

RECONSTRUCTING GENDER, PERSONAL NARRATIVE, AND PERFORMANCE
AT THE MICHIGAN WOMYN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL

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of the requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

RECONSTRUCTING GENDER, PERSONAL NARRATIVE, AND PERFORMANCE
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Presented by Lisa L. Higgins

A candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

To Cassandra and the rest of my family,
near and dear, and far and wide

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It takes a village to complete a dissertation—not to write one but to support the writer. My village is large, and my heart is full of thanks to: Lisa Vogel, the campers, and workers at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival; my dear friends who sat with me and shared their stories about Festival, especially Julie, Tessa, Sue, Nancy, Edie, Ginny, Cindy, Pam, Red, Pat, and Blu; my dissertation committee: J. Sanford Rikoon, Martha Townsend, Sw. Anand Prahlad and, most especially, Elaine J. Lawless; the shadow dissertation committee: LeeAnn Whites, Frances Wasserlein, Cassandra Rogers, Linda Reeder, Carolynn Sween, and Mary Jo Neitz; the Miami Writers Colony: Anna Lingo, Jan Colbert, Charlene Lingo, and Betty Littleton; the Ellis Interlibrary Loan staff, especially Delores Fisher; the University of Missouri Department of English for a dissertation fellowship and Victoria Thorpe; my co-workers and supervisors at the Museum of Art and Archaeology and the Missouri Arts Council, especially Alex Barker, Beverly Strohmeier, Carol Geisler, and Marlene Perchinske; my peers in folklore studies at MU; my folk sisters, especially Teresa Hollingsworth and Aimee Schmidt; my mother Betty, and all the women who dare me to rise every single day.

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examines the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a thirty-two-year-old, week-long event that features women performers and relies on an all female staff who produce the event for an audience of women and children. The Festival is more than a site to watch musicians perform. Participants have created a culture that foregrounds a worldview that includes safe space, personal authorization, and celebration of women's experience, work, and art. Through insider participant-observation, this ethnographer maps the folklore-based discourse of the short-term separatist community, uncovering and revealing alternative representations of the "nude" female in personal experience stories as both a key tradition and a symbol of personal regeneration.

Introduction

Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival. (Bakhtin 1986:170)

Culturally-based groups have congregated to participate in festive or celebratory events as far back as we can document human group behavior. In ancient times, self-identified communities apparently strove to create some semblance of order in response to the seeming chaos of the weather and the unpredictability of seasonal changes. Agrarian cultures celebrated the cycles of planting and harvesting, perhaps to make life more predictable. Religious groups similarly marked their members' births, rites of passage and deaths, the light and the dark, as well as their gods and saints with communal efforts for cohesion, stability, and the establishment of shared social and cultural norms. Currently, threads of ancient agrarian and religious festivals are sustained in theory via well-known American events, such as Thanksgiving and Mardi Gras, and even at an international level with the Olympics. In fact, contemporary festivals and celebrations have grown even more plentiful across the globe. In the United States, cities, counties, and states mark their histories and chart their progress with fairs, festivals, and bazaars.

Culturally-specific groups commemorate heroes, folkways, and anniversaries that resonate for local and regional communities. And, economic development councils promote local products and icons, though not always for the same reasons.

Based on his reading of cross-disciplinary studies of the genre of festival, Alessandro Falassi posits a working definition of festival:

a periodically recurrent, social occasion in which [members of a whole community, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and sharing a worldview], through multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events, participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees. (1987:2)

Although Falassi does not discuss the ways in which festivals function, other scholars' analyses have focused on ways that festivals may frame both the maintenance of societal norms and cultural inversion simultaneously. Frank E. Manning asserts that "[p]lay inverts the social order and leans toward license" (1983:7), while Barbara A. Babcock states that "symbolic inversions define a culture's lineaments at the same time as they question the usefulness and absoluteness of this ordering" (1978:25). The emphases in Falassi's definition and the plethora of scholarship on festivals, then, seem to include both the notion of a ritualized social function as well as a psychological,

celebratory outlet for folk groups. Barre Toelken might add to this discussion that folklore and folkloric events, such as festivals, tend to pull participants both toward the status quo—conservatism—and toward change—dynamism (1969:96).

“Women-only” festivals, such as the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MWMF) that is the focus of this dissertation, fit into these basic definitions.¹ Women’s festivals rely heavily on both the ludic and the symbolic elements found in traditional festive events; yet women’s festival participants are united by another bond, particularly by the bond of exclusion from or oppression in a patriarchal society. Over the course of the week-long event, MWMF attendees strive to eliminate oppression; to counteract essentialist notions of feminist, lesbian, or woman; and to foreground a worldview that includes safe space, personal authorization, and celebration of women’s experience, work, and art. Therefore, I use my own feminist narrative ethnography² to negotiate and represent meaning through insider observation, participation, and collaboration. My goal is to map the folklore-based discourse of the short-term separatist community produced during a women-only festival. In my research, I uncover and reveal alternative representations of the “nude” female in

personal experience stories as both a key tradition and a symbol of personal regeneration. In particular, I explicate personal narratives that I have collected over the last seventeen years, narratives about women and their personal reflections about "being naked" in the social and political space of this festival. In the process, I must periodically insert my own narrative, presented in the first person; I am a "central character" who seeks to "resolve at the personal level the internal discord arising from the disconnect between [my] professional and personal aesthetics and value systems" as well as to negotiate the disconnects between the worlds inside and outside the boundaries of the Festival. (Prahlad 2005:24)

In each of the chapters of this dissertation, I rely on personal experience narratives and "conversations," whether oral or published, in order to trace the discourse facilitated by the MWMF experience. Theorist Michel Foucault discusses the significance of studying those who are silenced, how they are silenced, where they are silenced, and why they are silenced. And, he points out the insidious ways that societal norms silence marginalized groups (1972). Women's festivals are consciously created to give space and voice to all participants, to create a quasi-public location to express, exchange, and examine

ideas.³ The goal may be compared to Jurgen Habermas' "ideal speech situation" where "no institutional power, physical threats, or lies get in the way of argument and inference" and "all actors are competent and able to challenge the premises" (Crawford 2002:29). Obviously, the ideal is ultimately impossible to achieve. The MWMF events I examine in this study will illustrate the ongoing struggles with equality and criticism in a meta-society that hopes to celebrate diversity while simultaneously trying to define itself and its boundaries. This dissertation traces, describes, and interprets MWMF discourse with a particular focus on the personal experience narrative. This discourse mediates and negotiates the identities of individual participants within the MWMF's lesbian-feminist community, and between sub-cultures and the dominant society, ultimately establishing an alternative socio-cultural world for the festival's participants who attend the annual event.

Chapter One provides the setting for the study, as I put myself and the MWMF into context personally, historically, geographically, and politically. In Chapter Two, I begin by recounting the story that served as the catalyst for this study, a story that I found to be indicative of MWMF participation and the festival's role in

the identities of its participants. In order to examine this particular festival's identity, it is also necessary to position it within the larger movement of women's music and culture. Chapter Two also places my study into context with new ethnographic scholarship about MWMF, in effect, a survey of the field. The chapter then concludes with some explication of my own research methodology. Chapter Three is an arduous and deeply personal examination of my identity as a lesbian, a feminist, and a folklorist, exploring the ways that my participation in the MWMF created and creates various degrees of tension each time I began to document, analyze, and write about the event. MWMF actively and consciously seeks to fully engage the participant and the audience, to have members move to a great extent between their assigned roles, and to have each woman examine her participation and actions as significant to the larger MWMF community's actions and conversations. Therefore, I have only ever been able to alleviate the tensions of my scholarly analysis with an acknowledgement of my roles as both participant and observer, dual roles that are not unique to me, or any other scholar studying MWMF.

Chapter Four begins the analyses of the collected narratives of casual nudity or "being naked at Festival

stories," looking at them structurally, comparatively, and functionally. Ten stories are included in the analysis, from a wide variety of sources including my own fieldwork, the fieldwork of other ethnographers, and secondary sources. My original fieldwork was conducted within my own local folk group, primarily white, middle class women in a Midwestern college town. Additional fieldwork was conducted within my MWMF folk group, whose primary identification in relation to the event is as volunteer workers. The latter group and the voices culled from secondary sources are more diverse with regard to class, race, age, and geography. Three additional verbatim narrative texts are included in Chapter Five; these stories were all collected via electronic correspondence from women with whom I have worked at the MWMF. These narratives are key components to the expansion of my thesis, which relies on performance theory to reconstruct fixed definitions of gender and narrative.

Ethnographic studies provide opportunities to uncover deeper layers of meaning. On the surface, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is a series of performances produced in a remote, rural location. Ethnographic explications of the MWMF, however, uncover several layers of participation, tradition, and rhetoric, from the official discourse found

in the event's published programs to the individual and collective voices of its participants and critics. A grassroots event that has grown into an institution in lesbian and feminist culture, the MWMF frames the community's culture, politics, and discourse in active collaboration with participants. A prevailing trope in this shared discourse is that MWMF provides a safe space for certain behaviors that are in direct conflict with the norms of Western society. I argue that the narratives about being openly naked indicate a seemingly archetypal story that is heavily imbued with notions of freedom and liberation.

¹ Some lesbian-feminist communities employ alternative spellings of *woman/women*, such as *womyn*, *womon*, and *wimmin*. These alternatives are designed to erase associations with *man* or *men* because of the Middle Ages etymology that irrevocably ties woman to patriarchy's defined role of wife to man. In this dissertation, for clarity, I use the conventional spellings of *woman* and *women*, unless I am using the Festival's name or quoting from another source. At the MWMF, *womyn* has evolved into shorthand for a person who was identified at birth as female, was raised as a girl, and lives as a woman.

² Feminist scholars examine the issues of fieldwork and representation, particularly in regard to post-structuralist theories like *reflexivity* posited by Ruby (1982) and Clifford and Marcus (1986). Important examples and critiques of feminist ethnography include Caplan (1988); Gordon (1988); Stacey (1988); Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen (1989); Abu-Loghod (1990); Lawless (1991, 1992); Bell, Caplan and Karim (1992).

³ The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is a private enterprise that is owned by We Want the Music Company, and the event is produced on privately owned land. Festival, however, is not a private club; legally, it is quasi-public-privately owned with services rendered to ticket purchasing members of the general public. Because Festival is restricted to ticket holders, designated staff, and artists and because the location is on private land, the resulting effect for participants is a feeling of privacy, much like a private retreat. I will occasionally use "public" in the context of Festival to indicate that an act happens openly and in the presence of a large crowd.

Chapter One

Tent City in the Woods

August 8-13

Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, near Grand Rapids, Mich. Started in the '70s, this weeklong campout features performances, workshops, a crafts bazaar and a film festival.

Ms. Magazine, Summer 2006

Coming Out to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival Jonesboro, Arkansas Saturday, August 4, 1990¹

I first attended the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in August 1990, but my personal festival started long before I ever began packing my bags or loading my truck for the one week camping adventure. The year before, my then-girlfriend Gina² attended the 14th Annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF) and came home with fascinating stories about the ups and downs of women-only space. Throughout the next year, she told her stories, and I read more about this festival in underground lesbian newsletters and feminist journals with eager anticipation of my own trip north to Michigan. In June, we ordered our tickets. In July, we began strategically planning for six days and nights of camping in western Michigan. In August, Gina and

I packed the truck with clothes, bedding, coolers, a cheap portable grill, and a camping toilet.

We took a very convoluted route north from Arkansas for fifteen hours, where we landed overnight to pick up our friend Dona³ in Wisconsin. The next morning, the three of us drove in our two pick-up truck convoy for six hours, through the always-congested traffic of metro Chicago, and around the southern tip of Lake Michigan. As we traveled east and then north again, we began to encounter car-, truck- and camper-loads of women and gear. We quickly guessed where they were headed. Their vehicles often sported telltale bumper stickers: "See you in August" (a motto of the annual festival that only has meaning for Festival participants); intertwined women's symbols and rainbow flags (iconography of lesbian and gay "pride"); environmentalist maxims; and political slogans. We peered into the vehicles looking for confirmation of our suspicions: for close-cropped hair, for sleeping bags piled up to the roof, for a carload of women sharing a ride. They looked back at us, searching for similar signs of recognition. My truck had no bumper stickers, but the one on Dona's Toyota urged readers to consider donating "10% for Peace."⁴ Those "in-the-know" guessed where we were headed as well.

Again, we diverted from the most direct route and headed east to Grand Rapids to pick up Dona's then-girlfriend Tina,⁵ who had flown in from Texas. The airport was transformed that Monday morning into the Lesbian International Airport. Everywhere we looked on the concourse, women were heading toward the exits, hauling camping gear and duffle bags. Tina reported that her flight was jam-packed with "dykes."⁶ Outside, a large passenger bus, provided to shuttle women to Festival land about two hours north, was surrounded by more women and more gear, although on the bus they were limited to two bags each. As a "festi-virgin"⁷ and a fairly new lesbian, I was already on the Wanderground⁸. We gathered Tina, her bag, and our share of knowing grins. One more stop—a local Meijer's department store for more gear, beer, snacks, and meat for the tiny grill (having been warned of Festival's generous but vegetarian meals).

Finally, our caravan headed north, catching the highway that parallels Lake Michigan's eastern coast. In our group, only Gina had attended the MWMF before. We checked the printed directions that had been mailed along with our advance sale tickets, but we needed only to follow the northern pilgrimage of mostly shorthaired women driving mostly bumper-stickered vehicles laden with gear to find

Festival's land. Off the highway, we wound our way through a small town and down a few curvy blacktops. The first time, we missed our turn, a nondescript gravel country road, but we quickly turned around along with a couple of other obvious newcomers. Just down the gravel road, we landed at the end of a line of vehicles, a long line that we learned stretched a couple of miles back from the MWMF front gate. Over the next two hours, sustained with cold leftover Chinese food stashed fortuitously in our coolers, we crept down the road, starting and stopping, hoping to see the entrance around every curve in the road. Finally, we saw a few women in orange safety vests directing traffic. The open gate was adorned with a wide rectangular green sign with hand-painted purple letters that read: Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, further assuring us we were in the right place. Beside the gate stood another large wooden sign painted purple, a cutout of Festival's logo (a stand of trees in the shape of a grand piano, nicknamed Treeano or Triano), flanked by seven multi-colored flags spelling out W.E.L.C.O.M.E. We widened our nervous, but excited, smiles. Dozens more women swarmed around the field on the other side of the fence, while recorded music played loudly through large speakers. One of the orange-vested women directed us to pull through the

gate, advance ticket holders to the left. Thick-striped tents, reminiscent of carnivals and fairs we have all attended, housed the Festival Box Office and other Festival services unknown to us. We stopped the truck and were greeted by two very exuberant women who came to our windows, took our tickets, and welcomed us with our official MWMF wristbands and enthusiastic shouts of "Welcome Home" and "Festi-Virgins!!" We had arrived!

