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Trans women and Michfest: An ethnophenomenology of attendees’ experiences

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ABSTRACT
The rise of queer and transgender studies has greatly contributed to feminist and lesbian understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality and also has resulted in rifts, tensions, and border wars. One such tension is around the inclusion of trans women in women-only space, such as the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (Michfest). In this ethnophenomenological study, we interviewed and surveyed 43 cisgender women who attended Michfest in 2013. Participants had a variety of perspectives on trans inclusion and on the dialogue surrounding it, and these paralleled intersections, frictions, and tensions between feminism, queer theory, and transgender studies.

KEYWORDS
Feminism; transgender; cisgender; lesbian separatism; queer theory; Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival

On a Saturday night in August 2013, our research team stood in a field surrounded by thousands of women and watched a stream of lanterns rise into the sky. Some faint spots of light quietly blinked out while others hovered low over our heads. There was a sense of exhausted calm in the crowd, which was gathered for the last night of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (Michfest). The week had included workshops, performances, and work shifts, and our team had conducted a number of interviews. As we reflected on these, we were overwhelmed by the complexity of representing participants’ perspectives on trans inclusion, but also had a sense of its importance. This study begins to articulate this complexity. Overall, we hope our findings contribute to the conversation about intersections between trans and lesbian identities, communities, and movements to promote synergy and growth moving forward.

Intersections and tensions in feminist, transgender, and queer theory

In the past several decades, the rise of queer and transgender studies has greatly contributed to feminist and lesbian understandings of the nuances of sex, gender, and
sexuality, but also has resulted in rifts, tensions, and border wars within and between these fields. Of central importance in this discourse is how the needs and interests of trans communities, including trans lesbians, are addressed. Despite the potential to further trans feminism and otherwise promote solidarity, dominant lesbian and feminist voices often marginalize trans communities within these conversations. In order to set the stage for our findings, we discuss tensions between feminism and queer theory, as strands of these larger debates are interwoven throughout participant narratives on trans inclusion.

Second-wave feminism is credited with developing social and political theory to contest gender-based structures of oppression that were previously viewed as part of the private realm. By and large, it foregrounded analyses of gender over sexuality, as reflected in divisions between the lesbian feminist and lesbian and gay liberation movements in the 1970s (McLaughlin, Casey, & Richardson, 2006). With the rise of postmodern and queer theories in the 1990s, which foregrounded analyses of sexuality, feminist and queer theories began to be associated with different values and analytical frameworks. Feminism has been linked with an emphasis on the primacy of gender, concern with material and structural analysis, and a focus on women’s bodies, whereas queer theory has been linked with an emphasis on sexuality independent of gender, a concern with cultural analysis, and the exploration of fluidity, deconstruction, and ambiguity (McLaughlin et al., 2006). Over time, these differences escalated into a dispute between the theories, with many activists and scholars aligning themselves with one side or the other. Many feminists argue that queer theory fails to acknowledge its intellectual debt to feminism, encroaches on space for lesbian and feminist approaches to gender and sexuality, is reductionist in its representation of feminist positions, and threatens collective political action through its emphasis on deconstruction and fluidity (McLaughlin et al., 2006). On the other hand, many queer theorists argue that feminism fails to disrupt and denaturalize the sex/gender binary, does not adequately complicate the meanings of sex, gender, and embodiment, and fails to attend to the intersections between gender and other aspects of identity (e.g., sexuality, race, and class; Elliot, 2010; McLaughlin et al., 2006; Richardson, 2006).

However, others argue that the dispute between feminism and queer theory has been exaggerated to the point that it is “inappropriate and unhealthy” (McLaughlin et al., 2006, p. 3) and has taken on a “weighty, symbolic significance” that is really about “disciplinary turf in the study of sexuality and gender” (Richardson, 2006, pp. 19, 25). McLaughlin and colleagues argue that viewing feminism and queer theory in opposition distorts the range of feminist, queer, and queer feminist work and precludes discussion about how they might enhance one another. By focusing on the relationship between feminism and queer theory, which is a “complex dynamic of oppositions, intersections, and contestations” (Richardson, 2006, p. 21), these authors hope to advance new ways of thinking about gender and sexuality that build on the contributions of both feminism and queer theory (McLaughlin et al., 2006).
Transfeminism has also emerged as an important movement that addresses mainstream feminism’s failure to address trans issues (Koyama, 2003; Green, 2008), and framing feminism and queer theory in opposition invisibilizes transfeminism. This study contributes to understanding the intersections between trans and lesbian identities, communities, and movements by examining dialogue around trans issues and inclusion among attendees at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival.

**Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (Michfest)**

**Overview**

Michfest was established in 1976, and for 40 years provided an annual space where 3,000 to 5,000 “womyn-born, womyn-identified” women came together in Oceania County, Michigan. The festival featured women’s music concerts, workshops, camping, and was part of a broader culture of women’s music festivals (Morris, 1999). The event lasted for one week, and a ticket included camping, three meals a day, and workshops and concerts. Festival attendees were asked to complete several work shifts, which helped support the infrastructure of the festival (e.g., childcare, trash and recycling, cooking, security, and transportation). Some women arrived early to work “crew,” which established the physical structures of the festival and coordinated the major logistical requirements of festival week. Each year, these physical structures were dismantled and stored in order to allow the land to return to its natural state.

**History and culture**

Michfest has been characterized as a form of lesbian separatism because the space was not open to men and many of the women who attended identified as lesbian or queer. Historically, the festival had a clear relationship with lesbian separatism. During the time of the festival’s founding in the mid-1970s, many lesbian feminists were frustrated by the lack of activist groups that were responsive to their multiple marginalizations. Black lesbian feminists founded the Combahee River Collective to address interlocking oppressions, and lesbians formed the Lavender Menace to address homophobia in the National Organization for Women (Kendall, 2013). The idea of a “Lesbian Nation” focused on lesbian feminist culture and values was popular, and lesbianism was recast as a political identity that rejected patriarchal values and strategically employed separatism (Kendall, 2013). In this climate, Lisa Vogel, her sister, and some friends formed a collective of women who founded Michfest in 1976. In an interview, Lisa Vogel stated that the festival founders came from a political place of “collectivity and cooperative effort,” including socialist, lesbian feminist, and food co-op values (Kendall, 2013, pp. 25–26). Although Michfest was defined as a women’s festival (as reflected in its name) and was open to bisexual and straight women, many considered it
It is more accurate to describe Michfest as a lesbian cultural space, as reflected in its use of the term “womyn” (Kendall, 2013). Over the festival’s history, some women worked to address other marginalized identities within the festival. For example, although women of color were always underrepresented at Michfest, they were much more so in its early years. Women of color organized and pushed for the creation of a Womyn of Color Tent to provide them with a safe space inside of the festival. Similar struggles took place around women with disabilities, women with children, and other groups. One of most controversial issues around identity and Michfest involved the inclusion of transgender women.

**Position on transgender women**

The festival’s official position was that it was intended for womyn-born, womyn-identified women (WBW). In May 2014, festival founder Lisa Vogel wrote:

> We have said that this space, for this week, is intended to be for womyn who were born female, raised as girls and who continue to identify as womyn. This is an intention for the spirit of our gathering… It is not a policy, or a ban on anyone… We do not and will not question anyone’s gender. Rather, we trust the greater queer community to respect this intention, leaving the onus on each individual to choose whether or how to respect it.

As this statement illustrates, Vogel conceptualized her stance as an “intention” rather than a “policy” or “ban.” Although this distinction is unclear, Vogel noted there was no official process for verifying whether attendees were cisgender or for asking transgender persons to leave. However, others believed this distinction was meaningless, and that the culture of Michfest was at best conflicted and at worst hostile toward trans women (Serano, 2013).

The issue of trans inclusion had been a topic of debate within and outside of the Michfest community for decades. In 1991, a trans woman named Nancy Burkholder was asked to leave the festival after other attendees learned she was transgender. This incident precipitated an increase in trans activism around the festival, and in 1994 Camp Trans was established down the road from Michfest as a protest to the WBW policy (Kendall, 2013). In 1999, tensions ran high when a trans woman was seen showering at the festival, with many women upset about seeing a penis on “the land” (Kendall, 2013). Later writing about this incident described the woman as “sneaking into the Festival from Camp Trans” (Kendall, 2013, p. 43); thus, although some trans women and trans men did choose to attend the festival, they were largely viewed as interlopers.

The debate within and outside of Michfest about the inclusion of trans women continued in recent years. In 2011, a group of activists started a Trans Women Belong Here (TWBH) campaign at the festival, which included hosting a number of workshops on trans inclusion and wearing shirts with the TWBH message. This was also the last year that Camp Trans gathered. In 2012, WBW-intention
supporters wore red shirts, armbands, and other apparel to visually demonstrate their position on trans inclusion at the festival (Kendall, 2013). In the spring of 2013, Red Durkin, a trans activist from Brooklyn, NY, started a petition on Change.org calling on performers to boycott the festival until it included trans women (Durkin, 2013). Several performers withdrew from the festival that year, and the Indigo Girls, a popular band with a history of performing at Michfest, announced it would be their last year playing the festival until Michfest’s position changed (Indigo Girls, 2013). Thus, when these interviews were conducted at the 2013 festival, the issue of trans inclusion was on the minds of many attendees.

**Festival ending**

On April 21, 2015, Lisa Vogel announced that the 40th Anniversary Michfest in August would be its last. She wrote, “We have known in our hearts for some years that the life cycle of the Festival was coming to a time of closure. Too often in our culture, change is met only with fear, the true cycle of life is denied to avoid the grief of loss. But change is the ultimate truth of life.” Although Vogel did not directly address the conflict around trans inclusion at Michfest in this statement, she acknowledged, “There have been struggles; there is no doubt about that.” Vogel’s statement did not provide specific reasons as to why the festival was ending, but media coverage speculated that it may have been due to performer boycotts of the festival, a petition on trans inclusion circulated by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) group Equality Michigan that was endorsed by several national LGBT organizations, and declining festival attendance (Ennis, 2015; Ring, 2015). Thus, trans inclusion continued to be a central topic of dialogue about Michfest right up until the festival’s end.

