

“Welcome Home Sisters!”: A Personal and Political Education

For Rebecca in Barter on the occasion of our 1st Michigan Womyn's Music festival. by Caroline (and Monika) from Montreal, Canada August 16, 1987

*Before Michigan
I'd never seen
a womon with one breast
I'd never seen
womyn walking nude
hand in hand
very simple
but I'd never seen it
Before Michigan
I'd never seen
thirty Amazon mud wrestlers
or womyn
whose breasts
held worlds of their own
womyn
creating crafts
for womyn only:
purple velvet
silver labyris
clitoris in pearl
I'd never
walked alone in the woods
unafraid
of rape
never
before Michigan
I'd never seen
so many stomachs, thighs,
breasts, buttocks,
so many colored
pubic hairs
made public
with ease*

*Lesbians,
I'd never seen
so many Lesbians
I'd never had the chance
to love so openly
to stand pressed to my lover
outside our tent
orgasms still coursing through us
flute or bongos in the background
womyn stirring, womyn moving,
womyn loving
like us
near by
Before Michigan
I knew diversity
could be respected
amongst womyn
but I'd never
lived the reality
like this.....
womyn of colors, white womyn,
sober support, over forties,
DART, young womyn
interpretation by voice or hand
I'd never seen
children growing
with the education I missed
Before Michigan
I'd never seen
a womon with one breast.*

¹ From Voices From The Land <http://www.michfestmatters.com/>

The above poem was written for a breast cancer survivor as trade for a velvet treasure bag at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival barter market. Every August since 1976 women from around the country and around the world have gathered in rural Michigan for the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (Michigan). More than ten years ago, when I first learned of this annual gathering in celebration of lesbian feminist culture, I knew that I wanted to attend Michigan. As a lesbian feminist who loves music and nature, six days deep in the woods surrounded by other lesbian feminists and some of my favorite musicians, comics, and spoken-word artists seemed like a little piece of heaven on earth. For ten long years I heard the distant drumbeat of my tribe but there was always some reason I couldn't go; I didn't have the money, I didn't have the vacation time from work, I didn't have anyone to go with, I was at residency for graduate school, I was afraid of the reaction from my activist communities due to controversy over trans inclusion at the festival . When I learned that 2015 would be the 40th and last Michigan I knew I had to make the pilgrimage despite my fears. I couldn't let this, my last opportunity, slip away.

I had no idea at the time that Michigan would prove to be more than a camping trip, more than a simple music festival, more than a series of workshops, but a full-fledged educational experience. It may be unusual to think of a music festival as a school, but in his essay "Movements making knowledge: a new wave of inspiration for sociology?" Laurence Cox (2014) writes, "Much of the knowledge now treated as unproblematically academic, including some of its highest status products, has roots in the efforts of popular movements to contest the status quo" (p. 957). I was already steeped in feminist theory and knew quite a bit about the lesbian feminist culture responsible for shepherding in birth and abortion rights, the equal rights amendment, rape-crisis centers, and women's shelters, basically the culture celebrated at Michigan. With that background, I certainly didn't expect to leave Michigan with a whole new perspective on both my role as a feminist activist and my personal identity as a "fat butch dyke". I didn't expect Michigan to be as much or even more about education than it was about entertainment. Even today I struggle to articulate both my actual experiences of the festival and the depth of meaning this six-day excursion in the Michigan woods has had on my life.

¹ I will not devote space in this essay for this twenty-year controversy. For more information, see:

- Official festival statements: <http://michfest.com/community-statements/>
- Myths and truths about Michigan: <http://www.michfestmatters.com/myths-and-truths-about-the-michigan-womyns-music-festival/>
- History of camp trans: <http://eminism.org/michigan/faq-protest.html>

When I think of education in the most technical sense there are three words that come to mind—curriculum, pedagogy, and community. Michigan was not only a space for women to live, even briefly, outside the confines of capitalist heteropatriarchy, but it also held space for lesbian feminists to share their culture and language. The curriculum at Michigan was vast and varied; from singing circles to writing workshops, from anti-racism dialogues to herbal medicine demonstrations there was something for everyone. Michigan was a model of “how kindness might produce pedagogical relationships that sow the seeds of possibility for the transformation of ... lives” and was an answer to the questions “how might we imagine a feminism that uses kindness as a pedagogical strategy? And what might feminist kindness in the classroom do to the lives, bodies, experiences, and identities that inhabit these spaces” (Magnet, Mason, & Trevenen, 2014, p. 1). Finally, a safe and supportive community was at the heart of everything that transpired on the festival land.