With the notable exception of the Midwest Wimmin's Festival, which was founded in the Missouri Ozarks in 1974 largely as a fun retreat in the woods, most women's festivals first began in order to fill a particular niche in the summer music circuit—to showcase the rising genre of "women's music" that arose from the convergence of second wave feminism, lesbian separatism, and folk music. The innovation of "women-only" music festivals was fairly simultaneous with the music festivals of the late sixties and early seventies, events like Monterrey and Woodstock. The first official women's music festival, the National Women's Music Festival, began in reaction to the exclusion of women at a local folk festival in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.⁹ "National" has always taken place indoors on a

college campus, moving from Champaign-Urbana to Bloomington, Indiana in 1982, and later to Muncie, Indiana. National suspended production in 2005 due to financial shortfalls but resumed production in 2006 at the Bloomington/Normal campus of Illinois State University. A few indoor festivals also sprung up in the 1990s that were mostly held in hotels. Whatever the venue, women's festivals are unique communities created over the course of several weeks "by women for women." The focus of the women's festivals is usually on music, sometimes on comedy, and sometimes on women's art and culture. In addition to entertainment, events may include workshops on various issues of particular concern to women, especially feminists and/or lesbians, ranging from legal, political, and medical to parenting, domestic relationships, and spirituality. Another favorite component at women's festivals is vendor space for women to exhibit and sell artistic works and crafts to participants. The festival studied here is an outdoor festival held on private land, and it is the largest event of its kind, managing to include all these components in one event.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is an annual event produced each summer on private property in Oceana County, on land owned by We Want the Music Company (WWTMC), the

producer of the festival. According to the 1882 publication A History of Oceana County, and the 1990 MWMF program, the area is believed to have been the home of native peoples, including the Ottawa, who migrated south from Canada. The Ottawa ceded much of the land in an 1821 treaty. White settlers organized the small rural county around the timber industry in the late-1800s. Festival land itself was logged early in the twentieth century, and Whistle Trail¹⁰ is the site of the former logging track bed. From the early 1900s, one family owned the property until selling to WWTMC in 1982 (WWTMC 1990:3).¹¹

Today, Oceana County is noted mostly for farming (asparagus, u-pick fields, and feed corn) and outdoor recreation (hunting, fishing, snow mobiling, and dune buggy riding along the sandy Lake Michigan coastline). The summer surge of Festival workers and campers is another boon to the local tourism industry, as thousands of women descend on the county before, during, and after the event.¹² There is an economic boost to the community when these women arrive: they rent hotel rooms and campground sites pre- and post-fest; they replace forgotten or broken camping gear; and they purchase or wash clothes if they misjudged the weather. Most top off gas tanks before driving into the line on "Opening Day" and once again before leaving a week

later for long drives home. On the way into the area, many grab last minute refreshments and cigarettes (at least one store specially stocked imported beer, loose leaf Drum brand tobacco, and American Spirit cigarettes that are all known to be favorites of Festival attendees). After Festival, tables at local restaurants are filled with weary campers sitting down for a much-anticipated non-vegetarian meal. Those carnivores that cannot wait seven days for a meat fix will often make a run to a local tavern for burgers, but the majority of festies prefer to stay within the boundaries of Festival's gates for the duration of the event. While the local community may not share Festival attendees' politics or lifestyles, locals have learned ways to benefit financially from this seasonal event.

The MWMF property lies in a more remote area adjacent to the massive Manistee National Forest. Inside Festival's gates, though, is a tent city all its own. The entrance leads into a large open meadow that is mowed each year for parking and shuttle loading. A stand of tall trees and a small hill separate the meadow from RV camping, but the majority of campers and all workers live further east, on the other side of "Treeline," the western edge of a dense forest that shades thousands of tents each August. Scattered across the city's sandy soil are knee-high oak

saplings, lush bracken ferns, and a system of trails. A second clearing on the east side of this stretch of forest is home to the city's "downtown" (entertainment, community center, medical assistance, shopping, food, and worker's village). The forest is also home to a range of wildlife: beavers in the swamp; thousands of small brown toads in another remote area near the western boundary (and it is not uncommon for a lone green tree frog to take up residence between one's tent and its rain fly); wild turkeys; blue racer snakes; chipmunks; an occasional wild pig (sighted pre-fest one year on the edge of worker camping); and the increasingly adventurous teams of clever and well-fed raccoons.

This now thirty-two year old festival draws somewhere between 3,000 and 8,000 human participants, or "festigoers" for one week each August. As the blurb from Ms. Magazine notes at the beginning of this chapter, the event, started in the seventies, is a "weeklong camping event with a myriad of activities." However, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival—also known in coded "lesbian parlance" simply as Michigan, Michfest, MWMF, or Festival—is so much more (Adams 1999:179).¹³ As Festival insider and folklorist Kay Turner notes:

Michigan becomes a study of the meaning of community and the definition of community that is in formation and in flux at all times. And yet I wouldn't want not to recognize that Michigan has a very definite place in the history of lesbian community and the larger notion of what that means simply because there was—generally speaking—no such thing seventy-five years ago. (Turner in Cvetkovich and Wahng 2001:139)

While relatively young in the folklorist's understanding of the festival genre, the MWMF is a pioneer event in lesbian history and is a community rich in tradition.¹⁴

The vast majority of the Michigan community is lesbian; many of the participants identify as some kind of feminist; some identify themselves with the post-modern label "queer"; and others prefer to defy any labels. Festival participants come from every state and several countries, although most women are from the Midwest. The audience also includes a large population of children. Festival has always included a few women with their children in tow, but the last decade has seen a baby boom in the lesbian community and at Festival.¹⁵ An increasing population of women with children led to ever-increasing spaces for family camping and daycare in Sprouts (children 4 and under) and Gaia Girls (girls 5 and up). After some negotiation in the earliest years, Festival policy evolved to allow boys four years old and under to camp with their

mothers in the festival proper. Five-to-ten-year-old boys camp at Brother Sun, on Festival property but beyond the geographical boundary called Treeline, with their mothers who now are required to camp with them and assist Festival staff assigned to Brother Sun during the day. In recent years, these families have dubbed the Brother Sun camping area "Neverland," an acknowledgement of the playful community of boys. Providing childcare (and free or reduced tickets for children, depending on age) is one of many ways Festival expresses its feminist commitment to empowering women and to garnering the largest audience of female participants possible.¹⁶

Festival staff and its producer also pride themselves on creating a woman-centered space constructed through layers of collaborative work. A small collective of women with shared ownership originally produced the event, but then responsibility shifted to a partnership of three women Lisa Vogel and her sister, Kristie, young white women from a working class family in Michigan, were key members of the MWMF founders, and they were joined by Barbara "Boo" Price. Lisa Vogel and Price then co-produced the festival for years as equal partners. Since 1995, Lisa Vogel has been the sole producer and owner. She and a small paid staff (three full-time and four part-time) work year round to

identify or hire the following: staff of 400-750 volunteers; performers for five days and three stages; intensive workshop leaders; and artists and craftswomen who sell their goods at the crafts bazaar. In addition to the full-year paid staff, Festival is produced through the hard work of a large group of women who volunteer to construct the event from the ground up to full production and back down to the ground, leaving nothing on the property each year except buried power lines, underground wells, and a short paved path for wheelchair accessibility. MWMF has always relied on these volunteer work crews; in 1984, the work became more specific, and all workers were required to apply for specific crews of "defined tasks" (WWTMC 1990:24). Festival workers, both paid and volunteer, collectively shepherd the one-week event through construction, production, and performance. The process includes everything from building stages, cooking meals, shuttling participants, and providing basic health care, to coordinating daily activities that include music concerts, workshops, a film series, and the crafts bazaar. Whether paid or volunteer, the staff members are known simply as "workers," and the vast majority of them reside in an area within the festival property called "Workerville." They arrive at the MWMF property each summer in two waves,

"long" and "short," a process that was described in 2001 by a group of six workers who participated in a roundtable discussion that was transcribed and published in GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies as "Don't Stop the Music":

Workers are organized in crews that come for a one-month "long crew" (two weeks pre-festival and one week post-festival) or for a "short crew" of ten to fourteen days. Long crews include Lace Hardware, which installs the tents for stages and brings in lumber and furniture; Land, which makes paths and prepares "the land"; Carpentry, which builds the stages and other wooden structures; Workers' Kitchen (a.k.a. Gal's Diner), which prepares food; Belly Bowl, which serves drinks and snacks; Garbage and Recycling; Sanitation, which takes care of Porta-Janes; Plumbing; Massage; Worker Support; Staff Services; Shuttle; Worker Childcare; and Health Care. Many other short crews handle the performances and the festies; Stage crews (for each of the three stages), Performer support, Parking, Community Center, and more, including the Main Kitchen, which feeds as many as six thousand festies. (Cvetkovich and Wahng 2001:132-133)

Festival's collaborative work process, however, is equally dependent on a system that asks each ticket buyer (also known as a "festie") to donate four to eight hours of work during the week. The festie work shifts have a three-fold purpose: to supplement the full-time staff, to keep Festival ticket prices as low as possible, and to foster a sense of personal investment in the community through active participation. American Studies ethnographer Laurie

J. Kendall notes that "With so many services offered, Festival organizers and workers could never provide them all without the help of festie-goers. These services require hundreds of 'womyn-hours' each day and skills that range from highly technical to relatively simple" (2006:110). Side benefits of volunteer shifts include wider socialization among Festival participants as well as recruitment of new workers for future festivals. Using an honor system, Festival asks each woman to sign up for her work shifts at the Orientation tent before she even sets up camp. Sociologist Sara Collas describes her sign-up process in Orientation as a first-timer:

We go over to the Orientation tent. There is a pre-recorded video. I am too excited, too impatient to settle in to watch. I do understand that I have the obligation to sign up for two four-work [sic] shifts. I am given a thick forty-page brochure, which lists rules and regulations and tells us of the concerts and workshops which we may choose. It tells us also of the schedules for eating our three vegan [sic] meals.¹⁷ There is another table in the tent where women answer any question you might have.

I am in awe. Women are in charge. They are efficient, strong, and confident. They have built a "city." Whatever is needed is there. They are not dependent on men for anything. In fact, there are no men anywhere.

The women are young, old, overweight, rail thin, black, white, brown, butch, femme, gender ambiguous, and some who can easily pass as males. I forget for a second that men are not allowed on the land. Then I remember. I am here with all women and ready for the party of my life. (2004:11)

Since "coming out" to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 1990, I have attended MWMF fourteen times, spending a total of 154 days on "the Land." For my first, second, and thirteenth years, I participated as a festie, but for eleven years, I have been a Worker, a member of the volunteer Festival staff.¹⁸ From 1992-1998, I was a member of the Security/Communications crew, also holding Assistant Coordinator (1995-1997) and Coordinator (1998) positions. Broadly, Security monitors who does and does not enter the gates of Festival, provides assistance to campers and crews as needed, and reminds festi-goers of Festival guidelines. After a long stint on Security, I worked on the following crews.

- **Satellite (1999):** a small, new crew of long-time workers who were asked to help Security and Box Office explore and, hopefully, deter a growing problem—campers who sneak inside the gates without buying tickets. We passed out fliers to festies in the line before the gate opened to raise awareness about the problem. We also checked Festival's physical boundaries for fence jumpers, monitored some common Festival areas like the Main Kitchen to check

wristbands, a.k.a. tickets, and even inspected large RVs and campers for stow-aways.

- **Community Center (2003):** a large tent that is a social hub during Festival. Women come to the Community Center for general information, to borrow board games or sports equipment, to attend dance workshops, or for Lost and Found. In the evenings, after Night Stage, the Community Center crew converts the space into the "August Night Café," selling refreshments and coordinating an open mic performance stage.

- **Cuntree Store/Festie Wear (2004 and 2007):** sites where campers can purchase snacks, toiletries, forgotten camping gear, and merchandise with the festival logo. In 2007, I was one of three assistant coordinators on this crew, where my primary responsibilities were to create a schedule for sixteen workers for the seven days the store was open, supervise crew and volunteers during work shifts, maintain accurate inventories, log deposits, and sell goods.

After my first MWMF, I knew that I would return again and again. After my first year as a worker, I knew that I would return to crew again and again. My status as a

graduate student during those years did not afford me much economically, but I did have large chunks of free time, and I was able to spend nine consecutive years attending or working Festival. Since 1999, full-time employment has afforded me a more comfortable and stable lifestyle, but I have also been forced to choose whether I have the vacation time to attend as a worker, or whether I have the money to buy a ticket as a festi-goer, or whether I have to stay home in August. No matter which I choose, my personal identity is intricately tied to my experiences at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. As early as my fourth year, the map to Michigan was routed in my body.

**Coming Home to Michigan
Columbia, Missouri
Tuesday, August 1, 1995**

I will drive thirteen hours to the state of Michigan from mid-Missouri for my annual pilgrimage to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. This is my sixth trip to Festival, my first to drive alone. Early in the morning, I load camping gear in the back of my 1990 Ford Ranger and head out toward the rising sun. Just outside the city, I see a doe standing in a mowed field row along Interstate 70,

hinting that I am leaving the city and university behind. I speed ahead on the interstate, wondering what, if anything, I have forgotten to pack. My gear is reflected in the rearview mirror. I have included anything to make the woods a little homier since I will be working for two weeks: toiletries, a tent, all-weather clothes, and a makeshift night stand for a reading lamp. August in Michigan is unpredictable. I have experienced major thunderstorms, near-freezing temperatures, perpetual rain, and unbearable heat—sometimes, it seems, all in one year. So, I also packed two sleeping bags, three tarps of graduating sizes, my dad's old suede barn jacket, waterproof rain shoes, sandals, two pairs of boots and several pairs of socks, sunscreen, and an alarm clock.