**Current study**

In this ethnophenomenological study, we examine the discourses surrounding transgender inclusion at Michfest. We use qualitative methodology to describe the perspectives on and dialogues about transgender inclusion among cisgender women who attended the festival. Our goal is to contribute to understanding about the intersections of trans and lesbian communities and to provide insight about how this conversation can productively move forward.

**Method**

**Design**

An ethnophenomenological design was used to examine patterns of values, beliefs, and language about trans inclusion among Michfest attendees. Ethnography focuses on a culture-sharing group (e.g., Michfest) in order to explore the meanings they make of this culture (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology focuses on people who have shared an
experience to describe its underlying essence (Creswell, 2013). Ethnophenomenology combines these approaches, which allows us to examine experiences around trans inclusion within the culture of Michfest.

This study was part of a broader study on feminism, empowerment, and transgender inclusion at the festival. A team of four researchers immersed themselves in the culture of Michfest by attending the festival in August 2013 and used participant observation to document their experiences while participating in workshops, concerts, work shifts, and conversations. Among the researchers, one had never attended Michfest, one had attended once, one had attended three times, and one had attended eight times. The researchers also collected data through individual interviews and surveys of festival attendees. Twenty interviews were conducted by the research team onsite and another 23 women completed an online survey following the festival. Using two formats to collect data helped ensure that women who wanted to participate, but may not have had time during the festival, were able to be involved.

**Recruitment and participants**

Prior to conducting the study, we obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through DePaul University. We contacted Michfest organizers to receive approval from them to conduct the study, but did not receive a response. As multiple past studies have taken place at Michfest and individual participants could choose whether or not to participate, we decided to proceed with the study. We recruited participants by approaching festival attendees to ask if they would like to be interviewed, posting flyers around the festival, and snowballing through interviewees. Key informants—such as women who had a leadership role in the festival, who had attended the festival yearly over a long period of time, or who had conducted research about the festival—were identified and recruited through conversations with festival attendees. The average age of interviewees was 45.20 (SD = 11.51; Range 28–68). The average number of years of festival attendance was 12.15 (SD = 8.16), with a range of 1–26 years. Most (n = 14) of the women identified their sexual orientation as “lesbian” or “dyke”; three identified as queer, one identified as bisexual, one identified as a “celibate lesbian,” and one identified as an “ex-lesbian queer.” Thirteen identified as White, three identified as African American, three identified as Biracial or Multiracial, and one identified as Hispanic/Latina. Of the 18 women who reported being religious or spiritual, seven identified as purely “spiritual,” four identified as “Neo-Pagan/Wiccan,” two identified as “eclectic” and named multiple traditions (e.g., Wiccan and Buddhist), two identified as “Buddhist,” one identified as “Unitarian,” one identified as “African Methodist Episcopalian,” and one as attending a “liberal church.” Ten self-reported their political beliefs as being “very liberal,” three reported being

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“liberal,” three reported other categories (e.g., radical, anarchist, or outside the spectrum), three did not report or were unsure, and one reported being “moderate liberal.”

We also recruited for an online survey that was distributed by e-mail a week after the festival. We posted flyers in community locations around the festival with study information and a sign-up sheet where participants could provide their e-mail address. Participants who declined an interview also were offered the survey option. Ninety-three participants were contacted with the survey; of these, 23 completed it. The average age of the survey participants was 40.74 years (SD = 11.12, Range 25–61). The average number of years of festival attendance was 7.96 (SD = 8.75, Range 1–30). Twenty-one women identified as White and two identified as Biracial or Multiracial. Of the 15 that reported being religious or spiritual, five identified as “Neo-Pagan/Pagan/Wiccan,” four identified as purely “spiritual,” three identified with multiple traditions, one identified as “Christian,” one identified as “Roman Catholic,” one identified as “Lutheran,” one identified as “Jewish,” and one identified as “Atheist.” Politically, 13 reported being “very liberal,” nine reported being “liberal,” and one reported being “moderate.” Sexual orientation information was not collected from survey participants.