After two days of driving the 900 miles across Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan my partner Dena and I arrived at “The Line”. Thousands of women were lined up for over 8 miles in RV’s, SUVs, trucks, minivans, and compact cars. Some with nothing but a backpack, some with automobiles overflowing with gear. As I lowered my window I began to hear the refrain, “Welcome home sisters!” What started out feeling kitschy, soon gathered meaning and started to feel real. On the line women of all shapes and sizes and colors, all smiling and waving, greeted us as if we were family. In her entry in *Voices From The Land* (2016) festival attendee Artemis writes, “My partner walks The Line with the girls and explains, quite plainly, that everyone they see here is female. That one with the beard? Female. That one with the tie and coat? Female. Those two women over there, with the kid just learning to walk? That is a family. Us, here together? We are a family too.” This was the first lesson I began to learn even before entering the gates, I was part of a global tribe of women, of feminists and lesbians. I had a culture and a community, and here I had found a whole new family. For the next 8 hours, as afternoon turned to dusk and dusk turned to evening, we started to get to know this new family while we slowly made our way to the festival gate.

My partner and I finally entered the gates at 9pm as darkness was beginning to settle over the festival grounds. Some of the festival crew suggested we might want to park and spend the night in our car, but having just spent two days in my compact Mazda3 the last thing I wanted to do was spend another minute in its too small confines. Little did we know that we still had hours to get through orientation, pick out our work shifts, load and unload our gear, and

figure out how to set up camp in the pitch-black darkness of the rural Michigan woods. You must understand that the land where this festival was built is almost entirely untouched forest; there were no designated campsites pre-cleared of forest debris. Somehow we picked a spot and hung our meager lantern on a branch. I briefly regretted getting the two-room Taj Mahal of tents as we struggled to untangle impossibly long tent poles and what seemed like miles of incomprehensible nylon in almost complete darkness. It was after 1:00 AM when we finally—gratefully, despite the cold temperatures and a leaking air mattress—settled into our first night of much needed rest.

The first morning on the land brought a wave of lessons. Professor Bonnie Morris (1999) describes some of the sensations felt by first-time attendees in her book *Eden Built By Eves* where she writes, “Forget structure and hierarchy for a moment, the first shock for festival virgins is the plethora of breasts. This is women-only space, folks— which means the freedom and safety to go without a shirt in the soft summer air. It means for many a woman the first day of being at home in her body and the first sensation of sun on her bare back since babyhood. There is no need to cover up here; there is no need for shame” (p. 67). I was immediately in awe of women of every age, size, color, and gender presentation all seeming comfortable and safe in their own skin, clothed and unclothed. It didn’t matter if a topless woman was 350 or 120 pounds, we still looked each other in the eye as we passed, no sneers, no cat calls, no judgments. Even though I felt the heavy burden of a lifetime of female socialization and body shame lifting slightly the hardest part of the second day for me was the showers!

Michigan didn’t have any indoor facilities. There were several shower areas like the one pictured below. They were simply ten shower heads, five on each side of a wooden structure with one curtained shower on the back, referred to as the “shy shower.”



Figure 1:<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/07/fe/48/07fe488822751a8e4274937a886cb889.jpg>

After such a long day on the line and setting up camp the night before, I was in dire need of cleansing. As I stood in line waiting for a free spot I got more and more nervous about being so vulnerably naked in front of so many other women. When the first shower opened, I froze. I couldn't do it. My partner took that first open shower. When the next opened I still couldn't do it. I waited for the shy shower. As I cleaned off the dust and sweat of the day before I vowed to myself that I was going to somehow overcome this paralyzing fear built on body shame. This became my personal goal for the week; I would walk the land naked at least once before I had to leave it behind.

