian feminism also comes up specifically around clarifying what’s important to us about Michigan as women-only space. That need can coexist alongside having a real appreciation for trans people, trans issues, and trans identification on the part of workers at Michigan as well as festivalgoers. It’s important not to presume that we know already what the answer is—that there is some theory that tells us what gender is, or what we can or can’t say about the definition of “woman,” and we just apply the theory to get the answer.

BA: Direct action presumes a power structure. Direct action is a really smart thing, because it works. It’s this in-your-face thing. It’s unapologetic. It also assumes that someone on the other side of it is saying “fuck you.” That’s why you need direct action in the first place.
But when you walk into a room of people who are willing to talk to you in the first place and you say “fuck you”—what the hell are you doing? At best that is ill-informed. At worst it’s really dangerous. It also brings out the worst in people, because it produces defensiveness. Once you become defensive about the action, you think that you know everything that that person stands for, on both sides of it. And that is incorrect. Gender has been played with, fucked up the ass, and bent in every direction on “the land.”

GP: Let’s remember that the “womyn-born womyn” policy comes from the 1970s. It was instituted in 1978.

BA: I just think two totally different things happened on the land. I think there was a response to behavior. Then there was an accountability, or lack thereof, for behavior on both sides. We were doing a lot of damage control on both sides.

Then there’s the issue in and of itself, which is a different conversation. I don’t think there’s a blanket Michigan response to the transsexual inclusion issue, but there is a perceived blanket response just as there’s a perceived notion of what Michigan is. People who go to Michigan are just as complex as people who don’t go to Michigan.

Many things came to a head for me personally in this issue. There was responsibility to community. My personal energy was always used toward something for other people in addition to myself. I didn’t see any of the festival this year, because I was facilitating a group of five hundred people or I was at a meeting. And I wonder if the people who were coming on the land to do direct action anticipated that. Did you think people were going to give up all of their time for you? For us? Do you know that while you were screaming that you weren’t included, you were still being treated as “us”?

Women-only space is another issue. Here’s a group of women who are committed to exploring every facet of what it could possibly mean to be a woman in all of its glory and all of its negativity, in all of its butchness and maleness and arrogance and femmeness and high heels and lipstick and all of its androgyny, in its communism and bourgie-ness. It’s about looking at what it means to be a woman. That’s what we have to talk about when we talk about trans inclusion. And we didn’t get to have that conversation at all, because we were busy dealing with bad behavior.

DYV: Self-determination is such a big part of civil rights, and the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival comes out of a need for self-determination. In a culture that is still male-dominant, patriarchal, and white, the idea of women determining
women is radical. And I’m using the term women to mean women who were born as women and raised as girls. I focus more on the “raised as girls” part because to me that feels like one of the most profound experiences of how I got to be a woman. And when I said that in the community meeting, I left there feeling not only very exposed but also very unsafe in a way that I never do at Michigan.

People don’t just have gender dysphoria because they feel like they’re the other gender. All women, I think, go through gender dysphoria, or they wouldn’t have the tomboy complex that almost every friend I have went through at some point. They can tell you the moment they realized that having to put on a bra changed their lives dramatically. And in my culture that meant wearing a girdle at age eleven, so that my butt wouldn’t shake and my tits wouldn’t move, so that men wouldn’t look at me. It was my responsibility to make sure that grown men didn’t look at me at age eleven! That is a particular experience of being a woman in Mississippi culture, and I feel that kind of experience needs to be interrogated, and it does get interrogated at Michigan. Because it isn’t recognized that there is that complexity of the gender of being a woman. It’s incredibly broad, and there isn’t a wall that you hit where you can no longer be a woman and you have to become a man.

**SW:** Actually, I’ve learned an incredible amount about my own gender identity and sexuality from my friendships and personal contacts with transgender individuals, especially female-to-male transsexuals and other transmasculine-identified people. I never felt connected to anything in the butch/femme spectrum, so I was looking for something else, which I feel is somewhat akin to what some transgender individuals are also searching for. We are all contributing to a gender conversation, and this has helped me really examine my most basic premises and assumptions about masculinity and femininity, especially how it ties in to other things, like race and economics.