Procedures

Semi-structured interview

Interviews were scheduled at times and at onsite locations selected by participants, which included participants’ camping areas, community areas, and lawn areas away from major festival activities. Interviews ranged from 19 minutes to 2 hours 19 minutes, with an average length of 54 minutes (SD = 27.78). Before each interview, informed consent to participate and audio record was obtained. Interviews began with an introduction of the seven major themes that would be covered in the interview. First, researchers asked demographic questions. Second, participants were asked about their experience at Michfest. Third, participants were asked about their experience of womanhood. Fourth, participants were asked about their experiences of feminism and empowerment. Fifth, participants were asked about relationships with feminists of other ages. Sixth, participants were asked about their perspective on the inclusion of trans women at Michfest, including how they arrived at this perspective, what they thought the general opinion of Michfest attendees was, what conversations they had had around trans inclusion, and what they thought should happen around the issue of trans inclusion in the future. Finally, participants were asked about how they experienced Michfest as a temporary setting and if they transfer aspects of their festival experience to their lives at home.
Survey

The online surveys included the same seven themes using a condensed version of the interview questions. Prior to completing the survey, participants completed a modified version of informed consent. After answering a few demographic questions, participants were asked two to four questions about each of the themes identified above. The survey concluded with an open-ended question, so participants could provide any additional information.

Analytic strategy

Data collected from in-person interviews and online surveys were analyzed using content analysis (Burnard, 1991). Although the interview and survey questions about trans women and the festival constituted the focus of this study, participants alluded to these issues throughout their responses; thus, all interview and survey data were included as part of this study. To form a coding structure, and to reach consensus, the first two authors coded one transcript for major themes of transgender inclusion. After consensus was reached, a code structure was developed for the authors to use with the remaining transcripts. The authors coded the transcripts and discussed any new codes. The authors placed these codes into initial thematic categories and then developed preliminary themes. These preliminary themes were discussed by the research team and then revised to form the final themes of trans inclusion at Michfest. We now turn to these themes and provide quotes from participants to illustrate the themes and findings.

Findings

Supporters of trans inclusion

Many participants passionately supported the inclusion of trans women at Michfest. One participant wrote, “Trans womyn belong. No bones about it… We are not whole without our trans sisters.” These participants expressed frustration that they were not “making the rules” around trans inclusion and lamented that the festival was reticent to change. Some identified working toward trans inclusion as a major motivation for their attendance at the festival.

Feminism addresses all oppressions

One of the most common perspectives articulated by supporters of trans inclusion is that feminism should be working to address multiple oppressions. One participant defined feminism as “the empowerment of all oppressed people on every axis” and expressed disappointment that “certain forms of feminism are not working to help ALL oppressed people, by refusing to welcome these women oppressed by misogyny and transmisogyny.” She stated that this was especially disappointing to her because Michfest is “better than anywhere [she’s] seen… before” with respect
to a number of other axes of oppression, such as sexual orientation, kink, race, class, and disability.

Participants also expressed the belief that trans women experience gendered oppression connected specifically to patriarchy, and thus share a common interest with cis women in feminism. These participants believed trans inclusion is “sound with the intention of Michfest because Michfest is about creating a space outside of patriarchy and it needs to include people who have been so fucked by patriarchy.” Participants considered divisions around trans inclusion to stem from patriarchy and thus come from outside of the community, unlike some supporters of the WBW intention, who see these divisions as coming from trans women. One participant used the male privilege argument as an example of this, stating, “They [trans women] jumped that patriarchal boat … they actually don’t get male privilege anymore.”

Moving past the gender binary
Participants believed that opposition to trans inclusion was driven in part by binary views of gender and patriarchy that were stronger at Michfest and in certain radical feminist discourses than in other communities in which they were involved. Participants compared this perspective at Michfest to other “anti-patriarchal institutions” that “see everything in terms of male-female power structures,” such as rape crisis centers that fail to acknowledge female perpetrators or individual agency and that are not inclusive of male volunteers or victims. One participant described this as the “penis = man = unwelcome equation.” Another connected this focus on anatomy back to the “transwomyn will be triggering arguments,” writing:

There is a full expression of genders on the land even among the women-born-women contingent that carries its own “masculine energy” that wouldn’t necessarily be super-altered by openly admitting trans women. Also, trans men are seemingly allowed on the land without any hassle, whose masculine energy I imagine could be just as triggering for some as the presence of bio-male genitalia on an otherwise feminine-presenting woman.

These participants critique feminist discourses within and beyond Michfest for relying on a binary view of gender, which contributes to their use of male—female power structures to frame the dialogue around including trans women at the festival.

Changing with the times
Whether or not they personally supported trans inclusion, participants expressed the belief that Michfest may need to change its position as times change. Some participants approached this very pragmatically, and believed that the festival needed to change to survive. Participants saw this as a way to increase attendance, and also believed that the festival may need to become inclusive of others on the trans spectrum:
I would rather the space be WBW, but I’m resigned to the fact it needs to change. I have friends who refuse to go to Michfest because of the policy—so for the survival of Fest it should change. … Particularly in that women [who] are transitioning to male and are festivities or even workers, they and their partners will want to keep coming.

While some viewed change as pragmatic, others viewed it as part of movement for social justice. For example, one woman said, “New oppressions will always keep emerging; it’s up to new generations of feminists to move past our fears of change and work toward helping all people.”