For the week 6,609 women came together as a family, cooking together, cleaning together, loving together, playing together, showering together, and even fighting together. In short, collectively doing all the things needed to make any home or community a functional place. Safety was the number one priority and collective actions of this makeshift family ensured everyone's basic needs were met. A kitchen staffed with a mix of festival worker crew and many attendee volunteers cooked hot vegetarian meals three times a day over wood fired cooking pits kept burning overnight for the entire festival. DART, the Disabled Access Resource Team, provided a special centralized camping area, shuttle services around the festival grounds for people with mobility issues, wheelchair accessible showers, and ASL interpreter services at all shows and requested workshops. The Oasis was a place to find any kind of emotional or addiction support. Basic health services for all attendees could be found at The Womb. Outside of the official festival services, women helped each other whenever a need was seen.

I was thrilled to live in a land where "feminist" was not a dirty word, where capitalist heteropatriarchy was not the predominant belief system, and where it was safe to be anyone I wanted to be. A friend of mine recently wrote a Facebook post about some of her Michigan experiences and the loss we share at the closing of the festival:

Michfest, above all else, was a place for womyn to heal from patriarchal trauma and abuse. Approximately 80% of womyn at Michfest were lesbians or bisexual, and many were also differently abled, womyn of color, sexual abuse survivors, butch and gender non-conforming womyn who experienced a lot of discrimination, Deaf or hard-of-hearing, economically disadvantaged, closeted for safety, and/or in recovery. Michfest was our one safe place, maybe the only 650 acres on Earth where womyn were free. That is why all the vitriol against Michfest is such a punch to the gut. Trans activists paint us as a "hate group," when in fact we are a hateD group, trying to heal. Michfest was, for so many womyn who had survived girlhood, a place of healing from spending our whole lives dealing (to

various degrees) with misogyny, abuse, and oppression in patriarchy. There were multiple, daily Sacred Singing Circles, recovery meetings, healing workshops, sweat lodges for abuse survivors, and so on and so forth...and these healing circles and rituals were frickin' intense. I will never forget the intensity of both the joy, of womyn and girls dancing naked and giddy and free in a circle of sisters, and the pain, the unbelievable pain that surged out of womyn in the form of screams, moans, gagging, tears, gasps, fists pounding the dirt. That literal, physical purging of pain and oppression was often what it took in order to begin healing. It may have been the only place in the world where that purging and healing was possible at that level and with that level of safety.... We had *no time or energy* to put towards oppressing trans people, as trans activists claim, because all our time and energy was required for healing ourselves and each other. AND WE WERE NOT DONE (Gabrielle, 2016).

Never, before Michigan, would I have thought it possible for a big butch woman to parade in a tutu. Never, before Michigan, would I have thought it possible for 30 nude women of color to march in the center of town chanting, "Naked and safe is beautiful." Never, before Michigan, have I seen girlhood in all its diversity so genuinely celebrated. From archery and hatchet throwing to hula hoops and stilt-walking, dressed in bowties or fairy wings, at Michigan girlhood mattered.

Throughout the week I had a lot to learn from this community of women. Before I could keep my personal promise of walking the land naked I had to learn some hard lessons about me as a fat woman, as a feminist, and as a butch dyke, as well as lessons about the safety and compassion of a community built on a foundation of radical feminist idealism. Fortunately, the loving community of Michigan was just the first aspect of its educational potential. In retrospect I see that there was also an astounding curriculum that was delivered through a powerful pedagogical model that encouraged active participation through its emphasis on kindness, compassion, and safety.