Somewhere around the Illinois/Indiana border (metro Chicago), Interstate 94 starts a gentle curve north following the Lake Michigan coast, and the sweltering August temperatures seem to drop a cool ten degrees. When I enter the state of Michigan, I stop at the Rest Area/Tourist Information building for another pit stop. Stretching my legs, I venture into the tourist area and pick up a complimentary map of the state, calculating the remaining hours to my destination (about three). I also browse through the divided bin of marketing fliers for

state attractions and am intrigued by a whole wall of brochures for festivals in the state. On a whim, I check through them, but I am not at all surprised that the women's festival is not represented, nor is it included in the state published travel literature. From my own experience, I know that the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is an event that is advertised, but only in lesbian and feminist publications, through direct mail, and, most importantly, by word of mouth. Upon coming out as lesbians, many women, like me, discover a multi-faceted culture and network that was previously invisible.

Anxious now, I hop back in the Ranger, roll down the window and head north. Interstate 80 segues into I-94, then I-96, and even though Lake Michigan is not visible from the road, I can smell a pleasant fishiness in the air and am always tempted to swing by and walk on the beach. By this time, however, familiar landmarks keep me on course. This stretch of highway is much more scenic than the flat, bland interstates stretching out for miles and miles in Illinois. Trees flank the divided road; its shoulders hoist signs for blueberries, tulips, and sand dune resorts. Periodically, traffic is slowed by flashing yellow and red lights as I pass in and out of towns. Plywood cutouts of Dutch girls and boys in wooden shoes gathering tulips welcome me to

Holland. Tulips and gladiolas are major crops there, and some festies will adorn the imaginary front porches of their dome tent homes with vibrant gladiola bouquets. I stop and start my way through the frustrating traffic lights of Holland and finally coast onto the smooth divided highway that takes me to Hart, all along reading the now memorized signs for "Fresh Michigan Blueberries, ½ mile on left" or for four-wheeling in the Dunes, "great family fun." These signs intermingle with the newer signs for the ubiquitous Dairy Queens, Kentucky Fried Chickens, and McDonalds at regular exit intervals.

Over the years, I note some changes. Hart, a town close to my destination, is now home to a Comfort Inn, a new addition since I started attending Festival. I exit and pass the International Hairport Beauty Parlor and the local fairgrounds. After a left and a right, I am on the last stretch. More family-run fruit stands and plywood lawn art are interspersed along the winding and rolling two-lane highway. A white frame house on the left is flanked by a long row of identical poplars with symmetrical trunks stretching toward the clouds, leaves waving like flat blue-silver hands. Down the road, the savvy owner of the country store has already changed his flashing arrow sign to greet me and other Festival attendees with a simple, but telling,

"Welcome Womyn." At the next stop sign, with a look to the left, I turn right and see Latino migrant farmers working the asparagus fields.

I begin my search for the last road, the county road that is marked not with a sign for the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival but one for a family camping resort further down the road. The last four miles my truck jostles along the ribs of the ungraded dirt road; I try to keep my speed down, though at this point I am anxious to arrive at Festival's front gate. As I rumble along the washboard road, I am more than impatient to see a friendly face and to talk to someone besides the conservative radio talk show hosts that I have yelled at and argued with for hours about the O. J. Simpson murder trial and the "Waco" congressional hearings. Little traffic, if any, is on the road, mostly a pickup truck or perhaps an occasional RV. As I crest a small hill, I slow for a lone wild turkey crossing the road. I pass the "back" gate, hidden in the curve of the road, and head for the "front" gate. Some years, I may pass a Festival work truck before I reach the front gate, but usually it is the plain swinging metal gate, quietly holding a few hundred workers, which signals that I have arrived. I recognize the women of the Security crew, seemingly lounging in their lawn chairs, but alert to check

in workers, performers, and delivery drivers. One woman jumps up to open the gate, and as I creep closer, I am recognized by my crewmates. With equal parts sarcasm and sincerity, N greets me with a hug and a "Welcome Home." The other women recognize my truck, then me, run over, and yell, "Welcome home, honey."

I have arrived again at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, but one would never know it. The actual festival will not begin for another six days. The signage, striped awning tents, loud music, and smiling women who greet the festi-goers at the gate on Opening Day are all missing. All one sees past the metal gate is a white aluminum-sided trailer on the left, a simple silver tarp awning on the right, four rented Porto-lets, and a meadow of knee-high grass stretching behind them. Hay bales may be stacked in the field, if they have been delivered, but there is no indication that eventually they will create artificial boundaries in the meadow to define a giant parking lot and shuttle stops.

The boundaries of the festival itself start with the front gate (west), better known to Festival workers as Gate 5. Wire fence follows the county road, partially enclosing

the land along the edges of its 650 acres. Another stretch of the property is bound by swamp (south). A second gate, Gate 6, is back down the county road toward town.

Festival's inner road, Lois Lane, makes a long loop east into the heart of the event and out again to the west through the back gate. A third gate, number 7, which is locked constantly during festivals, veers off Lois Lane to the left from the Triangle traffic post, and joins a road leading through the adjacent national forest. The land at "Michigan," like any land that holds personal and communal meaning, is itself a narrative.

For instance, the gates are numbered five, six and seven not because there are or ever were four other gates but because earlier in Festival history, workers only used citizen's band radios to communicate from one post to another, and they were easily monitored by any outsider in the surrounding county. Theoretically, six or seven gates would indicate that the land and the population were very large. A large population, even of women, would help to deter abuse or assault by small bands of local bigots who might capitalize on the perceived vulnerability of a smaller number of women on a small piece of property. Similarly, code words were devised to mask events and identities, and real numbers or names of women are to this

day never broadcast over a CB radio. Over the years, Festival staff has engendered a more congenial relationship with many members of the local community, especially business owners, suppliers, and law enforcement, so harassment is typically isolated and the work of small cliques or individuals.

Like the main Festival road, called Lois Lane, landmarks often have mystical, reverent, and irreverent women-centered names. The campgrounds are named Amazon Acres, Crone Heights, Solanas Ferns, and Bush Gardens. Three Sisters is a turnout on Lois Lane marked by a group of three trees sharing a root system. The health services tent is called The Womb. Campers can purchase all types of camping supplies from ice cream, potato chips, and sunscreen to tampons, lawn chairs, and flashlight batteries at the Cuntree Store. Other locations on the land have been added and named for arising functions not foreseen in the festival's youth:

- Crafts Bazaar (1976)
- Gaia Girls Camp (1979)
- Day Stage and DART (differently abled resources team, 1979)
- Sober Support (1982)

- Acoustic Stage (1984)
- Womyn of Color Tent (1985)
- Over 50s (nee Over 40s) camping (1986)
- Sprouts Family Camp (1988, formerly called Buttercup)

Each location has a story that chronicles, first, an absence, and then, the verbal and physical process to fulfill the need, and the eventual addition of the site. Within the boundaries of the gates, the fences, the swamp, and the strategically posted "No Trespassing/No Hunting" signs, one finds a town that is built from the grass up each year beginning in June and finished just minutes before unlocking Gate 5 on Opening Day. The physical boundaries of the festival, however, are much easier to map than the spatial boundaries of the community or the boundaries of Festival participants' stories.

The genre called festival has been regarded in the fields of folklore and anthropology as an artifact to examine and a text to read. In this lesbian and feminist culture, festival moves beyond a fixed position to become recurrent and recursive discourse. As folklorist Richard Bauman has suggested "the bounded event as an analytical frame of reference has certain inherent limitations as well, especially in regard to comprehending . . . spans of time that transcend the duration of the performance event"

(2002:95). Thus, I examine Festival not only as the location for performances, or conversations; Festival is itself an ongoing conversation—an expression of ideas and exchange of stories that seek to inspire social familiarity, hone cultural ideals, and redefine individual identity. In the recursive process, which relies heavily on and produces a rich body of personal experience narratives, the individual's identity is often transformed in the context of communal or cultural definition.¹⁹

Early on, I began to think of Michigan as a macrocosm ripe for study because of the high context of women on the land,²⁰ and because in this place, women participants collectively and intentionally turn the dominant Western culture, or "the heteropatriarchy," on its head.²¹ At Michigan, or at any women-only festival, women, and particularly lesbians and feminists, define the space and the culture. Women are in power, and women are empowered to fully explore cultural alternatives to what they find in their daily worlds. Together, they both consciously and unconsciously create new, diverse, and appropriate traditions. The only roles for males on the land are as the boy-children of festi-goers and as delivery persons of food, equipment, and services. Conversely, I see our hometown communities, where the number of lesbians and

feminists is smaller, as the microcosm, where women are rarely in power or empowered beyond our own special interest organizations. Rather, we are systematically subsumed, oppressed, marginalized, barely tolerated, or just ignored.

As a macrocosm, MWMF has become a locus for radical politics, a space where women strive to revise regressive models of community and unlearn the negative "-isms" that permeate the larger patriarchal culture. Festival participants explore politics-broadly-defined during the festival itself, and throughout the year through publications, in face-to-face communication, and, more recently, via the Internet through listservs, bulletin boards, blogs, and chat rooms.²² MWMF community members continue to redefine both the macrocosms and the microcosms in the tradition of that original radical political act—the establishment of women-only space. At Festival, this large gathering of women creates intersections from a range of races, classes, communities, and backgrounds where even this feminist institution is questioned, targeted, and criticized by its own participants. History scholar and longtime MWMF worker Bonnie Morris explains:

Conflicts, scandals, new music, weather, work, and stage personalities determine the character of each separate festival, but these instant

villages of women, chronologically added together, build a lesbian nation well worth remembering as we tumble toward a new century. Women's music festivals are a culture as tribal and ritualized and sustaining to the participants as any spiritual movement, and this is because the diverse contributions of the women involved have forged a sum of art and politics that is richly nourishing. (Morris 1999: xiii)

After thirty-two years of building cities and living together, the women of MWMF have generated a vast store of traditions. I quickly recognized the characteristics of a folk group. At the very least, Festival folk share Alan Dundes' "one common factor"—a seven day event each August (1965:2). Romantically and naively, I saw, in my earliest days, this macrocosm as the embodiment of a matriarchal Lesbian Nation. Folklorist Jennifer Fox's discussion of nationalism, though, underscores the complications of assigning nation status to the women's festival:

The quintessential nation constitutes a culturally homogenous, organic whole with a stratified, patriarchal form of social organization much like the nuclear family upon which it is modeled; Herder conceived of the nation literally and figuratively as a family writ large. The hallmark of each nation is a shared language, history, and environment, all of which contribute to the collective consciousness (*Volksgeist*) of a people. Language occupies a privileged position . . . , and its expressive forms . . . are seen as voicing the collective consciousness and embodying the shared tradition of the *Volk*. The members of a healthy nation will feel a genuine reverence for their shared tradition, which in Herder's

estimation encompasses the wisdom of the forefathers. (Fox 1987:556)

Almost immediately, I would have difficulty using terms such as "homogenous," "stratified," and "patriarchal" to describe the MWMF community. And, while "family," "shared language," and "expressive forms" are terms that serve my purposes well, the festival's notion of family is one that is expansive and multi-valanced.

Similarly, reverence for shared traditions and the wisdom of elders are important concepts tempered near equally with irreverence and recognition that an elder may be, for instance, a teenager who has been attending Festival most of her life. In my field notes from the nineteenth annual MWMF, I wrote about the juxtaposition of two very different scenes of workers who were socializing on a cold evening after a long day of prepping for Festival's opening, just two days away. Under the workers' dining tent, Lesbian²³ music pioneer Alix Dobkin, a Festival worker for many years, was leading an acoustic sing-along and accompanying the small group surrounding an upright piano. Other women under the tent sipped hot tea, hot chocolate, or coffee to keep warm. My crewmember Cindy and I observed them for a while, then went to look for other friends. A few hundred yards, and a world away, we found

another small group of workers surrounding a roaring fire. There were no marshmallows being toasted, no campfire songs being sung. Loud music by punk bands "Hole" and "Tribe 8" blared from a portable stereo. We observed women (younger than we were) teaching their friends to "eat fire" from straightened clothes hanger wires that were tipped with cloth, dipped in lamp oil, and set aflame. Frankly, Cindy and I felt rather liminal, appreciative of these two groups but not exactly comfortable with either. With years of participation, observation, and study, my perspective has shifted as I have come to realize that while the MWMF community may boast many shared traditions and some reverence for them, like any folk group, MWMF's traditions and other expressive forms are dynamic and diverse.

Folklorist Dorothy Noyes reminds us that "[a]s Bauman demonstrated, much folklore in fact takes place in regular interaction between people belonging to different social categories, and plays upon this very fact of difference" (1995:453-54). MWMF is a same sex gathering borne of radical feminism, lesbian identity politics, and the women's music movement. However, Festival has always been comprised of women with different backgrounds (ethnicities, economic classes, geographies, ages, sexual orientations, abilities, religions, philosophies, and educations).

Moreover, the long-term Festival population has aged, and younger and newer members have been added to the mix. Theories, practices, and individuals evolve and adapt. It is with folklore's shift in notions of text, context, performance, participation, and ethnography that I revise my long thought out, and ever changing, analysis of Festival, its participants, and their personal narratives.

¹ Throughout the dissertation, I recount my own experiences, based on field notes and descriptions of my experiences that I have drafted over the course of the last seventeen years. My MWMF experiences and memories will both converge and diverge from the experiences and memories of other participants. These moments, however, are frozen in time; the Festival's story and mine are unfinished and open-ended. In order to convey a range of voices, I also intersperse the reflections of other Festival participants that I have gathered in fieldwork, by observation, in secondary sources, and from the input of my collaborators.

² Some unofficial Festival participants and a few of my collaborators are identified by pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. A footnote will indicate each with the first reference. Gina is a pseudonym.

³ Dona is a pseudonym.

⁴ A message in support of global peace and sustainable living.