Sharing the benefits
Some participants supported trans inclusion out of a desire to extend festival benefits to trans women, people across the trans spectrum, and younger queers who find Michfest transphobic. Participants identified specific benefits they wanted these groups to share in, such as safe space and “the intergenerational dialogues that I see as essential in gaining human understanding not just of the different perspectives of the trans issue.” These participants supported inclusion in hope of increasing attendance among these groups.

Supporters of the “womyn-born womyn” intention
Most participants supported the organizers’ intentions to maintain a WBW-only space and believed this was the dominant view. Participants saw the value of trans inclusion in other spaces, but at Michfest saw it as a threat to space that “places women and their experiences at the center.” Many women spoke passionately about their views and saw defense of WBW space as important. For example, one woman said, “I don’t want women to have to stand aside and give up Michigan’s women’s space just because the politics and social change have shifted. The need for separate women’s space is no less needed now—in fact it is needed more than ever.”

Different experiences, different spaces
Womyn-born womyn supporters believed that trans and cisgender women have different experiences. Girlhood was often described as a unique path to womanhood that trans women did not share and could not understand, and participants expressed a need to protect girlhood as a “fragile and unique experience” for girls at Michfest. Biological aspects of cis womanhood were viewed by participants as sacred and connected to ceremony and ritual, such as maiden ceremonies for young women entering menstruation and croning rituals for postmenopausal women. There was some concern that if trans women were included in the festival, talking about cis female bodies would be labeled oppressive: “If we can’t talk about pussies with three thousand women, when can we?”
The broader idea that cisgender and transgender women have different experiences was connected for many participants to the belief that trans women need a space separate from WBW space. Participants described the trans community as a “different culture” facing different issues than cis women and believed that separate gatherings would help both better address their unique concerns. As one woman stated,

Everything I know about the transgender community is that they have a lot of homework to do among themselves which includes the internalized messages that you weren’t able to cut away when you changed your body. That’s a fundamentally different experience … in the world than being a womyn-born womyn.

Some participants also expressed frustration that trans women are focused on “defaming” and “attacking” Michfest, rather than attending festivals that are already trans inclusive or building their own festival. One participant connected this to zero-sum models of power encouraged by capitalism and stated, “I don’t believe that it’s necessary for transgender people to take from womyn-born womyn in order to have something of quality for themselves.”

**Triggering trauma**

Another common belief expressed by supporters of the WBW intention was that including trans women would threaten the physical and emotional safety cis women experience at the festival. This was frequently connected with a fear of having “overt bio-markers of masculinity,” like penises and male voices, on the land, as they may trigger cis women who are survivors of rape and/or child sexual abuse. Several women who identified as abuse survivors expressed varying degrees of comfort with seeing “penises on the land.” Participants also expressed fear that including trans women would threaten the safety of girls at the festival, and several told stories about cis women who either did not let their daughters out of their supervision or did not return after seeing trans women at Michfest.

**Entitlement, appropriation, and boundaries**

Many participants viewed trans women as possessing a “male energy” related to male privilege, which shaped the way they viewed trans inclusion, with some seeing the issue as “a forced invasion of male privilege yet again” or “a patriarchal mindset like I can do whatever I want.” Participants also compared inclusion to cultural appropriation, such as people who identify with Native American culture but “don’t go to the reservation and say move over, make room for me and take care of my needs.”

The importance of defining boundaries was expressed by participants who feared trans inclusion would lead to cisgender men attending the festival. For example, one woman said, “once you open it to true, struggling, real, queer people, then any straight White man can say he’s ‘queer’ and come to be
surrounded by naked women, who do not want to be naked in front of him.” For some older participants, this fear of cis men “dressing up” to attend the festival was related to past experiences they had of cis men attempting to gain entry into the festival in its earlier years. Participants also expressed difficulty drawing a line about who could attend the festival (e.g., trans men, trans women without bodily modifications) if it was open to trans women. Overall, participants expressed fears that if trans women were included in the festival, it would become difficult to draw any boundaries and would no longer be a women’s space.

**Experiences of dialogue about transgender inclusion**

Participants described a range of experiences with the dialogue around trans inclusion. Some reported attending multiple workshops and having extensive conversations, while others avoided the issue entirely. Some said they primarily discussed trans inclusion with those who disagreed with them, while others reported only talking to people who shared their views. Some participants reported they had never wavered in their views, others reported “falling into their views,” and still others reported internal conflicts that were unresolved:

> It’s hard to admit, but I probably have enough internalized transphobia that on a gut level… I might be more comfortable… in a space with women who are at least passable as WBW—but the challenges it would pose to have trans women around, to me, personally, would be worth knowing that the space designated for women was not excluding a category of people who are, by protected human rights categories, women.

Some participants indicated that even though they disagree, they understand where others are coming from, while others reported they cannot begin to understand the opposite position. Despite this diversity of experience, participants described several common themes.

