

WHEN OPPRESSED PEOPLE CAN OPPRESS PEOPLE: QUEER TRAUMA AND PERFORMANCE WORKING TOGETHER TOWARDS CHANGE

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Marginal social spaces created by those rendered 'out of place' can cultivate alternative ways of living [...]. (Browne 2009, 541)

It is August 1994, women, mostly residents in the USA, are getting ready for spending a week at the event they have been waiting for the whole year: the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a presumably "safe-space" that would become a home for the attendees during a week full of performances, educational workshops, and talks.¹ Nancy Burkholder, Leslie Feinberg, Riki Wilchins, and other transwomen might have followed the same route to "Michfest"; nonetheless, in 1991, Nancy Burkholder came out openly as trans to some MWMF² attendees, and as a consequence, she was asked to leave in the middle of the night. The year after, the festival reinforced the policy of allowing "only womyn-born-womyn" to access the event's grounds and this irretrievably caused a revolt: a group of transwomen organized Camp Trans, with a stand in the surroundings of MWMF. As Browne's epigraph quote asserts, Camp Trans was not just a form of isolated protest but also an "alternative way of living" that arose from the traumatic experience of being appointed "out of place" for not abiding by binary perceptions.

Hence, the main aim of this paper is to delve into the speeches delivered during the course of Camp Trans 1999 in order to explore how shared experience of Queer

¹ Apart from being former attendees to Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, some of these names have regularly produced research on the issue of trans rights due to the fact that they were renowned transgender activists.

² MWMF is an acronym of MICHIGAN WOMYN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL.



Trauma can be channeled through activism to ultimately have a transformative value. Similarly, the fact that all these events were taking place at a festival allows the possibility of analyzing how literal senses of performance and non-literal ones, such as “performativity” or the enactment of language and expressions to perform a kind of being, collide, and how their synergy can lead to social justice of change.

“An experiment in creating a feminist community” (Browne 2009, 453) is the definition that organizers of MWMF provided when describing the oldest “only-women” festival in America. With a large “herstory” of celebration of lesbian cultures, MWMF was held since 1976 until 2015 on a private area commonly known as “the land” in Oceana (Michigan). Considered by many a secure place where womanhood could be honored or as Joyce claims “a means to offering a substitute to the male monopoly in the music industry”(2014, 5), MWMF was an echo of the concerns of the Women’s Music Movement³, and the Radical Feminist Politics⁴ in the 60s, since it was a cultural event made by women for women. By removing grammatical reference to “men” in “womyn,” deterministic perceptions of gender were rejected and MWMF could be perfectly described as a “heterotopia” or what Foucault (1986, 24) considered real places, not utopic ones, which act as “counter-sites” to the existing ones in society; in other words, MWMF could be considered a world within the world itself in which a social structure—not feasible in real terms—based on the celebration of women, their skills, and their art was created.

While some may consider MWMF as an attempt to question the importance of gender in terms of social experiences and political impact, this festival has not become popular⁵ without controversy. The biggest dispute was the essentialist policy of “only womyn-born womyn” that rejects notions of gender fluidity and thus, stipulates what critics have called “paranoid logic” (Browne 2009, 543) which consists of being aware of a problem but at the same time not solving it. In this case, MWMF organizers advocated against the systematic oppression executed by men but at the same time unknowingly took it as unsolvable by establishing a policy that rather than diminishing,

³ The Women’s Music Movement is a social movement that started in 1960, mainly influenced by second-wave feminism. It was initiated by lesbian performers, activists, and African American musicians as a response to the male monopoly in the music industry. The productions that emerged from this movement could be considered a way of expressing, by means of music, second-wave feminism’s concerns.

⁴ Initiated in 1960s, this movement perceived that the worst form of oppression was that exerted by men. Women that conformed this movement asserted that patriarchy was within society since men were the ones that oppressed women. This ideology would be of some use for the rest of this article since it could be seen how radical feminist thought was also exerted towards other people not necessary “male”.

⁵ Professor Casselberry (2018) claimed that MWMF popularity partly lies on the nature of this festival to contest the male movement and thus constitute a “women’s cultural phenomenon” to where around 3,000 to 10,000 women assisted.



increased oppression. As a result, after Nancy's Burkholder expulsion from the festival's grounds, the debate around oppression of transwomen began in earnest and it led to the protest widely known as Camp Trans. Its origins could be traced around 1994, under the assumption that the organization of MWMF was replicating part of the complex network of institutionalized sexual and gender oppression. In order to understand the previous assertion, it is essential to resort to traditional understandings of sex and gender. In the *Second Sex* (1949), Simone De Beauvoir formulated a difference between sex and gender. While the former refers to biological traits (being born as male, female or intersex), the latter points to the socially constructed roles, identities, and expectations assigned to each sex. Even though De Beauvoir's formulation might be considered out-of-date, it has been appropriated by transphobes. Thus, it could be claimed that the Camp Trans protest, and oppression at large, had — and still has — its basis on the idea that trans should be left aside because they expressed their gender identity regardless of the sex they were assigned at birth. Precisely, this issue is supported in one of the speeches delivered prior to Camp Trans' 99 by Riki Wilchins:

When the owners know that gender difference is no longer about them but about us, when they know there is solidarity, then this policy will fall. Discrimination against any woman must always be contested. (Wilchins, 25/06/1999)

Wilchins was advocating for an inclusionary perspective while highlighting the oppression that they were suffering. Despite the fact that Wilchins evoked women's discrimination to debunk the argument of MWMF owners, she made explicit that boundaries had been established in terms of both sex and gender. According to MWMF's owners, trans had always lived in a privileged position as they were born male. Thus, Wilchins explicitly claimed the necessity of carrying out stand against transphobia which Camp Trans could execute.

To thoroughly understand how this stand was created thanks to "alternative ways of living", it is necessary to consider Ann Cvetkovich's notion of "Queer Trauma" (2003). Previously, it has been exposed that transphobia at MWMF was exerted based on the issue of being born male, and therefore, living in a privileged position not attainable by women. However, by claiming that "every movement is doomed to recreate the struggles of its predecessors," Riki Wilchins advanced an important matter. Joyce (2014, 137) asserts that the recreation of the past has a key role in unleashing psychological effects of experiencing feelings of unpleasantness. In this particular case, Wilchins's speech echoed collective trauma which had its source in the remembrance of an oppression—still in need to be contested—towards which they felt bad. When referring to the term Queer Trauma, Cvetkovich observed that it embodies a detachment of clinical dogmas by means of which the subject perceives trauma as "felt experiences" that could constitute new cultures and publics (2003, 47). In this way, Camp

Trans could be considered a “felt experience” through which traumatic experiences of oppression were transmitted, and ultimately used as instigators of a change.

On the one hand, the act of expelling transwomen from a festival due to their gender identity conforms a source of Queer Trauma that culminated in a stand at Camp Trans. On the other hand, the fact that all this was taking place at a festival draws, thus, connections with literal senses of performance and similarly, with non-literal senses due to the fact that they were “performing” an identity that did not conform to binary notions. However, in which ways are these two sides of this issues integrated to ultimately function as an artifact of change? Leslie Feinberg’s⁶ speech could be considered a triggering point to start answering these matters. Her words, extracted from the short documentary *We’ve been around*⁷, show the vindictive nature of Camp Trans speeches:

We’ve always been transsexual women helping to build the women’s movement and whenever you have been in a large gathering of women, I assure you have been with transsexual women. Did you feel unsafe? They are merely women in a women hated society so of course transsexual women want to be welcomed into women space for the same reason that every woman does: to feel safe. (Feinberg 1999)

Feinberg’s speech was a statement of the main issue that transwomen faced—even though they are still facing it—at that time: not being included in the “women’s movement.” However, analyzing the nature of this speech could lead to more conclusions. Despite the intimate nature of this performance, as it was reflected in the documentary where it shows a few attendants sitting in a circle listening to her, Feinberg was raising awareness to create a “public and collective formation” that had as its goal the debunking of MWMF’s anti-trans policy. Hall and Jagose argued that “trauma is best addressed by public and collective formations” (2012, 374) and indeed, Feinberg was, unknowingly, addressing it in this way. By shedding light on what was kept in a private realm in public, Feinberg was denouncing that transphobia was right at the center of hegemonic practices and as such, Camp Trans would be the “collective formation” which could not afford ignoring that. Hence, by resorting to the shared experiences of the trans movement, she initiated a “collective formation” around trauma. Feinberg

⁶ Leslie Feinberg self-identified herself as a lesbian, butch, and trans activist. Her presence in Camp Trans was crucial to the breakthroughs that later on would be exposed in this paper. Besides carrying out activism, Leslie was also the author of a series of books in which she dealt with gender issues, trans rights among other things e.g. *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), *Transliberation: Beyond pink or blue* (1992) or *Transgender warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (1996).

⁷ This documentary has been crucial for obtaining visual data for this paper. Most of the information concerning Camp Trans was deleted from the web in 2006, year in which the festival shut down. Therefore, in this short video, both detailed first-person data as well as reproduction of speeches not available are presented.

was implicitly claiming that the trans' community memory had been constantly inundated by trauma: for not being accepted into "the women's movement" even though they had conformed it, and also for being rejected due to notions of identity that went beyond the purely binary view. Thanks to this collective formation around trauma, links between Queer Trauma and non-literal senses of performance can be drawn. In 1958, in her essay *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt claimed that only by "performing" what was relegated in a private realm on the public sphere, one becomes a subject in the "public mind," and it is precisely in the public sphere where activist practices could be executed (O'Toole 2017, 177). With this argument in mind, her speech could be significant at a performance level since through it she could realize a change. By somehow "acting" (in non-literal terms), and not being a mute subject, Feinberg was fighting against transphobia, and, as a consequence, changing the ways in which their audiences could construct the presence of transwomen in the public domain. Cvetkovich (2003, 45) argued that it is by means of cultural struggle that the public recognition of a queer traumatic experience is made possible; hence, by means of activist practices accomplished by Camp Trans, oppression or discrimination towards gender identity was given voice.