⁵ Tina is a pseudonym.

⁶ "Dyke" is a complicated term, an insult from outsiders that has been reclaimed by some lesbians who consider the term to be less formal or clinical than lesbian or homosexual.

⁷ "Festi-virgin" is a Festival insider term that refers to a first-time participant.

⁸ Refers to the rural feminist utopia depicted in Sally Miller Gearhart's 1978 feminist classic *Wanderground: Stories of Hill Women*.

⁹ According to Eder et al., the National Women's Music Festival, first held in 1974, was the oldest music festival for women. National's first year was so popular that producers continued the festival in order to "[overcome] the underrepresentation of women in the music industry and [create] an alternative women's culture" (1995:512). In the documentary *Radical Harmonies*, founder Kristin Lems recalls her anger that a local folk festival included no women musicians; she was told "there just weren't any women good enough."

¹⁰ See Map in Appendices.

¹¹ 1990 was an anniversary year for MWMF, its fifteenth. The program is full of historical information, reminiscences, and annual highlights.

¹² In Festival's early years, local Oceana County citizens were wary of the influx of hundreds, or thousands, of women. Many were curious, others were disgruntled, and some were downright hostile. After three decades, the festival, its staff, and participants are eagerly welcomed, on the whole, as good neighbors.

¹³ I commonly use "Festival" in everyday conversation as shorthand for the event's official name and follow that tradition here, for the most part. "Festival" is capitalized then to indicate a proper noun.

¹⁴ This is the first full-length folklore dissertation to focus on the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and its traditions.

¹⁵ From the 2007 MWMF program: "Festival childcare areas see well over 300 kids each year" (6).

¹⁶ For instance, women who are 65 or older with a fixed or no income receive a 30% discount at the gate. A six-day ticket for the 2008 MWMF, which includes three meals a day,

all concerts, workshops, dances, showers, and other amenities is \$395-450 for early-bird purchases or \$430-480 if purchased after the early cut-off deadline or at the gate.

¹⁷ Collas incorrectly describes the meals as vegan. MWMF literature states that the meals are vegetarian, though there are vegan (no eggs or dairy) options available at all meals.

¹⁸ Sara F. Collas provides a fuller description and analysis of Workerville in her 2004 dissertation.

¹⁹ Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines *discourse* as a "2: verbal exchange of ideas, esp.: CONVERSATION." I use this definition because it foregrounds interaction and orality, unlike more academic definitions that rely heavily on rationality, logic, argumentation, and writing.

²⁰ I first examined MWMF as macrocosm in an earlier version of this chapter, which was presented in the organized panel "Lesbian Identities in Community (ies)" at the 1993 annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in Eugene, Oregon.

²¹ "Heteropatriarchy" was coined by Julia Penelope in "Whose Past Are We Reclaiming?" Common Lives, Lesbian Lives 13 (Autumn 1984), p. 19.

²² The MWMF producer established a website and electronic bulletin board in 2000. Hundreds of festival participants are registered to post in the forums.

²³ Alix Dobkin insists that lesbian should "always be capitalized in references to her life and work; she maintains that Lesbians are a separate tribe and cultural people" (Morris 1999:119).

Chapter Two

The Changer and the Changed: Transformative Narratives, Politics, and Scholarship

They come for the community; they come for the celebration of community. But the community is something where we get to experiment with a value system that is almost the anti-thesis of how the value system works in the real world.
Lisa Vogel, Michigan Womyn's Music Festival producer, in Radical Harmonies

Jonesboro, Arkansas August 1989

Not long after my then-partner Gina arrived home from the 14th annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, she had her pictures developed, and the personal narrative that first inspired this dissertation was woven. Gina and her friend Hannah¹ had traveled to Festival that year specifically to see a performance by their personal hero, the women's music legend Cris Williamson, the singer and composer of an iconic lesbian album titled Changer and the Changed. Like many first time Festival participants (referred to in emic lingo as "festi-virgins"), Gina and Hannah were anxious about the rumors of women casually walking around full or partially naked during the event.

The MWMF occurs on privately owned land, and Festival activities occur far from the gaze of the general public, beyond the property's gates, fences, and boundaries, on the other side of Treeline, a dense stand of forest. Lesbian historian Lillian Faderman would recognize Festival as a "lesbian geography" much like the working class lesbian bars that were established in the 1950s—"where they could be together as women and as lesbians, they were pioneers of sorts" (1991:167). A "gendered social space" resulted when Festival producers consciously chose to create a feminist event intended only for women and then secured private land, first via short-term lease and later by purchasing a square mile of property. As theorist Cheryl Kader points out:

In designing our own environments, feminists are not only creating new contexts for social action but sites for the transformation in/of meaning. We may conclude that, for now, women's bodies not only occupy space, vulnerable to environmental contingencies and the "incoherencies" of landscape, but command and order it through intention. (1992:4)

Because it is same-sex, "private," "safe," and (in August) a hot space, this outdoor festival quickly became a site where casual female nudity is a norm.

However, for an uninitiated woman, the idea of casually taking off one's shirt on a hot summer afternoon

while pitching a tent or basking naked in the sun during a concert can be initially daunting. Before they left home, Gina and Hannah were certain that they would never feel comfortable enough to remove their shirts in any space, even a lesbian mecca like Michigan. When Gina's photographs returned from the developer (I cannot now remember where in Northeast Arkansas she found someone to develop pictures of semi-naked women), she quickly flipped to the one photo that had already inspired a personal narrative—she and Hannah were posed shirtless in front of a large hand-painted banner that declared: "We All Come from the Goddess." Irreverent to a fault, Gina and Hannah found the sign to be highly amusing and took its discovery as a photo opportunity, each daring the other to shed her shirt. They easily found a passerby willing to snap their picture, and the shirts came off. They posed together in front of the sign, initially just for laughs, fully intending to put their shirts back on immediately afterward. After the first picture was taken, they snapped some of each other, and then they tacitly agreed that it was silly to put their shirts back on and enjoyed the remainder of the festival shirt free. I will never forget their sardonic refrain upon gazing at the photos back at home: "We may all come from the goddess, but those tits are from hell!"

In August of 1989, I was twenty-six, recently divorced from a man, and recently partnered for the first time with a woman. I had also recently graduated with a Masters degree in English. That academic year, I taught at my alma mater in the English department as a full-time temporary instructor while I searched for a doctoral program and a graduate assistantship. I also enrolled in an American Folklore course with Professor Marcia Gaudet, signaling my move away from literary criticism and toward an interest in folklore and ethnographic studies. Before the year was out, I ambitiously submitted a proposal to present a conference paper on the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival for the next fall. I had not even attended the event, yet I was certain that I had discovered a folk group with a wealth of lore to study and that I would learn enough in August to produce an articulate conference presentation. After I attended Festival that first time, despite a less-than-fulfilling attempt at fieldwork, my interest in the study of folklore was fixed, and I began working toward my Ph.D. at the University of Missouri in Columbia. Over the course of the next six years, I wrote about MWMF in seminars whenever I could, revising those papers for presentations at the American Folklore Society's annual meetings. My first six years of active fieldwork and analysis were followed by two

years of crippling writer's block, the source of which is apparent later in this dissertation as I discuss my approaches to ethnography. For the last six years, my fieldwork and analyses have been literally locked away in large storage bins.

When I initially started this study in the early 1990s, there was very little other scholarly investigation of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, despite its prominent place in the evolution of "women's music" and the enactment of feminist theories. Ethnomusicologist Eileen M. Hayes, whose specialty is the music of women of color, prefers the phrase "women-identified music" to "women's music," stating the latter is a designation created by the popular music industry (1999:2).² Both terms, though, are used interchangeably by Festival insiders. The history of women's music is held mostly in the memories of its pioneers, as Dee Mosbacher's 2002 documentary Radical Harmonies demonstrates. "Women's music and culture" is rooted in the political movements of the early to mid-twentieth century: civil rights, labor reform, suffrage, and peace. With feminism's second wave came the emphasis on carving space for women in areas dominated by men. The recording industry has long been a prime example of a male-dominated field. For instance, while it is not difficult to

name several big bands of the 1940s, it is nearly impossible to name many of the "girl singers" who sang with those bands or any female songwriters who wrote popular music. The 1960s folk music revival owes a huge debt to the everyday women who kept many traditional ballads going through the generations, but the general public more immediately associates men like Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger with the revival than their peers Joan Baez, Jean Ritchie, and Ronnie Gilbert. Fed up with this reality and armed with feminist audacity, a generation of young feminist women, often lesbians, chopped, rather than carved, out their own niche in the music industry in the 1970s. Alix Dobkin, active in the folk music revival and widely recognized as a Lesbian music icon, has emphasized "women's music was created by Lesbians because we had to have it; we needed it" (Mosbacher 2002).³ Maxine Feldman wrote and performed the first song of explicitly lesbian lyrics with "Angry Atthis" in 1969 and recorded the protest as a single in 1972.⁴ Soon, a collective founded Olivia Records in 1973 to record and market women's music. In response to the perpetual question "why," Olivia co-founder Judy Dlugacz responded:

Why women only? My response over the years has always been the same. It was "if you can name five women bass players, five women guitar

players, five women drummers, five women producers, five women engineers—we will stop." Never did I get anyone to do that for me. (Mosbacher 2002)

The women's music movement was not simply about increasing the number of women artists. The movement was also about women training their peers: a generation of women artists, record producers, sound and lighting engineers, distributors, concert and festival producers, and stage managers. Through their relentless hard work and innovative strategies, these pioneers created a new music genre called "women's music." The movement was about women creating their own space in the music industry, and a key component of the industry was the festival circuit, starting in 1975 with the National Women's Music Festival, founded by Kristin Lems on the Champaign-Urbana campus of the University of Illinois. The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival was founded one year later by We Want the Music Collective.

Historically, women's music, culture, and festivals were written about only in lesbian and feminist publications with an intended audience of lesbians and feminists. Initially, coverage of the MWMF was relegated to the pages of grassroots underground newsletters, including Lesbian Connection,⁵ a publication that is produced by a

women's collective in a college town just a few hours from Festival property. Additionally, Festival is covered each fall in the radical feminist publication, off our backs,⁶ more of a magazine or newspaper than a newsletter. Because Festival was also instrumental to the development of women's music, MWMF was also the subject of numerous articles in Hot Wire: The Journal of Women's Music and Culture.⁷ Two decades later, as lesbianism became less taboo and women's music sometimes crossed into the mainstream through artists like Melissa Etheridge and Tracy Chapman, articles about the MWMF began to appear in outsider publications, such as Spin and Esquire magazines and even some major metropolitan newspapers. Bonnie J. Morris points out that this mainstream media attention was triggered by a nationwide focus on women musicians, especially those who performed with the traveling music festival "Lilith Fair."⁸

The "transition period" that saw the discipline of folklore's shift from text to context parallels the advent and progression of second wave feminism and the women's music movement (Stoeltje, Fox and Olbrys 1999:167). These developments ushered in sites and occasions for participant-observer ethnographies of esoteric events by insiders, rather than "the old mold of folklorist as collector of esoteric, no longer relevant texts" or

"fragments to be found in the shadows" (167-168). This insider shift in ethnographic research was also not unique to folkloristics. By the mid-to-late nineties, the space that I often occupied alone in my initial study of Festival culture had opened up for students and scholars in sister fields: anthropology, sociology, ethnomusicology, and critical theory. My return to this dissertation after several years has been marked with excitement as I have found a small body of scholarship devoted specifically to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which has helped to inform my work at this time. Therefore, I have included an overview of these studies, both as a survey of this niche of scholarship and as an opportunity to represent a range of voices within the Festival community.

The Scholars of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

In 1992, Cheryl Kader published her dissertation "Gendered Social Space: Feminism and the Production of Meaning" at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in the Department of English. Kader devotes only about a third of her dissertation to the MWMF, but her use of post-modern theory, the 16th Annual MWMF program, and her own experiences reveal insights of Festival as a text. She

interprets Festival as a site for identity politics and narrows the scope of her work to an examination of an ongoing political debate over definitions of *woman*, what she calls "the destabilization of gender as an analytical category" (23). Kader explores the effects of these shifting gender definitions upon Festival's stated intent for women-only space.⁹ The second half of Kader's dissertation with her discussion of "locations," however, proves most relevant to my study, especially her notion of "gendered social space—as a site for rethinking and refashioning subjectivity" (4). Kader goes on to note that Michigan, a location for temporary separatism, is a place where

the interaction of space and music dislocates order and predictability, while the 'unruly' female body, released from the heterosexual gaze and its systems of representation, is mobilized in the creation of new pleasures, values and meanings. (14)

In other words, the physical and social space creates the site for participants to enact new paradigms, especially ones that break from prescriptive norms about woman, lesbian, and the female body. She continues:

Within this same-sex site/sight, the meanings carried by the naked female body escape the definitions imposed upon it within hegemonic discourses and paradigms characterized by violence and extreme negation . . . At Michigan, the female body asserts itself; making a claim

on the landscape, it relishes its lack of anonymity (138).

While Kader's reading of Michigan sometimes mirrors and echoes my own, her reading is one that is limited by a lack of ethnographic exposition and by her broader focus on "identities" and "locations"; her work is a primer in reading several gendered bodies/identities and sites/locations from a post-modernist gaze.

After Kader's early work, it is six years before there is a full-length scholarly study of the MWMF. However, from 1998-2006, studies are published almost annually on some aspect of Festival. Perhaps most interestingly, these studies are almost all based in ethnographic theory and practice, referencing key scholars in the field including Victor Turner, Barbara Myerhoff, Clifford Geertz, and Ruth Behar. Indeed, these studies reference important works in folklore studies as well including Joan Radner (feminist coding), Beverly Stoeltje (feminist readings of the festival genre), Marsha MacDowell and Kurt Dewhurst (quilt analyses), Richard Bauman (performance theory), Gary Alan Fine (ethics of field research), and Roger Abrahams (festivals as rituals).