**Positionality shapes perspective**

Participants noted how people’s positionality shapes their perspective on trans inclusion. By far, the axis of identity most discussed was age, as one woman noted, “many of the divisions along the trans lines are generational as much as moral.” These participants viewed younger women as more likely to support trans inclusion and more likely to think of trans women as part of their community. Participants had a variety of reasons for this perspective, including that younger women grew up in more accepting climates and “cannot really fathom” the issues older women had to deal with around feminism and lesbian identity; that younger women have a more fluid understanding of sexuality and gender; that younger women are more likely to have an instant gratification mentality; and that older people tend to be more rigid as they “become more situated in their [politics] wherever they become the most radicalized.” Participants also identified several barriers to dialogue due to this generational divide. Older participants expressed a
desire for their views and contributions and the larger festival history to be appreciated by younger women, and identified this lack as a potential barrier: “We want somebody to say thank you, you did this, you gave this to us, we’ll carry it on the way you want and I think that’s holding a lot of things back.” Younger participants identified the dangers of ageism (e.g., assuming older feminists are stagnating in their views, are unwilling to get to know them), but also expressed a belief that older women have more power in the trans inclusion debate. In respect to the “rules” around trans inclusion, a younger participant noted that they are set by “women in a generation that comes from a different time and place with regards to lived experiences of feminism, womanhood, and relationships to gender binaries.”

However, others challenged a strict generational division on the issue and discussed the importance of intergenerational relationships. Some younger women who support inclusion reported that older women also are supportive, but the younger generation is “just more vocal about it.” Participants reported being surprised by older women who attend trans inclusion workshops, boycott the festival due to its position on trans women, or who “have kept their politics moving to integrate more forms of oppression such as trans oppression.” Several younger women who support the WBW intention described themselves as more closely aligned with second wave feminism and the beliefs of older feminists. One younger participant said she feels closer to the older generation than her generation, which “has absolutely no hesitation on any level (ideological or emotional) about proudly proclaiming ‘trans women are my sisters.’” Nevertheless, she supports trans inclusion because she sees “the unfairness in it, the meanness, the ignorance, the failure to tolerate or accept or embrace those who are different.” Intergenerational dialogue also played an important role, as some older participants indicated that they changed their views due to relationships with younger women.

Participants also identified race as an important factor in the trans inclusion issue, such as seeing the trans inclusion movement (and queer culture in general) as White-dominated. Addressing this point, an African-American woman said, “99.8 percent of the betrayal of womyn-born womyn is White lesbians.” However, other participants acknowledged that the festival as a whole is very White-dominated. Another participant, who identified as Multiracial Black, connected queer theory with a belief that “it’s not okay to have boundaries and it’s not okay to self-identify” and stated she primarily experiences this mindset from White academic lesbians. A White participant drew a parallel between the importance of WBW space and space for women of color, and also saw White women joining trans activists “out of a guilt which can get manipulated.” Other participants similarly drew on their experience of race to illustrate their position on trans inclusion. For example, one participant explained that she wished trans women would choose not to attend the festival out of respect, saying, “As a woman who is White, I don’t have the right to be in space set aside for women of color.”
Some participants viewed the dialogue around trans inclusion as taking place in the context of a broader shift in which the rise of queer theory threatens feminism and women’s studies. As one participant said, “I see what has happened to women studies is now a trans movement, a queer movement, a postmodern movement that has taken away the attention from women’s bodies and women’s experiences and placed them on queer which means nothing.” These participants viewed WBW space as extremely important and felt threatened because they believed “our space to understand ourselves is shrinking because we’re no longer in vogue.” Several participants were themselves professors in women’s studies departments and indicated experiencing this in their professional lives, including one participant who expressed concerns that womanhood was deconstructed to the point of invisibility, that what was once a political discipline has become a theoretical one, and that women’s studies has become gender studies. She viewed these trends as threatening women’s ability to organize and fight for material political issues, such as contraceptive rights, and said, “I’m still back in second wave.” Several participants echoed this concern that queer theory is overly academic and “has exploded as this nebulous no boundaries thing, that can now include everyone, thereby erasing women, feminism, and womyn’s space.” While some viewed this as a general shift, others viewed it as an intentional strategy producing “a historical erasure that’s really effective.” Sheila Jeffreys’ (2003) belief that queer theory co-opted and depoliticized lesbian feminism was explicitly referenced by one participant. Jeffreys’ position that trans identities themselves threaten feminism was reflected by some participants, who believed that trans identities reinforce patriarchal gender roles and lamented butch lesbians becoming trans men. As these quotes illustrate, many participants connected the issue of trans inclusion very specifically to broader tensions between queer theory and women’s studies.

Many participants felt that conflict about trans inclusion has increased, which has resulted in tension, anger, and hurt feelings. Participants described actions on both sides as attempts to polarize the issue. For example, in 2011, supporters of trans inclusion wore shirts reading, “trans women belong here.” In 2012, supporters of the WBW intention wore red shirts as a counterdemonstration. One participant described this as the “color wars” and compared it to rival gangs claiming their turf. Some supporters of the WBW intention expressed feeling dismissed as transphobic “and therefore not worth paying attention to,” while some supporters of trans inclusion indicated feeling unsafe expressing their views at the festival. Participants who were ambivalent felt forced to pick a side. One participant noted that the polarizing nature of trans inclusion draws attention away from other important issues, such as racial diversity at Michfest. A number of participants stated that people are not really listening to each other because of “not wanting the long story from each other” and out of fear of being misunderstood. Several supporters of the
WBW intention emphasized they were not transphobic, but believed others perceived them this way. Additionally, several lamented that Michfest was “now being attacked both by right wing and from inside.”