An unspoken but clear commitment to kindness toward each other and the planet at the heart of Michigan made it a place where curiosity and accountable relationships were formed even where there were strongly divergent positions. In 1991 a transwoman, Nancy Buckholder, was asked to leave the festival which sparked a 24-year controversy over trans inclusion and the festival intention as a place of celebration of women and girls who were born female. Despite the festival organizers' repeated denunciation of the 1991 incident as a mistake, as well as the simple fact that transwomen were always present at the festival, many queer activists have targeted Michigan as well as performers and attendees with boycotts

and even extreme threats of violence (see <https://terfisaslur.com> for examples). Although I had read all about the controversy from outside the festival, I was very curious to see how the topic of trans inclusion was discussed within festival. I was surprised to see that, not only was the topic of trans inclusion discussed but, even in its very last year, several workshops in different formats were dedicated to facilitating the challenging conversations around the controversial topic. I chose to attend two Allies in Understanding workshops and one Imagining an Inclusive Festival workshop.

Early in the first workshop we discussed the practice of radical listening. Radical listening is the startlingly simple idea of listening closely to whoever is speaking instead of thinking about what you want to say next. It seems simple, but it turns out to be more difficult in practice than one would expect. After practicing radical listening and modeling communication techniques that allowed for expression of controversial and even upsetting differences of opinion, the workshop leaders asked everyone to line up along a spectrum depending on how they felt about the idea of trans inclusion in the festival. The line was then folded in half and we were partnered with our ideological opposite in the spectrum and asked to share our feelings and radically listen to the feelings of our partner. I talked about being in what I termed the “Michigan closet,” not feeling safe in my community because I planned to attend the festival and how that was such a shame because so much of the hatred was based on misinformation. The woman I shared this with reflected similar feelings and together we wondered how we could tell the story of Michigan in a way that could be heard by these people we care about but who don’t understand the intention of the festival. Obviously, I was not on an extreme end of the spectrum and the woman I was partnered with in this exercise was open to a creative dialogue. I don’t know that anyone’s views were significantly changed because of the exercise, but after the workshop one woman who had a more extreme position on the topic said that she thought the respectful conversations that she had over the two days allowed for a deeper level of understanding, if not harmony, than could ever be achieved in the flame wars of social media.

Another example of understanding across difference came from my partner Dena who is a Jewish Palestine solidarity activist. She met several Zionist women at the “Jews Choosing Justice Despite our Fears” workshop for Jewish-identified women. Although the conversation they had was difficult and uncomfortable, she later told me that the experience allowed women from opposite ends of a heated spectrum to hear each other in ways that had not previously been possible. Later in the day we sat with one woman from the workshop who told her “I can hear it

coming from you here in this space.” Unlike anywhere else in my experience, within Michigan people from opposite ends of extremely emotionally charged issues came together to talk through and learn from each other with respect. The feminist ethos of radical listening, unconditional love, and deep mutual respect built into the Michigan foundations and maintained even when we vehemently disagreed, created a space where discussion could occur between different modes of knowing, ultimately creating new knowledge and better understanding.

In a recent Feminist Teacher article, "Feminism, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Kindness" Shoshana Magnet, Corinne Lysandra Mason, and Kathryn Trevenen (2014), describe "curiosity [as] an emotion necessary to learning and discovery, one that thrives more easily in an environment where students feel safe to try out different ideas and to dialogue with one another. In this way, a pedagogical commitment to kindness also helps to foster curiosity, an essential feature of education" (p. 8). They go on to describe a pedagogical method they call "thinking with" where "kindness is understood as a pedagogical strategy to rearrange our engagements with texts and each other, so that 'thinking with' rather than 'speaking to' or 'arguing with' is central to the classroom objectives" (p. 11). In retrospect, I can see that the pedagogy of Michigan was exactly what these teachers were experimenting with in their classrooms, a feminist pedagogy of kindness. At the time of the Allies in Understanding workshop I thought it was crazy and perhaps even a little bit dangerous to “fold the line” and open discussion between the most ideologically opposite participants in the workshop, but now I see that the underlying pedagogy of kindness supported that dialogue in a way where curiosity and the possibility of deeper understanding resulted in conversations that were more geared toward thinking with rather than speaking to or arguing with each other.