For instance, Mary Alice Gebhart published her Master's thesis "The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival:

Building a Lesbian Community" in 1998 at Michigan State University (where MacDowell and Dewhurst teach and coordinate the Michigan Traditional Arts Program). Like Cheryl Kader, Gebhart relies on her personal experiences at the MWMF as a camper, or festie. Because of Gebhart's ethnographic approach, she is able to provide a detailed description of Festival based on two years of experience as a participant, specifically her first (1996) and second (1997) years, the 21st and 22nd anniversaries of the event. In fact, Gebhart explicates Festival and its physical space (citing Habermas) over the course of twenty-seven pages of her first chapter. She introduces the uninformed reader to Opening Day and "the Line" on the county road: "In 1996, I arrived at 10:30 a.m. on Monday, the first official day of the festival, only to find myself number 423 in line" (27). From there, the reader accompanies Gebhart via thick description through the gate and orientation, onto a shuttle with her gear to set up her campsite, all the while describing the various camping areas and their implicit and explicit rules for community living. Gebhart describes the physical landscape of Festival, moving from area to area to discuss the function of each, from the workshop meadow and all stages to the craft vendors, quilting, and children's areas. Periodically, she includes pertinent anecdotes, like

the following didactic story from her field notes, which illustrates how a conflict might arise and be resolved on Festival land:

At the 1996 festival there was a skirmish over space issues when several newly arrived campers pitched their tents inside the 10' invisible boundary. The woman whose space was being invaded requested that the new campers move their tents back several feet, and the campers explained that they were unable to do so because of several small trees that occupied otherwise open space. The woman replied that they should just 'chop down the little trees (a definite festival no-no) and move the tents.' The conflict was solved when the campers shifted the front opening of their tents to face away from the woman's campsite" (33-34).¹⁰

Gebhart ends this first chapter with an expanded description of Wednesday night in 1997, Festival's official opening ceremony and first evening of scheduled performances.

In Chapter Two, she discusses "lesbian community building" in the context of conflict over a lesbian punk-rock band's initial performances, their transgressive performances of gender, and their implications for the event and its audiences. She completes her analysis, informed by theories of Antonio Gramsci, with a look at the "commodification of women's music": "the founders of the MWMF recognized the need to bypass the traditional record companies and to gain control of the production and

distribution of women's music, and the festival seemed to be just the place to start" (12). Today, Gebhart continues her research on the functions and meanings of MWMF as a Ph.D. student at Michigan State University in American Studies. Her dissertation is titled tentatively either "Trans-forming Feminism: The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and the Challenge of Liminal Bodies" or "Feminism, Biologism, and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival." By her own admission on the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's electronic bulletin board, Gebhart no longer attends Festival in protest against the so-called "womyn-born-womyn policy."

George Washington University Professor Bonnie J. Morris wrote the first full-length examination of womyn's festivals, Eden Built by Eves: The Culture of Women's Music Festivals. Published in 1999 by Alyson Publications Inc., a progressive feminist press, the book is a fairly comprehensive look at several women's festivals, including the MWMF where the author is also a volunteer worker. An historian and Women Studies professor, Morris applies a scholarly methodology in a very readable study intended for an audience of insiders, or those who are at least "in the loop." As a performer, worker, and camper at many women's festivals on the once busy circuit, Morris has been a

participant-observer since 1981, voraciously collecting interviews, in-context performances, underground publications, written responses, and ephemera such as stage and lighting plots, fliers, and cartoons. She takes on the daunting challenge to compress the history of well over twenty events into ten chapters, three appendices, and 370 pages. Not surprisingly, she is both praised for telling our story and scolded for some glaring choices and omissions, especially with regard to key voices in the production and artistic legacy of the women's festival movement (c.f., Myers-Briggs 2000; Keefer 1999). Morris is perhaps most noteworthy for testing the waters for lesbian scholars who study women's festivals: "Few universities regard festival culture as a legitimate subject for study and preservation, and carving out the academic writing time for this project has been an exercise in being out and proud as a lesbian scholar" (xiv). Later, in her conclusion, she reveals that the number of scholars interested in the topic warranted an "Internet discussion group for women conducting research on festival culture and women's music" [just as this author eagerly departed academia and set the dissertation aside] (303). Still, Morris hits on my focus of "being naked at Festival" early on in her study:

Forget structure and hierarchy for a moment, the first shock for festival virgins is the plethora of *breasts*. This is women-only space, folks—which means the freedom and safety to go without a shirt in the soft summer air. It means for many a woman the first day of being at home in her body and the first sensation of sun on her bare back since babyhood. There is no need to cover up here; there is no need for shame. (67)

Morris returns to the topic of casual nudity again and again, as it is as synonymous with the outdoor women's festival culture as tents and vegetarian meals. However, the topic and tradition of nudity comes up primarily as punch lines in Chapter Seven—on comedy and self-parody, indicating our ongoing tension with public nudity, despite at least twenty years of practice.

In 1997 and 1998, Canadian folklorist Pauline Greenhill, Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Winnipeg, directed the research of a three-student team from the University of Guelph that chose the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival as their research site. Amanda Birdsell, Jane Leverick, and Maria Fowler conducted research on site at MWMF during the 1997 and 1998 festivals. Researchers set up two sites, one in RV to house their equipment, tapes, and notes and another in a tent located in a heavily populated area central to Festival from which to conduct interviews. The second year of research was funded by a grant secured by Dr. Greenhill

from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, a federal agency that "promotes and supports university-based research and training" (www.sshrc.ca). Amanda Birdsell completed her thesis in 2000 and Jane Leverick in 2001. Maria Fowler published an article entitled "Sexual Social Scripts and the re-Imaginations of Community Identity" in a special issue of the journal Ethnologies, which was edited by Greenhill in 2001.

Like Kader, Gebhart, and Morris, Amanda Helen Birdsell addresses the MWMF community's ongoing debate about gender, the definition of Woman, and the exclusion of male-to-female or transsexual women. Birdsell, however, foregrounds the issue throughout her Masters thesis "'Womyn-born-Womyn': Contestations of Gendered Identity(ies)" published in 2000 at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. In her abstract, she notes that her "research explores these dynamics as it seeks to understand: What is a Woman?" Birdsell also takes an ethnographic approach to the research and event, relying on her experiences first as a festive and then as a worker in 1999. She notes that she chose to volunteer as a worker in order to learn about the event from both the "front stage" and "back stage" perspectives (50). While she participated as an undergraduate in the 1997-98 research team with Leverick

and Fowler, Birdsell bases her graduate thesis on fieldwork she conducted in 1999 on site at the 19th MWMF, through follow-up interviews and her participation in "Son of Camp Trans."¹¹

I employed a combination of ethnographic tools including both qualitative and quantitative techniques. My primary techniques were interviews and participant observation. Secondary techniques included mapping and surveys. The quantitative data was acquired through the use of standardized surveys. These surveys were precoded and analyzed using . . . Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. The qualitative data was drawn from: interviews, participant observation, qualitative surveys, and mapping and proxemics. (54)

Birdsell's study of MWMF is a comprehensive one, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative fieldwork, mostly presented in a seemingly "objective" voice and employing the third person. She relies on a broad range of sociological research methods and a large quantity of research participants—fourteen in three group interviews; three individual worker interviews; and twelve individual "attendee" interviews. She includes data and narrative excerpts from festies, workers, and protesters. Birdsell strives to present a "collaborative approach to ethnography as a form of co-authorship" (10). Her personal voice and experiences, however, are missing from this ethnography, surprising for work primarily based in participant-

observation. Her description of Festival, then, is informed by long but sometimes heavily edited excerpts from interviews and the results of more empirical data, including subject's age, sexual orientation, income, camping area, positions on community issues like the "womyn-born-womyn policy," and on inclusion of transsexual participants. The results, often presented in tables, graphs, and figures provide the reader with a good overview of the twenty-fourth annual festival, especially with regard to the conflicts over perspectives on gender and concepts of "Woman." Birdsell ultimately concludes that "[p]aradoxically, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, like feminism in general, relies upon the essential bodily characteristics of female sex organs as a basis for selfhood. In this instance, the self emerges, yet again, from the body. It is the notion of a collective self which marks the community identity [at Festival], as well as the larger political struggles associated with feminism" (136). Birdsell intends the statement as criticism, but in fact, she is correct. The macrocosm and the folk groups that comprise the community are primarily made up of women who believe in whole or in part that Woman can be defined based upon shared experiences, usually of slight and overt oppressions, in the "real world," often from birth.

These publications all offered threads of information about and analyses of Festival's landscape, politics, and culture. However, none is so fully developed and as relevant to my ethnography as the next two. Less than a year after Birdsell completed her thesis, her research partner Jane Leverick published her Master's thesis: "A Field of Women: Exploring Meanings at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival" in the spring of 2001. Like Birdsell, Leverick also notes her dual roles as participant and observer. Unlike Birdsell, Leverick clearly self-identifies as a member of the larger Festival folk group, although she also identifies as a bisexual woman in a monogamous heterosexual relationship. After her first Festival in 1993, she notes: "My experience was profoundly satisfying and led me to the decision that I would try and attend every year" (12). Her chapter on field research, "Working the Field," is especially reflexive as she examines how her own and the research team's research methods were challenged again and again, whether due to assumptions about interviewing women of color or complications due to a particularly rainy Festival. While Leverick does address the ongoing gender controversy, she breaks from the pattern of the previous scholars and narrows her frame to a new topic—the meanings of symbols and iconography at the MWMF,

while noting that "[t]here is no definitive 'field', rather a layering of many fields of experience and meaning" (26).

Leverick paints a more realistic image of Festival's complexities, especially with regard to controversial topics such as racism, sexual expression, and safety—and the ways those controversies are addressed and the ongoing processes of resolution. She checks MWMF events against folklorists Beverly Stoeltje's notion of "true festival" and Inta Gale Carpenter's "focus on symbols in festival and their role in festival dynamics" (66). With her layered understanding of both the festival genre and MWMF in mind, Leverick explicates meaning from the iconography found in the visual art and material culture at the Crafts Bazaar, in the MWMF signage, and on the annual Festival quilt, which is raffled off at the end of the week.¹² Her analysis, often informed by folklorists Linda Pershing and Joan Radner, allows Leverick to discuss both coded community values and convey the multi-vocality of the event, as the Festival arts come from more than one arena of Festival: Crafts, Workerville (particularly the Signz crew), and the general Festival population. In Chapter V, "Fields of Meaning," Leverick narrows to one artistic arena and describes the composition and signs in three annual quilts,

contextualizing them with a description from her fieldnotes of a quilting session in 1998:

One evening the women were singing Goddess songs. Sewing in a halo of light cast by the lanterns and electric generator's lamps, their voices drifted out over the darkened tables of the August Night Café, competing with the ambient strains of Lunachicks from the Nightstage. "We all come from the Goddess . . ." as needles worked attaching crystals and shiny beads to the spiral in Midnight Woman's belly. I wondered how often quilting had been done to the strains of Goddess worship and juxtaposed that with images of women quilting to the hymns "Rock of Ages" and "Onward Christian Soldiers" . . . The repertoire of Goddess songs was exhausted after an hour or so. Women began to sing show tunes. Before long they were changing the words to fit the Michigan milieu. "These are a few of my Favourite things" became "Raindrops on nipples and warm sun on bottoms...Kisses from women with freckles and sun burns, Wonderful women not wearing a thing, these are a few of my favourite things!" (113-114)

Leverick's description of the quilting space and the quilts illustrates her thesis, that Festival and its participants are constantly reinventing themselves. ¹³

Ethnomusicologist Boden C. Sandstrom developed a solid study of Festival in her 2002 dissertation "Performance, Ritual, and Negotiation of Identity in the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival" from University of Maryland-College Park. The work is as much informed by her position as an ethnomusicologist as by her role as a Festival veteran. Sandstrom worked for nine years in the earliest years of

the MWMF (she was a sound engineer from 1977-1985), then spent eight additional years either as a researcher or participant (1995-2002). Additionally, Sandstrom was active at the beginning of the women's music movement, during which she learned sound engineering, co-founding one of the first women-owned and women-operated sound companies. Not only did she participate regularly at MWMF, but she also traveled the women's music festival and concert circuit for decades before she began her academic study of Festival. While Bonnie J. Morris brought similar experiences to bear on her study of the vast festival circuit, Sandstrom centers her study exclusively on a single festival, the MWMF, explicated in five chapters, ten appendices, and a bibliography that combined cover 336 pages. Sandstrom looks at Festival through the kaleidoscope lens of an ethnomusicologist who combines performance studies, ethnography, history, political science, bodylore, feminism, and music theory.

Like other MWMF scholars, Sandstrom conducted personal interviews, including extensive follow up by telephone and e-mail. She also searched primary and secondary texts in archives and transcribed Festival meta-events in thick detail, including music and lyrics from key songs performed at Festival. She transcribed opening and closing ceremonies

in minute detail, including the words of the long-time voice of MWMF, Therese Edell, whose calming but disembodied voice came to audiences during Night Stage set changes, reading announcements, and chiding women to mind their Festival manners. Finally, Sandstrom was able to draw upon her standing in the MWMF and her relationship with long-time producer Lisa Vogel. Sandstrom was granted access to the archives of the MWMF housed in the Berkeley office, and she was able to conduct telephone and email interviews between 1995 and 2002 with Vogel.