Positive aspects of dialogue
Participants also identified positive aspects of this dialogue, describing conversations that were respectful, informative, loving, and open. Several talked positively about the role of workshops in facilitating these exchanges, such as by helping people draw parallels between trans inclusion and other internal conflicts (e.g., dildos; bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism [BDSM]). Several women commented on the positive impact of having artists address the issue from the stage. Participant descriptions of positive aspects of the dialogue did not focus on talking with others who agreed with them; rather, they focused on women with different positions approaching the dialogue with openness.

Future directions around transgender inclusion
Participants also shared their perspectives on what would or should happen around trans inclusion moving forward. Examining these perspectives provides a sense of how attendees believed trans inclusion would impact the festival several years before its end. Many connected the festival’s position on trans inclusion with lower attendance, and believed that the conflict would end the festival. Some participants expressed the belief that the festival would not change, and others offered potential solutions to the issue of trans inclusion.

The end of Michfest
Several participants correctly forecasted the end of the festival. They believed that the festival’s failure to change may lead to its end because “it’s not relevant to so many thousands of younger feminists that don’t come because of [the WBW intention].” Participants identified knowing people who did not attend or not having attended the festival themselves in past years for this reason. These women did not talk about Michfest in their home communities because they fear being viewed as “inherently transphobic,” a reaction that one participant connected to people she knows seeing the festival “solely in the abstract,” such that the “trans exclusion issues are all that pings on their radar when Michfest is discussed.” This participant believed they “can therefore afford to be purely critical or dismissive of it, as, on a personal level, they have no vested interest in whether the festival lives or dies.” Thus, although Lisa Vogel’s statement about Michfest ending did not reference trans inclusion, participants identified conflict about trans inclusion as having impacted festival attendance and as possibly leading to the end of the festival.
Other participants believed that the festival would end due to declining numbers, but identified other factors driving this decline, such as older women dealing with health issues and having a more difficult time camping, less need with more visible queer women’s communities, and more women having families and having a difficult time getting time off from work. Several people described Michfest as an aging community and expressed a desire for younger women to “step up.” Several speculated the festival would make it to its 40th anniversary, and then would end. Ultimately, this prediction proved to be correct.

Some participants noted that other conflicts at Michfest over the years have tended to “work themselves out,” but were unsure if this would be true for trans inclusion. One woman said, “I think the trans issue has the potential to kill this festival and many of us are beginning the grieving process.” The sense that the festival may end over trans inclusion impacted dialogue about this issue, as the climate of “this festival which you cherish may die” was making people opposed to trans inclusion more hostile because they “[saw] the trans inclusion activists as having an aggressive ‘we don’t care if the festival dies and actually we want it to’ attitude.”

However, other participants said they were tired of hearing people say the festival was going to end and saw this as a “sales pitch” to encourage ticket sales. Others, including some participants who did not support trans inclusion, expressed the belief that Michfest would change to include trans women and that this would have less of an impact than some people believed. Several argued that once women at the festival were interacting with real trans women, instead of debating an abstract possibility, they would adjust, and conflict would decrease over time. One participant said, “At some level fest is about interpersonal connections that will transcend any policy or original intention.” Another noted that workers at the festival were effective at defining appropriate behavior, such as the restriction of BDSM activities to a particular camping area, and expressed confidence they would also be able to handle the inclusion of trans women.

Potential solutions
Participants also proposed solutions to appease both parties, such as having separate weeks or spaces (with some overlap) for cisgender and transgender women. One participant proposed having separate lands for different communities and allowing each to determine its own by-laws. Another proposed building an educational center on the festival land and having events throughout the year with Michfest as the main event, which would show “the young people that the women who put on Michfest are allies of transgendered youth.” Several participants proposed alternative boycott strategies, such as a reverse boycott in which participants express commitment to attend the festival if trans women were included or purchased tickets for their trans friends. Finally, some did not propose specific
solutions, but believed the issue would be resolved. One woman said simply, “There is hope.”

**Discussion and implications**

In the broader debate about trans inclusion in women’s spaces, Michfest attendees have often been portrayed as uniformly opposed to trans inclusion. However, we found participants had a range of perspectives on trans inclusion, and indeed many felt conflicted or had changed their views over time. Some spoke passionately about their beliefs and expressed an inability to understand different perspectives, while others expressed identification and understanding with multiple sides. Just as there was no uniform perspective on trans inclusion, participants had diverse experiences of dialogue and ideas about what would happen to the festival in the future. The diversity of perspectives in this sample highlights internal disagreement among Michfest attendees about what should happen around trans inclusion, and illustrates that some participants believed conflict around trans inclusion would ultimately lead to the festival’s end.