Because I have done a lot of my academic and curatorial work on trans-gender identities, my first impulse in this transgender debate was, “Of course, we should let trans women into Michigan!” and I felt this impatience around people who didn’t agree with me. But after attending the processing meetings, with both festies and workers—and meetings just with workers—I realized that maybe it was more important to have a deep and meaningful exploration of ideas and emotions around this, instead of trying to reach an immediate decision or persuade people to agree with my opinion. After all the anger, the bitterness, resentment, and hostility—after all that—I was finally moved by the depth of feeling people had on both sides of this dilemma, and when people did speak from that place of direct emotion—fear or longing or caring—it was extremely powerful.
DYV: Transgender women feel that it is so important to be a part of Michigan because they have this idea that there’s something that women at Michigan are getting that they’re not getting to get. Which is a very different thing than saying that MWMF [the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival] is biased and discriminatory. It’s about saying, “I want some of this stuff that you get to have there.”

MWMF is so much about women’s space that it becomes an easy target. Contestation sometimes happens right at the gates and not in some other way that’s less confrontational. Because women-only space is always up for grabs. When do women get to have their own space or define a space as theirs? Even black people get to define a space as theirs and people won’t overstep it.

KT: I’m very moved by what Dez was saying, because Michigan really has the entailments of a kind of sacred space or ritual space — whether it’s having a meal with our crew, or going to Night Stage, or having a sex party, or very consciously having a ritual together, like the Opening Night ceremony and singing “Amazon Women Rise” together.

Historically, MWMF has been a contested space, among women. One way to look at this controversy is to look at, for example, when S/M practitioners who were women wanted to make their presence known and make that practice a part of the sexuality of Michigan. It caused tremendous upheaval as late as 1994 or 1995.

By claiming Michigan as sacred space, as space apart, we as women get to decide what the rituals are that are meaningful for us. My sense is that we get to determine who can come into that ritual space and for what purposes they might be there. When the trannies first came in 1994, when they had a parade and made their presence known, but then they left the land and went back to Camp Trans, I felt that was good. I supported that. Because I felt that was a way of having a ritual moment of inclusion that might invite a conversation of some kind. But it wasn’t about invasiveness. And what we experienced this year was a kind of invasiveness called direct action, which was not about having a dialogue. Later on, a dialogue did come out of some of what went on, but I felt like our space was violated.

I had an amazing experience postfest. I was sitting by my tent and it was Monday, so all the festivities should have been gone by then. I was sitting by my tent and I see this large person coming down the trail into our area, the worker camper area, and she’s got a big floppy hat on and a dress. And I’m thinking, I haven’t seen this chick before. So, I sort of hailed her. And she said, “Oh, I’m looking for the lake.” I said, “Well, there really isn’t a lake, there’s a swamp.” So she approached me by my tent, and I recognized immediately that she was a transsexual — she had
a scar on her Adam’s apple. And we got to talking, and I told her how to get to the swamp. I told her that festies weren’t really allowed back in the workers’ area, and she glowed with a kind of reverence for the workers, and we got to chatting further and having a beer. So I thought, I’ll ask her about the trans issue and just see what she has to say. And so I said, “Well, it’s been high controversy this year with the tranny issue. . . .” And she goes, “It’s disgusting. They’re just disgusting. They should have not come on this land, they have no idea what a struggle it is to come to a change in your life that is so momentous and to find a place like this that is so much a woman’s place. They don’t know what it means to be a woman and the struggle it takes to really be a woman.” And she had been coming for five years. She was the kind of gender-transformed transsexual who I’m sure has been on our land for twenty-five years who never said a word because what she really wanted to do was be with women as a woman.