Not surprisingly, Sandstrom focuses on Festival music. Her years of participation and location within the sound booth or upon the edge of a stage give her special insights into individual songs and performers. As an ethnomusicologist, she looks at the holistic role of music in the event. While one might assume that describing music at a music festival would be a rather elementary task, Sandstrom, like most veteran MWMF participants, recognizes that the event is less about music, despite the name, and more about community. Thus, she aims her lens at the opening and closing ceremonies, two meta-events that she identifies as the larger event's ritual frames, referencing Barbara Myerhoff's analysis of "secular ritual" (1977:15-17). Sandstrom asserts that, due to the liminality of the

festival space and the diversity of participants, a "ritual container" provides for participants various ways in which to navigate the event, the land, and their roles:

The Festival opens with blessings and celebration, which calls in the ancestors and spirits and creates an atmosphere of connectivity and harmony. Energy is raised and the Festival philosophy of acceptance and celebration of diversity and the beauty and pride of being women and lesbians is imparted. Women are now open to do the tough work of negotiating identities through performance and political and social discussion that involves intense fighting, laughing, crying, and loving. The final day of closing performances and ceremony bring the energy back down and blesses everyone as they leave, ensuring safety and health for the upcoming year. (268)

In her work, Sandstrom provides both history and context. She crafts a history of each ceremony from Festival programs, first person interviews, and personal experience. She meticulously explicates the Opening Celebration and Candlelight Concert of the 20th anniversary, using both field notes and tapes as well as providing illustrative figures for the reader of the crowded audiences and sheet music for "Amazon," the event's signature song. Additionally, she provides her own personal observation of the first moments of the opening ceremony—looking toward the "cloudy evening sky" for the arrival of that year's surprise—a device to focus every woman's attention and energy at the same moment. Sandstrom

describes the group dynamic from the moment that the audience of thousands became aware of a skydiver: "A roar of astonishment and appreciation traveled through the crowd as we all watched the first of the many magic moments". Then, the moment that this aerialist landed: "We stood in amazement and then simultaneously burst into hearty applause and whoops. We were fully attentive now." (222-223). Basically, Sandstrom explains how sometimes disparate groups of women can come together in the middle of the woods in the middle of the country where they find not just middle ground but a shared ethos.

Like Morris, Birdsell, and Sandstrom, Sara F. Collas is both a Festival worker and an ethnographer. In her 2004 dissertation "Conflict and Community in a Lesbian Feminist Space: An Autoethnography of Workerville at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival" at the University of Kansas, this sociologist composes an "autoethnography," one that foregrounds her position as an eleven year veteran of Festival, particularly focusing on two years (2001-2002) when she shifted from Festieland to Workerville.¹⁴ Collas is unflinchingly honest in her descriptions of the challenges she faced in writing her dissertation, shifting roles from festie to worker, then trying to fit into the smaller,

tight-knit, and "hyper-productive" community that is Workerville.

It turned out that the life of the festival goer and that of the worker was vastly different. The festival goer celebrated her very existence; she thought about the joy of womanhood in her language, in her song, and in her dance. She celebrated her very being. The worker at MWMF celebrated not just what she was but what she could produce. Turning a rural space into a small city, in fact, the largest city in the county for that week in August, was a feat. To make that space marginally profitable, for nothing in the dominant society survives without profit, was an overwhelming but necessary challenge. Different functions called for a differing life. (19-20)

Collas especially notes that her crews are demanding, one physically and both sharing a strong work ethic (1). Like most of the previous scholars, Collas provides pertinent historical information about the MWMF as well as an overview of her research methods, including the struggles she faced negotiating between participant and observer—something that I also struggled with and write about in this dissertation.

The bulk of Collas' study is a critical analysis of the Worker community, in which she examines the social organization of work, community, and sex. In one chapter, she uses the language and metaphors of high school in order to describe her perception of Workerville, acknowledging that she often feels anxious about where to sit for meals

(e.g., school cafeterias) and that some groups seem impermeable to outsiders (e.g., cliques). She struggles with her notion of community. On the one hand, she proclaims that the Worker community is an elusive ideal and is fractured by sub-groups, with some cliques "so well established and tight knit that they rivaled the exclusive membership in elite country clubs" (130). On the other hand, she complains that Workerville is united in its primary role and that workers as a whole conform to "dominant values, practices, language, and rituals of the culture" (132). In Chapter 6, Collas introduces yet another new topic to the scholarship, the "hypersexual culture" of Workerville, in which she examines the dynamics of sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation in a "same sex" city. Her final chapter examines the ubiquitously researched "womyn born womyn policy" from a reflexive perspective. Collas tracks her shift from support of Festival's guideline, to her current thinking that Festival supports an essentialist definition of Woman based on biology. Ultimately, she protests the "policy" when she eventually participates in the counter-Festival event, Camp Trans, which she argues supports fluid social constructionist definitions of gender. Collas concludes that Workerville, and by extension MWMF, is an oligarchy that reifies the very structures and

values of the dominant culture that this counter-culture event seeks to undo.

Like Collas, a working class Latina woman who consciously examines issues of race and class, Chandra L. Hinton, another sociologist, frames Festival through a trifocal lens in her 2005 Master's thesis, "Looking from Outside/Within: A Multiracial Feminist Ethnography of a Radical Women's Music Festival" at the University of Arkansas. Hinton is a self-described "working class, Southern, queer, Black woman" (41) who bases her analysis on three years of participation as a festive and crafts bazaar assistant, Festival's website and electronic bulletin board, printed programs, and three personal interviews. Additionally, she references online sources from *off our backs* and a website hosted by Emi Koyama, an activist who maintains what she calls the "Michigan/Trans Controversy Archives" at www.eminism.org, a collection of over 70 articles, letters, statements, commentaries, and press releases dating back to the seventies. Hinton also investigates the budding scholarship on MWMF (Morris, Leverick, and Sandstrom). Early in the thesis, she positions herself as an ethnographer as she addresses sociologist Gary Alan Fine's Ten Lies of Ethnography point by point (1993).

A nagging concern with Hinton is that she uses a pseudonym for MWMF, "Harmony Womyn's Music Festival." While I myself seriously considered using a pseudonym when I first started writing about MWMF in the early nineties, by 2005, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival had been written about openly in the popular press, on its own public website, and in other theses and dissertations (Hinton even cites them, using their full titles in the bibliography). The fictitious name, however, allows Hinton to convey a kind of Jekyll/Hyde character to the event. When she clips the made-up festival name, as MWMF insiders do to Michfest, the festival becomes Harmfest. As a long-time Festival participant, the juxtaposition of "harmony" and "harm" initially seemed rather abrasive to me. Upon further reflection, I recalled stories of blatant and subtle racism that women of color have shared with me, and I must acknowledge that, especially for a woman of color, being on the Land is both harmonious and harmful.

Hinton's work is important as she reads Festival through her personal experience as informed by "multiracial feminist theory" (Combahee River Collective 1982; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; hooks 2000). Hinton critiques the shortcomings of MWMF and notes that the event is constantly, consciously striving for change—though more

changes are necessary. Rather than focusing solely, as many do, on the issue of gender, Hinton asserts that feminism must be complicated by putting race, economic class, sexuality, and gender on the same plane, rather than prioritizing gender. Interestingly, she reads accommodations for differences (such as designated family camping) as "distinct areas of privilege" (50). "Harmony," she explains, is a "matrix of domination"—where "hierarchies have definitely been reproduced" (54). Hinton asserts that the greatest of these hierarchies, prioritizing gender as proffered in early feminism, ultimately erases diversity. Her personal experiences and participation at the Women of Color Tent reinforce her emerging thesis. As verification, she looks to some comments on the MWMF electronic bulletin board and from white participants that were collected and appended in Jane Leverick's dissertation, in which respondents immediately link diversity only to race and women of color. Some respondents deny racism can exist in a feminist space; others quickly point to the Women of Color Tent as evidence of diversity and anti-racism; and a few lament what they perceive as "reverse racism" with the designation of Women of Color-only space.

Hinton suggests that romanticized notions of unity, common ground, and harmony that predominate in Festival culture trump both actual and perceived diversity. By default, the norm that is engendered is white, middle class, and lesbian. Hinton concludes that a "paradigmatic shift of multiracial feminism is needed as a crucial tool in the hands of women who have otherwise proven themselves to be willing and capable to create an alternative society" (80).

The most recent of the MWMF ethnographic studies is Laurie J. Kendall's 2006 dissertation, "From the Liminal to the Land: Building Amazon Culture at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," which she wrote in American Studies at the University of Maryland-College Park. Kendall makes an important distinction in her opening pages, noting that her five-year study is an investigation of the stories of individual "womyn" and should not be construed to represent all women, lesbians, or MWMF participants. In her ethnography, she focuses on festies, the women in the woods for whom the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is not a liminal space:

Theoretically, the women who attend . . . live liminal lives 51 weeks out of the year. They are like a diasporic people, who visit their homeland once a year, where they soak up their cultural traditions and reinvest in their

familial relationships before returning to their lives in the diaspora. (8)

Kendall is an unabashed insider, a willing participant, and her study is of her adopted hometown, filled with the voices of the women who she names her "family" and who share her "neighborhood" both inside and outside Festival gates.

Kendall tells us that these are not the women who theorize endlessly about cultural feminism, social constructionist definitions of Woman, or biological essentialism. The women she loves as family and neighbors "remain steadfast in their belief that one is *born a woman*" (107, emphasis hers). And still, she writes, the women that she knows are keenly aware of the layers and complexities of gender, race, class, and sexuality—the stuff of their day-to-day lives. In the welcoming, safe space of MWMF, Kendall explains, they build "Amazon culture," and the primary tool for construction according to Kendall is "love" (91). Kendall's is the most autobiographical work in this small canon, as she names the relentless homophobia of her biological family, her church, and her country, then spins the story of her discovery of womyn's space and Amazon culture, where she found unconditional love and acceptance.¹⁵ In the bulk of her dissertation, Kendall

weaves together vivid descriptions of the Land, which are further illustrated by photos and lengthy narratives from the women who shared stories with her about their relationship to this safe space. A notable addition to the scholarship and history of MWMF is Kendall's Appendix A, an eleven page Festival timeline (1975-2005) that she cobbles together from several sources, including Sandstrom's dissertation, Morris' book, her own interviews, and several Festival programs.

Also published in 2006, Laura Katherine Kroll's "Patrolling Borders, Resisting Transitions: The Impact of Musical Performances on Controversies at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival" ultimately adds little, if anything, to the scholarship on Festival. Kroll produced her Masters thesis at Smith College in the field of Music, focusing on the ways in which Festival politics are influenced by performers from the stage, vis à vis their lyrics, set arrangements, and chats with audiences between songs. While the topic and thesis are enticing and definitely worthy of study, Kroll provides only a very few underdeveloped examples to support her thesis. Her work is riddled with factual inaccuracies and little understanding of the event itself, although she includes a perfunctory history. It is unclear to me from her text whether Kroll

herself has ever attended the MWMF, or even attended the counter-event Camp Trans. Thus, it seems she compiles her understanding solely from secondary sources from both insider and outsider publications: Morris' history of women's festivals, Sandstrom's dissertation, the 2000 MWMF program, and a single e-mail interview with a Festival performer from an all-women Klezmer band (Kroll misses an opportunity here to examine the impact of that musician's lyrics and performances). My complaint is not that Kroll examines Festival and the ongoing debate over the "womyn born womyn policy"; the problem is that her analysis lacks depth in examining the numerous Festival musical performances, in any given year or over the course of time, and, surprisingly, she appears to be unaware of the studies by Kader, Gebhart, Birdsell, Leicher, and Collas.

My own research for this dissertation on women-only festivals, and the folklore that has emerged from them, is based on three equally important elements. First, I conducted formal and informal interviews with women who have attended one or more women's festivals. Secondly, I have been an active participant in the event since 1990, as

a ticket holder (1990-91 and 2005) and as a volunteer staff member at MWMF (1992-99, 2003-04 and 2007). Additionally, I have been a member of an online social network or community of Festival participants that emerged in 2000 via the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's internet bulletin board at www.michfest.com. Much of the formal research for this study was conducted over a five year period from 1990-1995, both at Festival as well as at home in my local community in Columbia, Missouri, a Midwestern college town.

The very first "interview" was recorded at the 1990 MWMF where I scheduled a "workshop" specifically to collect folklore from Festival participants. Any Festival attendee can propose a workshop for the schedule by submitting a request and description by a specified deadline. If accepted, the workshop is added to the official MWMF schedule and listed in the printed program. My workshop was listed in Arts and Culture and scheduled for Thursday afternoon from 12:00 - 1:30 p.m. in Area 13:

FESTIVAL FOLKLORE AND RITUALS - Lisa Higgins
Thursday, 12:00-1:30, Area 13.

I would like to meet and interview any womyn who have attended and/or worked the Festival over the last 15 years. I will use this workshop as an opportunity to find volunteers who are willing to share Festival stories. (WWTMC 1990:56)

My workshop did not attract many participants or bear much useful content—only three women attended the workshop and only two came to share stories. The third was also a “festie virgin” who wanted to learn more about the event. I expected a larger crowd, but my workshop was scheduled at the same time as lunch and the opening music performances at Day Stage, a popular activity for most Festival participants. I expected the narratives to flow with a simple prompt so I had prepared no formal questions. I expected that the best location to conduct fieldwork was on the festival site, but as I did not yet know any long-timer festies, I actually chose an inappropriate venue to gather stories. Finally, I had little understanding about Festival culture; therefore, I did not know the best prompts, the best questions, or the best avenue for gathering the stories that I suspected were there. In the end, the tape from the workshop is most important to me as evidence of my fledgling and immature skills as an ethnographer. Still, the experience gave me some initial insights into Festival history, and, additionally, the MWMF program that year included a retrospective of milestones in celebration of the event’s 15th anniversary.

With those insights, milestones, and some instruction in folklore fieldwork methodology during my first semester

at the University of Missouri, I tested the waters again and conducted three new interviews in December of 1990 at a local pub in Columbia, Missouri for a term paper in Narrative Studies. For that project, each interview was conducted with a specific topic in mind—the tradition of nudity at women's festivals. Those interviews were more structured and very targeted. I gathered information about the collaborators' (my preferred term for "informants") Festival participation, asking each woman to recall her first experiences of "being naked" at a women's festival. With two of those collaborators, I had already heard their stories over the course of casual conversation, which had led me to ask permission for recorded interviews. I had been encouraged to talk to the third woman by another women's festival participant who claimed this person had a story about "being naked at festival."

Each year, I conducted additional interviews as I wrote seminar papers and conference presentations on additional aspects of Festival culture, including personal narratives, folk speech, beliefs, and occupational lore. The next spring, I conducted three more targeted interviews in a local pub and a private home in Columbia, specifically focusing on lesbians' participation in women-centered rituals at women's festivals. The 17th MWMF in 1992 was my

first year in Workerville. Living and working there, I learned much more about Festival, its history, and its culture, but I still had mixed results doing field interviews on site at MWMF. I attempted three in-context, open-ended interviews. The first two were problematic, primarily because I was too new to the Festival community and did not have enough standing with these participants to elicit their trust in divulging Festival stories and traditions. However, the third interview, with Tessa, was especially fruitful, providing an oral history of Festival from her perspective and informing my discussion of women's narratives in the following chapters.