Participants’ perspectives on trans inclusion were framed within and shaped by their broader relationships with feminism. Participants who opposed the inclusion of trans women at the festival tended to view queer and trans identities as eroding important boundaries that preserved space for cisgender women and lesbians. This was related to the belief that trans women still have male privilege, as many viewed efforts to include trans women as a manifestation of male privilege. Participants who supported the inclusion of trans women at the festival drew connections between the ways that cisgender and transgender women are both oppressed by patriarchy. This was related to the belief that feminism should address all oppressions, including those faced by people on the trans spectrum, and these participants did not tend to view trans women as possessing or enacting male privilege.

Participant responses directly addressed tensions between feminist, transgender, and queer theory. Michfest is a highly educated population, and a significant number of attendees are faculty members. Thus, some participants in this study directly related the dialogue around trans inclusion to their experiences in women’s studies departments. The fissures participants identified between feminism and queer theory parallel those identified by scholars: feminism was linked with an emphasis on the primacy of gender, concern with material and structural analysis, and focus on women’s bodies, while queer theory was linked with an emphasis on sexuality independent of gender, concern with cultural analysis, and exploration of fluidity with respect to identity (McLaughlin et al., 2006). Generally speaking, the former was associated with opposition to trans inclusion, while the latter was associated with support.

However, participants did not neatly fall into these two camps, and there was overlap between the issues discussed on both sides. For example, those who supported trans inclusion strongly identified with feminism and discussed this
identification much more often than queer theory, but highlighted the importance of intersectionality in shaping their belief that feminism should address all oppressions. Many of these participants had strong material and structural analyses and focused more on these issues than on the cultural analysis associated with queer theory. Conversely, participants who opposed trans inclusion discussed the role of culture in generating shame about women’s bodies and experiences and celebrated Michfest as an alternative cultural narrative. Even though many of these participants believed that queer theory detracted from space for women’s issues, some embraced the complexity it allowed them to describe. For example, one woman expressed a strong dislike for academic queer theory, but identified as an “ex-lesbian queer,” which provided language for her to describe her marriage to a cisgender man. As these examples illustrate, feminism and queer theory both have unique strengths and tools to offer, and participants from multiple perspectives on trans inclusion drew upon the tools of both in articulating their positions.

Participants also perceived generational affiliation as an important factor that shaped dialogue about trans inclusion, with younger women more likely than older women to support trans inclusion. However, others challenged this generalization: they highlighted the involvement of older women in the trans inclusion movement, or pointed to examples of younger feminists who identified with the perspectives of older or second wave feminists. These participants complicated the generational metaphor that often frames these relationships, and suggest that relationships with particular waves of feminism are the result of an intentional process of identification, rather than the default inheritance of a generation. Thus, although the generational metaphor may help some participants make sense of divisions around trans inclusion by providing a framework in which people’s perspectives are the inevitable result of differing cultural norms and experiences, we agree with Henry (2004) that this approach is “an impoverished model of generational relations, one that allows for only two possible points of identification: mother or daughter” (p. 181). By viewing these perspectives through the lens of individual agency and generational diversity, we gain a richer sense of participants’ perspectives and an appreciation for their emphasis on the importance of intergenerational dialogue.

Limitations and directions for future research

One important limitation of the current study is that interviews and survey recruitment were conducted at Michfest. Many people boycotted the festival due to its policy on trans inclusion, and trans people were discouraged from attending the festival due to its stated WBW intention; thus, our sample does not include cisgender female supporters of trans inclusion who did not attend the festival or the perspectives of trans women and other people on the trans spectrum. Due to this limitation, we did not have as many participants who supported trans inclusion
and are missing the valuable perspectives of trans women. We view this limitation within the context of the purpose of the study, which was to explore perspectives on trans inclusion among festival attendees. Also, we sought to include participants with diverse perspectives by attending workshops likely to attract diverse audiences and recruited participants in these venues. The use of an online survey also helped us to engage people with different perspectives, who may not have been comfortable being interviewed at the festival.

Conclusions

The findings from our study illustrate the diversity of perspectives held by Michfest attendees and contribute to broader discussions about the tensions and common ground between feminism, women’s studies, queer theory, and transgender studies. The process of interviewing women for this study led us to an appreciation of the complexity of each person’s views and the fear (on multiple sides of this issue) of being misunderstood. Participants were eager to engage in dialogue, and many became very emotional while discussing these topics. Our goal in this article is to provide some perspective on the complexity of the dialogue around trans inclusion at Michfest. As the festival ended in 2015, this dialogue will not impact trans inclusion at Michfest; however, we hope our findings will promote synergy between feminist, transgender, and queer theories and movements. We believe this process does not necessarily depend on these fields having identical perspectives, but rather on their engaging with each other to work toward critical, inclusive social change.

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