

**POLITICAL CONTEXT: CONTROVERSY OVER SCHEDULED BITCH
PERFORMANCE AT THE 2007 BOSTON DYKE MARCH**

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Fewer than twenty-four hours before dyke performer Bitch was to take the stage at the 2007 Boston Dyke March, the Boston Dyke March organizing committee decided to cancel Bitch's performance. The decision was made to halt a planned boycott of the Dyke March and to quell charges that the Boston Dyke March, despite its proactive advocacy of trans inclusion, was transphobic. The reason for the boycott and charges of transphobia: scheduled performer Bitch had not only performed at the Michigan Women's Music Festival [Michfest], but more importantly, in a published interview, Bitch had expressed support for Michfest's "women-born women only" admittance policy.

The cancellation of Bitch's performance halted the boycott, but incited an angry backlash by those who felt that it was wrong for the Boston Dyke March to cancel the performance of a beloved political dyke. Michfest protestors, on the other hand, applauded the decision. Local LGBT papers, national online LGBT news sources, message boards, and bloggers devoted hundreds of pages to the controversy.

MICHFEST BACKGROUND: BIRTH OF WOMYN-BORN-WOMYN

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival began in 1976 by Lisa Vogel, Kristie Vogel, and Mary Kindig. The purpose of the festival was to provide women a space to come together and celebrate women's cultural community. Through the years the festival has become a well-known mainstay of feminist culture. The weeklong festival provides festival goers much more than the opportunity to enjoy performances by women musicians from around the world; it provides a sense of community and empowerment. All the labor necessary for the producing the festival is performed by

women. Women build stages, set up lighting, and operate sound systems. In the absence of men and in the women-centered values, festival goers experience a feeling of safety, freedom, and body acceptance. Participants feel free to spend the week in varying states of nudity. The schedule features workshops, lectures, discussion groups, and of course music and entertainment by women performers. For many, attending the festival is a transformative experience.

But the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival has not been without controversy. Festival policies about the presence of male children, attempts to address racism and white privilege, and debates about the practice of S/M on festival grounds have all been issues of contention. One of the ongoing controversies is about the admittance of transsexual women to the festival. This controversy began in earnest in 1991 when organizers expelled a transwoman from festival grounds. Organizers maintained that the festival was open only to women-born-women. The following year a small group of trans activists protested the policy. Their intent was to advocate for the admittance of post-operative, but not pre-operative MTF transsexuals.¹

WHO IS A WOMAN? TRANS DISAGREEMENT

In 1994 trans activists established Camp Trans on Forest Service land across from Michigan Womyn's Music Festival property. By this point, a debate had erupted between trans activists who advocated for a post-op admittance policy and trans activists who advocated for the admittance of all transwomen. Those who advocated for admittance of all transwomen argued that the postop admittance policy implied that non-operative and pre-operative transwomen are not real women. According to a statement released in 2000 by proponents of postop policy, non trans and post op

transwomen alike “deserve the opportunity to gather together in a safe space, free of male genitals, [because] male genitals can be so emblematic of male power and sexual dominance that their presence at a festival ... is inappropriate.”² In response, those who advocated for admittance of all transwomen noted that a postop admittance policy has classist implications. Sex reassignment surgeries are only available to those who can afford them. In addition to the classist implications of this policy, activist writer Emi Koyama has outlined the racist implications of such a policy. According to Koyama, the postop/no penis policy results in class issues that disproportionately affect transwomen of color who are not able to afford sex reassignment surgery.³

In 2005 another trans inclusion advocacy group, the Yellow Armbands, emerged. According to organizer Dandypants, “In the Fall of 2005 when I began working on trans inclusion with the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and Camp Trans, I created the Yellow Armbands as an alternative educational tool because I felt that there was a potential for more effective outreach than was possible within the polarity that existed at the time.”⁴ Members of the Yellow Armbands attended both Michfest and Camp Trans in an effort to “build bridges between the Camp Trans and Michigan communities through continued *respectful* dialog both inside and outside of Fest.”⁵ Although the strategy of the Yellow Armbands was to support protest from the inside Michfest, Camp Trans continued and continues to eschew this strategy.⁶

Meanwhile, Michfest organizers held fast to their women-born-women only policy.

MORE INFIGHTING: PERFORMER BOYCOTT

Finding the protests of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival insufficient, some trans activists began boycotting artists who performed at Michfest. Artists who either expressed support of the Michfest admittance policy or continued to play at Michfest despite repeated requests to decline invitations to perform were most frequently targeted. Attempts by these bands to explain their support of the Michfest policy or explain their strategy of "transforming from within" served to further anger many Michfest trans activists. Ironically, bands at the top of the boycott list, the Butchies, Tribe 8, Le Tigre, Bitch and Animal, included trans, genderqueer, and/or gender non-conforming members.⁷

In 1999 the Boston Dyke March was organized by the Boston Lesbian Avengers. In 2000 Gunner Scott reached out to community groups to recruit a more diverse committee. In 2000 more than half of the committee members were also members of the Boston Lesbian Avengers. At that time the Boston Lesbian Avengers extended the practice of boycotting the Michigan Womyn's Festival to anyone who performed at Michfest, regardless of their position on the Michfest admittance policy. The Boston Lesbian Avengers organized protests of performers booked in Greater Boston venues if they had performed at Michfest in the past few years. Likewise, the Lesbian Avengers maintained that the Boston Dyke March ought to adhere to the boycott and ought not to invite performers that had played at Michfest.