Later, in 1992 and 1993, I conducted group interviews with seven intimate friends, again from my local community of Festival participants in Columbia. In fact, my focus on participants from my local community was borne of my realization that folk groups within the larger Festival community include groups of women from a specific city or region who have traveled and camped together annually; this realization, of course, became clear the more I attended Festival and the more I participated in it with my friends from Columbia. In addition to friendship-based and place-based Festival folk groups, I also recognized crew-based folk groups in Workerville. Thus, I shifted my target in

fieldwork to the smaller folk groups within the women's festival community in which I was a member. In 1994, I then conducted three more interviews with local women from my Columbia folk group and four interviews with my Security/Communications co-workers from Michigan. These interviews were more formally structured and guided by questions about the women's first introductions to the existence of women's festivals, their first-time attendance and first impressions, their narratives about various personal experiences, and their levels of participation. The at-home interviews were all conducted in my informants' homes, around the dining room table or on the back patio, locations where we would normally converse about our Festival experience. With my co-workers, I also asked questions specific to their roles and goals as volunteer staff on the Security/Communications crew, one that serves as both gatekeeper and information conduit. These four interviews were conducted after Festival, during a time referred to as post-fest, when all crews work to break down work posts and put the event to rest for another year. The final 1994 interview was conducted on the road home to Columbia in the cab of the red Ford Ranger. As I drove, my passenger, an acquaintance from home who had worked on the girls' childcare crew at Festival, recorded our post-

festival conversations, and I asked her the same questions I had asked my Security/Communications co-workers.

Over the course of five years, I conducted nineteen interviews, took field notes, read Festival programs from cover to cover, and collected some ephemera. During that same time, I established strong and lasting relationships with festies and workers both in my home community and at our home away from home on the Land in Michigan. I was also able to correspond, in 1996 and 1997, with some of these women through e-mail to ask follow up questions, to request feedback on an essay or a working thesis, and to gather a few additional narratives. While those narratives were delivered in writing, their content is very similar to the oral stories that I had gathered previously. Our e-mail exchanges were informal and echoed our oral conversations. Because I have been present to hear their oral stories, I know that the cadence and content of the e-mailed stories are similar to the cadence and content of the stories we have shared around a kitchen table in March or at a firepit in August.

Similarly, my participation and observation has extended beyond Festival's gates and the days in August with new online resources. I participate and observe weekly, if not daily, on the MWMF online bulletin board,

which was added to Festival's website in 2000. The board is in its second incarnation, as participation on the first version ultimately overwhelmed the site. The new board, or forum, was unveiled in 2006 in late fall. Due to space and cost, none of the old board was archived. All posters had to reregister. One year later, the "new" site has over 1,100 users and almost 31,000 posts. In addition to postings, the site features "randomized" images (changing each time a page is refreshed) of Festival performers, workers, festies, and landscapes, as well as a countdown clock that ticks down the days, hours, minutes, and seconds until the gates open again in August. Participation on the bulletin board is constant throughout the year, but activity picks up considerably between March and August. The MWMF production staff posts the list of performers and intensive workshops on the website in March, signaling the unofficial start of Festival planning, much of which is informed by threads in the "What to bring, what to wear" forum. The bulletin board has been used to organize fundraisers for low-income festies, to arrange caravans and ride shares, to borrow camping gear, and to coordinate an "unofficial schedule of events." Additionally, the board is noted for an entire section devoted to politics, which includes "All things political," "Feminism 101," and

"Female identity and gender politics" (an active area where debates about definitions of womyn-born-womyn, transgender, and "policies" are parsed). The new board also boasts a forum for "Festival stories and lore." Although most stories and lore are shared in context in other forums and threads, the advent of the Michfest bulletin board ultimately created yet another location for "hearing" and collecting Festival stories.

The locations from which I have collected Festival lore, whether during what I call "home" interviews or via the Internet, may appear to be decontextualized from the Festival experience itself; however, a key argument in this dissertation is that the boundaries of this women's festival, and perhaps any festival, go beyond the designated physical and temporal space. I will argue that the one's Festival experiences and the personal narratives about those experiences are as much a part of individual and community identities as they are a part of one's briefer, on-site Festival life.¹⁶ In addition to the information collected during interviews, I rely heavily on my own fourteen years of Festival participation, my seven years of participation on the www.michfest.com bulletin board, and my memories of unrecorded stories and experiences recounted by others, which I have heard and

witnessed over the years. Finally, I continue to actively seek feedback on my work from my collaborators.

Originally, I approached the "womyn's festival" as an artifact, as a genre of folklore, and as an object to be defined, described, and deconstructed. My first essays about women-only festivals were primarily ethnographic and employed some of what Geertz calls "thick description" (1973:9-10). My intent was to show how these events fit into the traditional categories and definitions of a genre with a long history in the study of folklore. Scholarship on festivals focuses primarily on three kinds of identifiable events: calendar/religious festivals; state and national folklife festivals; and community-generated and community-based festivals.¹⁷ Examples of calendar or religious festivals include harvest, Christmas, and Passover (Pirkova-Jakobsen 1956; MacGregor-Villarreal 1980; Sherman 1988). Folklife festivals include the largest, our Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, held annually on the outdoor mall of the United States' capitol. Additionally, states like Kentucky, Vermont and, until very recently, Louisiana host annual festivals to showcase traditions particular to each state. Community-generated, local culture festivals include rodeos and local fairs, as well as thematic events such as Spring Flings, Dog Days,

and Homecoming (Weales 1957; Toelken 1965; Stoeltje 1981). In the nineties, contemporary United States' culture was rife with the targeted-audience music festival, like Lollapalooza, H.O.R.D.E., and Lilith Fair, all of which went beyond music programming to include other cultural components, such as vendor and information booths. These events, as well as women-only festivals, provide occasions for festive behavior in structured environments for large groups.¹⁸

Contemporary folkloristics, particularly narrative and performance-centered theories, expands notions of the genre of festival, its purpose, and meaning (Stahl 1985; Bauman 1977, 1986). Rather than an artifact to be documented, described, and archived, a festival may also be examined as text, implying it is more than a stagnant object and may be "read" like a novel, an epic poem, or even a quilt. Many studies have been conducted about the significance of festivals and carnivals.¹⁹ The primary conclusion these studies make is that festivals and carnivals create spaces for both the perpetuation of group traditions as well as the inversion of societal norms where inversions are not only acceptable, but also encouraged. The argument is that small, framed, and limited separations from day-to-day life provide safe outlets for deviance and, simultaneously,

reinforce the order of daily life and societal norms. Thus, festivals fulfill more than social outlets; as texts, festivals begin to take on symbolic meaning for participants within the festival and in the larger society as well. Festivals are significant as artifacts and texts, both socially and metaphorically. In this dissertation, however, I will focus primarily on how the genre of festival may be re-contextualized as discourse where the audience conveys meaning.

Allow me to explain. Seemingly, the audience of a music festival is comprised of those who sit passively at the foot of a stage and listen to performances. However, in the context of womyn's festivals, and particularly the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, audience transcends the traditional boundaries of mere staged performances. Folklorist Richard Bauman points out that "performance is a mode of communication, a way of speaking" (1986:3). In the context of Festival, then, all participants—whether performers, producers, workers, or ticket holders—move seamlessly between roles of performer and audience. All participants actively generate the ongoing conversation of the community. In this model for the genre of festival, the most significant function is to facilitate what Bauman called "generative politics." However, sociologists and

women's festival ethnographers Dona Eder, Suzanne Staggenborg, and Lori K. Sudderth counter Bauman with "prefigurative politics." They argue that one goal of women's festivals is to posit political discourse, particularly radical feminist politics. Their definition, however, suggests boundaries—that a festival's discourse has a beginning, middle, and an end, and that a women's festival is the location for the beginning or origin of political ideas. From a women's festival, they would argue, politics filter out into local feminist communities and then, perhaps, into mainstream society (1995). I differ with them, in that I argue Festival politics (and discourse) blur a linear transmission and are, in fact, recursive.

¹ Hannah is a pseudonym.

² Eileen M. Hayes (1999) traces the participation of women of color in the women's music genre, which she refers to as "women-identified music," based on the word choices of her informants, who include artists like Judith Casselberry, Sandra Washington, Mary Watkins, Ubaka Hill, and Rashida Oji, who have all performed in the women's festival circuit. While Hayes' dissertation is not specifically about the MWMF (although it frames her Introduction) nor women's festivals (she conducted research at seven women's festivals), her work is important for a full understanding of the depth and breadth of voices in "women-identified music."

³ I capitalize Lesbian in context with Dobkin to honor her preference.

⁴ Though she has not performed or worked at the MWMF for many years, Maxine Feldman first wrote and performed "Amazon," which marks the symbolic beginning of Festival each year during the Opening Ceremony tradition. Festival participants hold her in high regard for creating the song that most exemplifies the spirit of the event and the movement. Feldman passed away in late August 2007.

⁵ A bimonthly informational publication by, for, and about lesbians published in East Lansing, Michigan since 1974.

⁶ A quarterly feminist news journal by, for, and about women published in Washington, D.C. since 1970.

⁷ Thirty issues were published from 1984-1994, documenting women artists (music, comedy, literature, cartoon, dance, and theatre), conferences, festivals, spirituality, and concerts with photographs, interviews, and commentary. Hot Wire was founded and published by Toni Armstrong, Jr.

⁸ Lilith Fair, billed as a "celebration of women in music," was a music tour founded by pop music artist Sarah McLachlan in 1997. McLachlan featured female solo artists and bands with female leads. The wildly successful commercial endeavor was not a separatist event, and the tour crews, production staff, and backing musicians were not restricted to women only.

⁹ In 1992, festies reported to Festival staff the presence of a male-to-female transsexual woman on the Land. She was ultimately asked to leave, sparking fifteen years of protests and dialogues about how to define "woman." The first protest outside Festival gates occurred in 1993; over the years, it has grown more organized and was dubbed "Camp Trans." Its organizers' primary goal is "protesting the exclusion of trans women from women-only spaces, most notably" MWMF (www.camp-trans.org). Since 1993, the MWMF producer has steadfastly articulated that Festival is "a place for people who were born and have lived their entire life experience as female" (August 24, 1999). In the ongoing issue's lingo, outsiders and protest supporters refer to this designation as the "womyn-born-womyn policy." Insiders and Festival supporters typically refer to it as a

"wish," "guideline," or "intent." No matter where one stands, the issue is highly complex and deeply personal.

¹⁰ Suggested guidelines for camping in the 1996 MWMF: "There is plenty of room, so please try to give your neighbors a little elbow room when you pitch your tent. We recommend at least ten feet between tents - more, if possible."

¹¹ The latter event was a protest down the road from Festival where participants sought to overturn the MWMF producer's stated "womyn-born-womyn" intent for participation. The name "Son of Camp Trans" lasted one year, and the event reverted back to the original name.

¹² Leverick's section on the scholarship of festivals (as genre) and its intersections with women's festival scholarship is particularly good.

¹³ A sixth work, an Honors thesis entitled "The Separatist Game: Challenging the Womyn-born-womyn Policy at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival" by Sarah S. Leicher of Albion College published in 2002 would appear here chronologically. While Leicher provides descriptions of the MWMF and attempts to analyze the event, other works offer fuller descriptions and more rigorous theoretical analyses.

¹⁴ Collas shifted back to participating as a festie in 2003 and 2004 after completing fieldwork in Workerville.

¹⁵ In August 2007, I met Laurie J. Kendall in person in Workerville at MWMF, where she had worked with her wife Bobbie at the Women of Color Patio. The patio is a space open to all women, especially those who want to discuss the issues of racism and white privilege. In 2005, Kendall, also a working class, non-traditional, first generation graduate student, was instrumental in encouraging me to dig out my dissertation and finish it.

¹⁶ I propose this theory based on discussions with participants in the annual Burning Man Project, an "art and temporary community based on radical self expression and self-reliance". Additionally, I work with a Colombian traditional dancer who lives in St. Louis, Missouri whose identity is deeply situated in *Carnaval de Barranquilla*, a pre-Ash Wednesday tradition formalized in the 19th Century.

¹⁷ John F. Moe categorizes the genre of festival based on levels of audience participation: nonparticipatory, semiparticipatory, and participatory. Folklife festivals seem to fall into the nonparticipatory category indicating that audiences observe artists and artifacts in a museum-like fashion. See "Folk Festivals and Community Consciousness: Categories of the Festival Genre," Folklore Forum 10 (1977): 33-40. Also, see categories proposed by Lee Udall and Joe Wilson in Presenting Folk Culture: A Handbook of Folk Festival Organization and Management Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Traditional Arts (1978): A2-A5.

¹⁸ Linda T. Humphrey adds another element to the discussion of festive behavior in her essay, "Small Group Festive Gatherings," Journal of Folklore Institute 16 (1979): 190-201. Humphrey posits that socialization is the primary purpose of get-togethers among smaller folk groups of friends or coworkers, and the gatherings generally center around shared food. Similarly, women's festival participants break off into smaller groups based on friendship, geography, and common interests.

¹⁹ For analysis of the genre of festival's symbolic meaning, see Barbara Babcock, ed., The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978; Harvey Cox, The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969; and Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World Cambridge: MIT P, 1968.

Chapter Three

Schizophrenic Ethnography: Negotiating the Roles of Participant and Observer¹

Foolish, foolish is the [ethnographer] who mixes up the field with her life.

Ruth Behar (1995:77)

Over the last two decades, new theories of ethnography have developed in reaction to evolving concerns about the interactions between the researcher and the researched. James Clifford sketches a few images of the ethnographer in his oft-quoted introduction to Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography; Stephen Tyler puts pen to paper in India; Margaret Mead romps with children in Manus; Colin Turnbull hauls his typewriter to the jungle; Malinowski is "carefully posed . . . writing at a table" (1986:1-2). Only the image of Mead reflects what Clifford calls "the usual portrait of . . . fieldwork, participant-observation" (1986:1). Clifford's intent is to foreground the "writing" of ethnography not the "doing" of ethnography. His depictions of Tyler, Turnbull, and Malinowski paint them as contemplative authors in solitude. In the photo, Tyler sits outside a hut with his back to his subjects. Turnbull's separation is much more subtle,

although one can imagine how then-modern technology and, thus, distance is evoked by his typewriter and even by the foreign clacking of its keys. Finally, Malinowski works within the confines of his tent while the Trobrianders observe *him* from a distance. In these descriptions, Clifford does foreground the ethnographer as writer, but the subtext is still the different, distant Scholar authorizing the Other. As a relatively new scholar and ethnographer, that was the primary model I gleaned from the scholarship.

