Letter to the Community - 4/11/13

On March 28, an activist named Red Durkin posted a petition on Change.org asking artists and attendees to boycott the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival until organizers fully and openly welcome all self-identified women. This petition has intensified a long-running debate about and within the Festival, a debate that has often included intense misrepresentations about the political heart of this gathering. There is no doubt that complex political debate is healthy and necessary within our communities; however, a boycott, within this context, fails to advance resolution and only seeks to exact damage. As the Festival's producer for her full 38 years, I write today to clarify the festival's herstory, intention and my desire for understanding within our communities, as well as to clarify where I stand on these issues.

I have listened, I have talked, I have struggled, and I will continue to do so. I do not fear our differences. But I do fear the harm being done to the space held so dear by so many – the space known around the world as "Michigan" – by the way this conflict is playing out. And thus I hope you will consider what I have to say with an open heart and open mind, as I pledge to continue to listen to the diversity of voices in this struggle.

Why We Gather

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is a soulful gathering of womyn from all over the world, created 38 years ago during the height of feminist organizing. Built from the ground up by womyn's innovation and womyn's labor, filled with art, performance, play and discourse – we live together for a week in the woods and create community as we know it in no other form. There's freedom on that land that womyn living under patriarchy rarely touch; freedom to walk in the woods at night alone without fear; to be clothed or not clothed depending solely on comfort and personal style and without judgment; to move and work and play and love without the socio-cultural constraints that uniquely push down on all womyn, all the time. For these reasons, Michigan remains vital and vibrant even though countless other institutions from that burst of consciousness are gone. For these reasons, there's no real debate about the value of the Festival – it is precisely why passions run so strong on all sides of this issue.

When we started Festival 38 years ago, we did so to make a home and a space where we could grow our own definition of female identity. At the time, the mere idea of a female identity autonomous of male identity was revolutionary. Over the course of nearly four decades, we have continued to discover, (re)define and live out what it means to be womon-identified and to recognize and honor diverse gender expression among womyn. Every

August we do the work of growing into a community inclusive and meaningful for womyn from diverse class and cultural experiences, different abilities and ages - a community alive with a value system grown from the core of radical feminism. Over time, some clear collective values have emerged: communal cooperation; a willingness to show up and listen; an ethos of love, compassion, and active care for others; an undercurrent of strength and fierce resiliency; and a commitment to remain teachable. These values are the foundation of the Michigan community. These values reflect the intention of the space.

About the Intention

The Festival, for a single precious week, is intended for womyn who at birth were deemed female, who were raised as girls, and who identify as womyn. I believe that womyn-born womyn (WBW) is a lived experience that constitutes its own distinct gender identity.

As we struggle around the question of inclusion of trans womyn at the festival, we use the word intention very deliberately. Michigan holds this particular lived experience of womanhood as honorable, meaningful, unique and rich. Our intention has always been coupled with the radical commitment to never question any womon's gender. We ask the greater community to respect this intention, and to value the complexity and validity of every gender identity, including that of WBW. The onus is on each individual to choose whether or how to respect that intention.

Rejecting Transphobia

I reject the assertion that creating a time and place for WBW to gather is inherently transphobic. This is a false dichotomy and one that prevents progress and understanding. I believe in the integrity of autonomous space used to gather and celebrate for any group, whether that autonomous space is defined by age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, gender, class or any other identity. Whatever spaces we carve out in our community to encourage healing and rejuvenation should be accepted, and we should support each other in this endeavor. Nobody should be asked to erase the need for autonomous spaces to demonstrate that they are sisters in struggle.

Clearly, our community struggles with the wide-ranging opinions that have formed around this question. Womyn who love the Festival deeply have intense feelings on all sides of this issue. There have been a great many good, loving and smart discussions between womyn who profoundly disagree, and there have been disrespectful and dehumanizing behaviors on both sides of the debate that demean all of our feminist political ideals. We all must stand up against hate speech, harassment and threats in any form,

against any individual and against all of our communities.

I passionately believe the healing in our community will occur when we unconditionally accept trans womyn as womyn while not dismissing or disavowing the lived experience and realities of the WBW gender identity. Sadly, the extreme voices on this issue have driven much of the discussion, and the aggressive rhetoric leaves little room for building the alliances that are critical to everyone's survival, growth and integrity.

We must find ways to be allies in this discussion. I know that for some, WBW space seems flatly incompatible with honoring and supporting trans womyn within the larger womyn's communities. Regardless, we must listen to those who believe in the power of every womon's voice, and commit to stay in a process with open hearts, open minds, and abiding respect even when that conversation gets incredibly hard. Space for WBW and a true solidarity with the trans community can and does co-exist.

Our Commitment to Each Other, My Commitment to You

The extreme positions being repeated, stoked, and disseminated on the internet do not represent the complex wholeness of the Festival voice, and they overshadow the more measured communication that will heal this divide. I call to each one of us to approach this issue in the purest example of sisterhood, to wrestle with the extremely difficult questions of our relationships with one another, and to do so always with compassion and abiding respect.

I commit to promote, foster and participate in continuing discussion on and off the land in hopes that we can all move towards greater understanding of each other's perspectives. I will, however, turn my focus away from the destructive voices that do not seek progress, but only stoke division. As Festival works to survive and thrive into her fifth decade, I will do everything in my power to ensure that she continues as something beautiful, more complex than ever and yet true to the principles that spurred me to start this celebration in the first place.

I invite you to join me on this ongoing journey.

Lisa Vogel
MWMF founder