Commitment to this boycott led to many heated debates on the Boston Dyke March Committee between 2000 and 2005. Many committee members who were not Avengers did not support the Michfest admittance policy, yet disagreed with the strategy of boycotting performers who accepted invitations to play at Michfest. Despite the fact

that at least half of the committee found the practice of boycotting performers who had taken the stage at Michfest problematic in principle, they acquiesced to prevent the kind of infighting that would lead to the demise of the Boston Dyke March.

By 2006 the Boston Lesbian Avengers no longer existed as an organized group and hence had ceased organizing protests of Michfest performers. In addition, Camp Trans had issued a press release stating that Michigan Womyn's Music Festival had ended its transwoman exclusion policy.⁸ In response, a circulation of email messages celebrated the end of the performer boycott. All of this was followed by the circulation of a press release by Michfest organizers stating that there had been no change in its admission policy.⁹ Confused by the circulation of conflicting email messages, unaware of the differing views among factions of trans activists, and unaware of public statements made by Bitch supporting the Michfest policy, in 2007 the Boston Dyke March invited Bitch to perform at the Dyke March.

A week before the Dyke March, organizers became aware that Boston trans activists had begun expressing unhappiness on online forums and via email about Bitch's scheduled performance at the Dyke March. Assuming that Bitch was opposed to the Michfest 'women-born women only' admittance policy, the Dyke March committee asked Bitch to provide a statement expressing her view about the policy. After a few days of stalling, to the surprise of Dyke March committee members, Bitch provided a wishy-washy statement that did not reject the Michfest admittance policy. The next day, June 6, two days before the Dyke March, what was supposed to be a pre-event logistical planning meeting became a long deliberation session as to what should be done about Bitch performing at the Dyke March. The Boston Dyke March had signed a

performance contract with Bitch for \$1300.00, which comprised more than 1/6 of the annual Dyke March budget. The committee could not reach consensus, so instead decided to rest with the majority opinion, which was to issue a statement declaring the Boston Dyke March's ongoing commitment to trans-inclusion and to allow Bitch to perform as scheduled.

On Thursday June 7, one day before the Dyke March, long time committee member Jo Trigilio received an email letter from former committee member Gunner Scott. At the time, Gunner Scott was heading the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition. The letter expressed his sadness and disappointment about the decision to have Bitch perform. Moved by the emotion in the letter, Jo, who had served on the committee with Gunner for a number of years, called Gunner to have a conversation. The conversation with Gunner made Jo realize that allowing Bitch to perform would seriously harm the spirit of unity that had structured the Boston Dyke March for so many years. That night, as a group of committee members drove to the Queer Women of Color Pride Dance, Jo called every single committee member for which the people in the car had a number, informing each of the magnitude of the issue and asking each to approve the cancellation of Bitch's performance.

Every major urban area in the U.S. is constituted by its own set of unique LGBT political relationships. In Boston, the dyke, genderqueer, and trans organizing communities are well-networked, and operate with the spirit of cooperation and mutual support. While most members of the Dyke March Committee found the strategy of boycotting Michfest performers politically and ethically problematic, the committee agreed that community unity was more important. Supporters of Bitch and lesbian

feminists claimed that the organizers of the Boston Dyke March had been intimidated and bullied into canceling Bitch's performance. From the perspective of the committee, the value of having trans members of the community continue to feel welcome and included in the Dyke March trumped the value of having Bitch perform.

ENDNOTES

* Research for this paper was greatly facilitated by the materials archived on Emi Koyama's website: <http://eminism.org/michigan/documents.html>

¹ Emi Koyama, "Whose Feminism Is It Anyway? The Unspoken Racism of The Trans Inclusion Debate," in the Transgender Studies Reader. Eds. Susan Stryker and Stephan Whittle (Routledge: New York, 2006), 699.

² As quoted in Koyama, "Whose Feminism Is It Anyway? The Unspoken Racism of The Trans Inclusion Debate," 699.

³ Koyama, "Whose Feminism Is It Anyway? The Unspoken Racism of The Trans Inclusion Debate," 699.

⁴ Dandypants [screen name: Pandapajamas], Yellow Armbands Livejournal, comment posted May 28, 2007, <http://community.livejournal.com/yellowarmbands/>

⁵ Yellow Armbands, archived website, <http://community.livejournal.com/yellowarmbands/41335.html> [no longer available]

⁶ Camp Trans, <http://www.camp-trans.org/pages/whatwedo.html> [no longer available]

⁷ For an example of one of the events that lead to one of the first Michfest performer boycotts, see the Chainsaw Records Message Board, "Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," <http://www.geocities.com/snarkles/chswmwmf.htm> [no longer available]

⁸ Emilia Lombardi, Bryn Kelly, Camp Trans Press Release, "Michigan Women's Music Festival ends policy of discrimination against Transwomen," August 21, 2006.

⁹ Lisa Vogel [Michigan Womyn's Music Festival] press release, "Michigan Womyn's Music Festival Sets the Record 'straight'" August 22, 2006.