If Feinberg's account could be considered the starting point of an activist change, Jessica Xavier's "individual performance" — due to the intimate nature that performances at Camp Trans' 99 had — *The Phantom Menace at Michigan* represents, from the perspective of an attender to Camp Trans, how effective were previous activist practices held in the same festival:

Thus Gay and Lesbian Identity Politics, which denies me inclusion in anti-discrimination legislation, also would erase my actual sexual orientation (bisexual) - if I didn't fight for it (...) Being born into a body without the mismatch of gender identity and physical sex spares the birth privileged all manner of physical, emotional, social, legal and financial hardships. Like other forms of privilege, it's possessors usually don't know they have it, which unfortunately allows them to unwittingly oppress transsexual women and men. [...] Which brings me to the Michigan Women's Music Festival and its "womyn-born-womyn" policy. Transsexual women who identify as Lesbian and Bisexual have been going to Michigan and other women-only festivals since their inception, almost always without incident. How? About a third of us have passing privilege, allowing us to pass undetected as nontranssexual women - thus making such exclusionary policies unenforceable. [...] So the real message of these exclusionary policies is that if we're not out, we can stay in, but if we're out or outed, we can be thrown out of the festival. (Xavier 1999)

This account, however, transcends the idea of the efficacy that other speeches delivered at Camp Trans had among transwomen since Xavier unknowingly established a powerful connection between non-literal notions of performance and Queer Trauma.

Gamson claimed that “cases of explicit expulsion of group members in sex and gender movements manifest whether and how all social movements are engaged in the social construction of gender” (1997, 181), and Xavier’s account, implicitly, gives clues of this identity construction. Living in a body “without the mismatch of gender identity and physical sex” indicates that their identity has been constructed outside hegemonic boundaries. This intrinsically connects Xavier’s argument with Butler’s theory of Gender Performativity. This theory has as its basis the idea that rather than being a continuum of biological sex or an inherent identity, gender is an act which arises from, strengthens, and is strengthened by, societal norms (Butler 1990). Therefore, by delivering such speech, Xavier was performing an identity that allowed her self-identification as a bisexual woman. This established a new way of constructing identity derived from an individual’s performance of acts that could be neither associated with female nor male but rather both. As mentioned before, transwomen who wanted to enter MWMF suffered from transphobia due to the performativity of an identity that stood outside conventional sociocultural boundaries, and this irremediably caused them a traumatic experience. Xavier’s words were a desperate attempt to condemn this policy while unknowingly creating what Cvetkovich (2003, 8) defined as a “trauma culture.” By disclosing a private reality as it could be transphobia at MWMF, others with a similar frame of mind could feel connected to this issue and start producing cultural artifacts that would ultimately constitute a new structure of feeling. Hence, the significance of Xavier’s performance not only stands on the effectiveness of previous demonstrations exerted at Camp Trans, but also on the creation of a new way of living around trauma derived from the performance of an identity that was overtly rejected by others.

Little did Nancy Burkholder, Riki Wilchins, or Leslie Feinberg know that one act of bravery could leave such a mark on the trans movement. After Camp Trans’ 99, cultural artifacts such as workshops, demonstrations, and talks, did not stop from being produced, and Camp’s Trans voices were echoing them each year in which MWMF was celebrated. Another event considered a watershed moment for the movement was the interruption of a workshop by Leslie Feinberg claiming that they had “been told we can enter the festival” but only if they conformed to existing sex and gender binary identities. This might have been perceived as a victory for Camp Trans, but it was not: Lisa Vogel, founder of MWMW, issued declarations that still revealed her reticence to accept transwomen.

In 2015, MWMF decided to shut down rather than updating the format of the festival to the recent times and allowing the entrance of people with fluid gender identities. However, in an interview of 2018 and looking in retrospect, Vogel declared that there were “many things that influenced the attendance of the festival and certainly the trans debate was one of them.” Her words demonstrate that the activist practices undertaken by Camp Trans had, to some extent, an effect on the organizers of the festival.

On the one hand, speeches such as that of Leslie Feinberg becoming a subject by means of the public disclosure of queer trauma allowed for advocating a transformation. On the other hand, Jessica Xavier's account constituted a new 'trauma culture' around the idea of gender performativity. Different but at the same time interdependent, both processes are illustrative examples of the ways in which either literal or non-literal performances, collective or individual, public or private, were not only an entertaining experience but also a motor of change to redefine society and its gender and sex related conventions. Cvetkovich claimed that changes happen "[...] not only when there's despair but also when there is hope" (2003, 64), and hope inundated every corner of Camp Trans since. Despite the fact that the group did not win that particular fight and the rejection by the festival organizers persisted, Camp Trans' 99 cast a stone that would not go unnoticed.

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