GP: By the same token, what does it mean in regard to this trans woman chopping vegetables alongside somebody? What if it just wouldn’t be the same festival for another woman if she weren’t there? Those versions of personal relationships take so much more time than the alleged transgression of coming on the land and showing one dick that you apparently had constructed and paid a lot of money for and another that you were born with!

I feel that definitely the bad behavior on the part of the direct action tranny situation brought out terrible behavior on the part of some dykes. Potentially, those dykes who are making those “testosterone free zone” signs are the same ones who are going to kick your ass at the bar! There are mean lesbians at the festival whom you don’t want to tangle with, but we still have to include them as part of the dialogue.

I listened to Riki Anne [Wilchins’s] talk about dreaming of coming to Michigan, about how everybody was going to Michigan and Riki couldn’t go to Michigan and all she ever wanted to do was to go to Michigan and live this ideal of safe space. [Wilchins helped organize Son of Camp Trans.] It reminded me of a dream of living happily ever after. As though everything were perfect, which is not realistic and is not even the beginning of the story about Michigan. When you arrive on women’s land, that’s actually when the shit hits the fan. You cry your eyes out the first number of years or forever. But that’s just the process.

**Publicity**

AC: I hope that people reading this will get some sense of the preciousness of Michigan as a place that you have to experience in a bodily, sensory way, and over
the years, over time. We are trying to make that vivid by bringing together a group that does have that experience, but I hope readers are aware that there are limits to what we can do.

GP: Because they can’t judge a festival by our coverage!

AC: My thinking about publicizing Michigan comes out of the privilege of conversations with Lisa Vogel. I’ve learned that while we might enthusiastically think, “Yeah, everybody needs to know about this,” there are very interesting and important reasons, grounded in a lot of history, why Michigan has been a protected space in relation to media and other forms of publicity. Michigan is not a place that has sought to represent itself to the world.

KT: Lisa has a very strong feeling that the freedom of expression that is Michigan — where women determine their limits or their boundless abilities, whatever those may be — should be protected. It’s another way that Michigan really does invert the other world by saying, “No, publicity is not important here.” The Absolut vodka logo will never fly over Michigan’s land. Bringing that kind of attention, that kind of money, that way of doing things is not important, because our privacy is in large part the key to our freedom there.

And I think that people do misconstrue that, of course they do. That’s why you sit down with them and say, “Well, this is my experience, you need to come.” And then you bring a friend in and they start to come, and all of a sudden they get it. But they can’t get it without experiencing it, really. I think our situation in doing this roundtable is a very privileged one, and we need to pay close attention to what we are giving to the readers of GLQ. It’s invaluable information that they’re getting from a space and a politic that has been fairly enclosed by choice, and for good reason.

GP: I did do publicity for Michigan, by writing an article that was in the Village Voice and in the book Rock She Wrote. There are a lot of articles that talk about how much acid we eat at the festival, because I wrote that I ate a lot of acid when I first went there. You see that you just say this little bit in terms of publicity, and that becomes the giant story of the whole thing. It’s incredibly inaccurate, but that is how information gets given out if it’s not done in a one-on-one way, which, we learn at Michigan, is the real way to communicate.

DYV: The idea of respecting experience as a tool for communication is integral to Michigan’s mission and affects how the festival handles publicity. There’s a consciousness about how a story ought to get told and about respecting a woman’s
ability to tell a story and respecting that, even if that story is different than five other people's stories, it's valid. So even if we all give a different experience of Michigan and that gets somebody else to come and they come with different expectations, depending on who they talk to, that's okay. Not that we'll necessarily fulfill all their expectations, but all those experiences are real because Michigan is so complex. There isn't any one way you could describe it, because you have a thousand interactions in one day and that's why it feels like a week. It should be the women who go, the women who work, the women who pay—it's incumbent upon them to get women to come. And it works! Because women have come for twenty-five years.

Notes
1. See Pat Califia's call to boycott the festival for its admission policy in Girlfriends, August 1999, 46.