The Michigan curriculum incorporated countless subjects that are not available in traditional mainstream educational settings, or even in most social or activist spaces. Some of the topics covered included radical acceptance, feminist history, lesbian culture, and sexual and gender identity. As much as Michigan was a place for affirmative learning, it was also a place for unlearning racism, classism, ageism, ableism, and body shame. This is a radical learning. In her dissertation, *Reconstructing Gender, Personal Narrative, and Performance At The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival* (2011) Lisa Higgins describes Michigan as a place “where women strive to revise regressive models of community and unlearn the negative ‘-isms’ that permeate the larger patriarchal culture. ... At Festival, this large gathering of women creates intersections from a range of races, classes, communities, and backgrounds where even this feminist institution is questioned,

targeted, and criticized by its own participants" (p. 36). In academia we learn about joining the academic conversation which sometimes means questioning the foundations and separations of disciplines. Similarly, Michigan provided a safe place to not only celebrate lesbian feminist culture, but to seriously question, debate, and expand the beliefs at the heart of that culture. Michigan could serve as a model for education that asks important questions like: What are valid ways of knowing? Whose knowledge is valuable? Whose voices are being left out? How do we communicate across difference?

In their essay, "The Woman-Identified Woman," Radicalesbians (1970) wrote:

To the extent that she cannot expel the heavy socialization that goes with being female, she can never truly find peace with herself. ... Those of us who work that through find ourselves on the other side of a tortuous journey through a night that may have been decades long. The perspective gained from that journey, the liberation of self, the inner peace, the real love of self and of all women, is something to be shared with all women - because we are all women. (p. 1)

The radical feminist values at the core of Michigan made it a place where women could, even briefly, expel the heavy socialization that goes with being female to do the work, individually and collectively, of getting through to the other side of this tortuous journey. The legacy of Michigan is the perspective, liberation, inner peace, and love gained by all of us who have lived and loved and learned on that sacred land and in that truly feminist educational tradition. Michigan will be remembered as a community where the lives and culture of women, regardless of race, ability, size, gender expression, age, religion, or sexual orientation were validated and celebrated. Michigan was a model for education that incorporated a curriculum built according to the needs and desires of all who came through the gates rather than the interests of capitalist heteropatriarchy. Michigan was a place where a pedagogy of kindness made possible true curiosity and radical understanding even where disagreements seemed insurmountable.

With this I am brought full circle to the poem included as a preamble to this essay "Before Michigan / I knew diversity / could be respected / amongst womyn / but I'd never / lived the reality / like this... / I'd never seen / children growing / with the education I missed." I am profoundly grateful to have experienced a taste of the education, community, curriculum, and pedagogy found at Michigan. Though I regret all the years I missed, I hope to share the fundamental lessons of radical acceptance and feminist empowerment far beyond

the gates of Michigan and into the wider world where those lessons are so tragically needed.

As women filed out of closing ceremonies on the final night of the final Michigan I still hadn't kept my promise to myself. I had managed to take a few showers outside of the "shy shower" under the cover of darkness, never looking up, and with my towel close at hand for a quick cover-up for the return to the tent. I had one last chance. Had I learned any of the lessons of Michigan? Had I let go of any of the emotional baggage from a lifetime of oppression and female socialization? Had I learned to trust? It was time to find out!

Elizabeth Ritzman's *Voices From The Land* entry echoes my own sentiments about that last shower and living in the safety and shelter of womyn's land, she writes, "I remember finding the courage to go shower in the moonlight, and how I never wanted to leave. That safe feeling sheltered by the trees, pebbles beneath my feet, the giggling girls in the trees, that moon, womyns bodies of all sorts wet and glistening, murmuring to each other in the night. This is what it must be like to live in a world created and defined by women. The night is an intimate friend, no longer a threat to be managed." I stepped out from under the water and walked, cleaner and lighter, for the first time on that sacred land wearing nothing but moonlight. This final lesson I learned at Michigan was both the most challenging and the most personally and politically rewarding. Body shame is ubiquitous in our culture and has played a particularly destructive role in my life as a fat butch dyke. It took a whole week, the cover of darkness, and the courage, compassion, and radical acceptance of over 6,600 women in sacred community to loosen the bonds of body shame in myself. The bonds are still there today, but for a brief moment, I was able to see what the world might be like without them, and it was phenomenal!

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