As a student of literature, my second impression of the ethnographer was drawn by contemporary literary authors. In these accounts, ethnographers and fieldworkers are bumbling undergraduate and graduate students who return to their hometowns to hassle their neighbors and kinfolk, asking pesky questions, sticking microphones in people's faces, tape-recording relentlessly, disrupting lives, writing jargon-laden, high-falutin' prose that no one back home wants to or can read. Lee Smith's novel, Oral History, is framed by the undergraduate fieldwork project of Jennifer Bingham, an estranged city cousin who comes to collect the quaint lore of her hillbilly family in Hoot Owl Holler. In the novel's conclusion, only her grandfather, the slightly addled Little Luther, participates

wholeheartedly as he obsessively belts out ballads and accompanies himself on the dulcimer. Every other member of the family is put off by Jennifer's tape recorder. In the last five pages, the tape recorder begins to symbolize her intrusion and disruption of their lives. Jennifer's uncle and grandmother both identify the recorder as "that thing." For Jennifer, it becomes a kind of totem, a connection not to the folklore she collects on the mountain but a link to her urban, civilized life at the university. She draws the following elitist conclusions about her remote family:

"They are really very primitive people, resembling nothing so much as some sort of early tribe. Crude jokes and animal instincts—it's the other side of the pastoral coin"

(1983:290-291).

Similarly, in Gloria Naylor's Mama Day, the narrator recalls the return of a local boy to the island:

Look what happened when Reema's boy—the one with the pear-shaped head—came hauling back from one of those fancy colleges mainside, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder and a funny way of curling up his lip and clicking his teeth, all excited and determined to put Willow Springs on the map. (1988:7)

Inevitably, the narrator refers to the tape recorder as "his little gray machine," "the machine," and "that machine." In regard to the ethnographer's fieldwork, the narrator asserts he "ain't never picked a boll of cotton or

head of lettuce in his life" (7). Like Jennifer, Reema's boy distances himself from his family and neighbors with the machine (the fieldworker is never named in the novel except by his relationship to his mother). Upon receipt of their complimentary copies of his thesis, the locals read his conclusions: Willow Islanders are "asserting [their] cultural identity, inverting hostile social and political parameters" (8). Again, an author uses the ethnographer as a character to frame her novel. Naylor's point is that the ethnographer's biggest mistake is that he just does not listen—not a very favorable commentary on a field of study that relies on close visual and aural observations. The machine creates a schism between Reema's boy and his family and between him and the cultural knowledge that, as a member of the group, he should possess, but that he has obviously forgotten. Jennifer Bingham and Reema's boy go into the field, into their native land, not as insiders or even as participant-observers, but, following the more pervasive model, as Scholars authorizing the Other.

During what feminist anthropologists Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen label "the post-modern turn," the canon of ethnography began a process of revisions in the late 1980s (1989:7). Countless scholars in folklore and anthropology have questioned the social, cultural, ethical,

and political implications of fieldwork as well as the analysis and publication of field-based data. More often, the focus of the scholarly works is on the role of the outsider studying an/other culture. For many folklorists and anthropologists, the preferred model of fieldwork is participant-observation, in which an outsider makes contacts within the group, temporarily joins the group for the sake of observation, participates as fully as her/his "subjects" will allow, and then retreats within the walls of a tent or returns to the halls of academia to produce the product. More recent post-modern revisions, however, call for collaboration and self-reflexivity. While these critiques, suggestions, and prescriptions are often progressive additions, I found a few examples of, or models for, the "insider" ethnographer—mostly in my own academic department at the University of Missouri.

In 1990, I entered the field of folklore in the midst of the post-modern turn. I carried preconceived notions of the ethnographer, and my mind was crowded with the images of distinguished scholars in tents, Margaret Mead playing with children, and intrusive students with ubiquitous tape recorders. As a first-generation college graduate, I also carried my working class (with middle class aspirations) family's simultaneous lionization and demonization of the

academy. As a lesbian-feminist, I learned to distrust institutions firmly grounded in the system of patriarchy. Despite all the intellectual baggage, or perhaps to spite it, I ventured into the field of folklore to study a group in which I participate fully. As Sw. Anand Prahlad so astutely points out, "our field . . . has been based upon class and political distinctions from the beginning" and "does not exist for the interest, liberation, and empowerment of the indigenous and other marginalized groups that it uses as fuel for its *machines*" (1996:6-7, emphasis mine). On some level, I sensed this disparity once I entered the discipline of folklore. On another level, I believe that our discipline, perhaps more than any other, may offer opportunities to make political statements about understanding and tolerance. Lesbian anthropologist Ellen Lewin points out:

Lesbian ethnography informed by feminism offers us an opportunity to reduce the distance between ethnographer and subject and to provide the basis for a level of intimacy not readily achievable by the non-lesbian investigator working with a lesbian population. But it cannot overcome fundamental differences that still emerge between ethnographer and subject simply because of the nature of the enterprise (1995:332).

The writing of this chapter itself gives me the opportunity to articulate the ongoing tensions and negotiations that I

encountered in the first six years of actively studying one of my own folk groups.

Unlike such famous participant-observers turned converts as Zora Neale Hurston and Karen McCarthy Brown,² I was a participant, a member of the group, before I began to study the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and the subgroups that emerge from the event, and I will remain a member of the group after the study is complete. The impetus to study my own group grew from my initial participation, not vice versa. Still, the tensions of the participant-observer exist: when does/should the scholar change "hats"? Can one be simultaneously participating fully and observing? How does a scholar report and analyze events and performances without jeopardizing the role of participant? Does one position take precedence over another, and when? How does the acculturated scholar convey the events and analyses to the academic audience and other members of the dominant culture, as well as her own "folk culture," without betraying peers or endangering the event? These questions are further complicated when the scholar is more than a participant in the activities but is also a dedicated member of the group.

As I mentioned earlier, I tried to collect folklore at Festival the very first year that I attended. I was a

novice lesbian, a novice festie and, most of all, a novice ethnographer. I scheduled a workshop in the meadow under the trees in area #9, and asked women to "come and tell me their festival stories." I sat anxiously awaiting, tape recorder in hand. No one was on time; obviously, the novice lesbian was not yet familiar with the emic concept of "lesbian time" (typically, running fifteen minutes behind schedule). As women straggled in, I explained my project three different times. The first woman was shy and needed lots of prompting. The second woman was also a first-timer, and she thought my workshop was a perfect opportunity to learn the festival's oral history in one sitting. The last two campers to join us were a couple who had each attended the festival for over ten years. They brought along their bowls of vegetarian cuisine, eating with chopsticks, and proceeded to tell us a few stories. The novice ethnographer kept the tape, lost the women's addresses, and eventually misplaced both.

On another occasion, I tried to tape "in context" in 1991 back at home in Columbia during the year, between festivals. I had met a fairly large group of women who regularly attended women's festivals, including the Midwest Wimmin's Festival, at one time the oldest women's festival in the country, but then lapsed, was resurrected as a

"reunion," and now has returned to annual production.³ On this particular autumn weekend in Columbia, many of us had traveled to the home of a friend who lived in the country near the Missouri River. These weekend retreats to the river were often compared to mini-festivals by this group of seasoned festies. I was not surprised that, while we sat in the living room around a woodstove, the topic of women's festivals came up naturally in conversation. Everyone began swapping stories about women's festivals, and my best friend urged me to get my tape recorder. I checked for everyone's consent and hurriedly plugged in the recorder. As hard as they tried to continue, the tape recorder stopped the conversation. Even with their consent, and their enthusiasm for my topic, the tape recorder shut the stories down.

At the 1992 Festival, I tried one last time to record stories "in context." I was sitting with my crew around a fire pit, working at Festival's front gate. Everyone said that "Eloise" was the best storyteller.⁴ Everyone said that Eloise had lots of great Festival stories to tell, both about her own experiences and the experiences of friends. Everyone said I should really get Eloise on tape. Since she and I were working together on this day, and my tape recorder was in my backpack, I asked her if I could tape

her Festival stories. She was reluctant. She grew very shy. She gave her permission. I turned on the recorder, asked a question, and then she clammed up. She drew a blank. Her entire repertoire evaporated. And, of course, the novice ethnographer did not have the skills to plumb the well.

Based on these experiences, I often envied the skills of my fellow graduate student, Kenneth DeShane, who was also studying a group in which he was a long-time member. DeShane, an Assemblies of God believer, was working on a dissertation that examined the sermons of ministers in his faith, including his own father's sermons. DeShane asserted that "the presence of the [emic] folklorist will be less likely to upset the normal flow of the creative processes in performance within the context of the [event] and will be less likely to precipitate change in participants' behavioral patterns" (1996:16). Perhaps it was easier to record an entire service from the audience; perhaps the preacher did not mind the tape recorder. Of course, it is also more common for sermons to be tape recorded, and, in general, a preacher is much less likely to suffer from performance anxiety than my Festival friends. Whatever the case, my fieldwork and tape recording experiences were never as successful as DeShane's.

At this point, the meaning of this chapter's title, "schizophrenic ethnography," may be emerging. In the Oxford English Dictionary, one definition of schizophrenia is a "state characterized by the co-existence of contradictory or incompatible elements." An unabridged edition of the Random House dictionary notes that schizophrenia is a "psychosis marked by withdrawn, bizarre, and sometimes delusional behavior and by intellectual and emotional deterioration." There were times, during the fieldwork and early composition of this dissertation, when I worried that the latter definition fairly described my mental state as I painstakingly muddled through the processes of gathering stories and drafting pages, even though I clearly did not suffer the very real and debilitating symptoms of this clinical psychosis.

The former definition, though, accurately applies to the tensions between the binarity that I experienced as participant and observer, member and scholar-roles that often do seem contradictory and incompatible. In "A Folklorist in the Family: On the Process of Fieldwork Among Intimates," Susan L. Scheiberg discusses the importance of role negotiation for the insider, native, or emic ethnographer. Scheiberg collects her Jewish grandparents' personal experience stories about their escape from Nazi

Germany and the ensuing life of these immigrants in the United States. My tensions about ethnographic fieldwork resonated with hers. I also found the tape recorder to be a "silent participant" and "ever conspicuous"; I sometimes felt ambivalence from my "intimates," close friends at home, and others in the Festival community; I have been cautious and conflicted about revealing their stories to academia because the research reveals much about me, a member of the community; and I often find myself torn between collecting "data" and enjoying the interactions with the group (1990:210-211).⁵

The first year I attended the MWMF, I was overwhelmed by the size of the event. I arrived with three other "festi-virgins" and, although we attended many concerts, films, and meals, we never really ventured outside our own small group. My second year was much the same, although amplified when my newfound group of friends from Columbia, Missouri was not accessible, as they were working at various posts throughout Festival and were camping in an area that was fenced off from the general population of campers. My third year, I joined the workers' village and quickly became a welcomed member of the Security/Communications crew. This crew was most advantageous for sharing stories about past and present

Festival experience because the crew worked around the clock in three shifts, staffing three or four posts that mark the physical boundaries of Festival property. On overnight shifts, stories flow around each of the fire pits and between the posts via hand-held FM radios as crew members pass the time and stay alert.

My position as a Security crewmember also led to occasions to interact with other crews and locate shared traditions. In August of 1993, I attended the Gate 7 "christening," an impromptu ceremony and improvised ritual where members of the Security/Communications crew dedicated a new post. "Security gals" were joined in the ritual by workers from other crews that work in conjunction with Security: Traffic, Shuttle, and "Earthquake Volunteers" (who are mechanics and generally handy women in emergencies). Our purpose was to dedicate and bless Gate 7, a new and very isolated work post. Before the short crews had arrived, vandals had snuck onto the land, stealing equipment, destroying property, and leaving behind derogatory graffiti. Although Gate 7 is closed to all vehicle traffic when MWMF workers are on the land, the vandals were believed to have entered on foot around the locked gate. As we stood in a circle, each woman expressed her wishes for safety at the post, one that had

specifically been created to deter more antagonistic acts from local bigots. After the blessings and wishes were shared, some old-timers from other crews told stories about the early days of Festival security, when each participant was expected to pull a volunteer shift at Festival's gates. Emergency security shifts were announced from stages, and women were mustered based on their home states. A physical gate of dozens of women would confront unfriendly trespassers, linking arms with festive neighbors, from, for instance, Ohio and Indiana.

The Gate 7 ritual was presided over by a member of our crew who practices Wicca and goddess worship. Another woman broke into song and led the group with her sweet alto voice, surprising me. Before that night, I had only ever glimpsed her driving a rugged sports utility vehicle, repairing huge shuttle tractors with ease, and smoking cigar-like cigarettes in a dining tent with her crew. I usually heard her voice only as she stepped out of the dining tent, gruffly yelling announcements during all-crew meetings, or as she spoke over a CB radio to communicate with members of her crew. I had my tape recorder in my backpack that night as I did every day and night that I was on Festival land my first six years; however, like almost every other occasion where Festival's non-stage

performances occur in context, I was not willing to introduce "that thing" that Scheiberg calls the "silent participant"—the one bound to kill the event (1990:210). To me and the other women at that midnight ceremony, the event was sacred. Once again, introducing the tape recorder could have altered the event significantly. I have come to believe that taping in context at Festival is physically, emotionally, and ethically impossible for me. I have no desire to invade what so often becomes a sacred space for women who work or attend Festival year after year, or for those attending Festival for the first time. I also have no desire to distance myself from the group with the physical presence of the tape recorder. Membership in this particular group is very important to me; I work at least eight hours a day on rotating shifts for six to thirteen days with other crewmembers to create a retreat for thousands of women, and for myself.

Each year as I packed my gear for Festival, I dutifully made room in my bags for a tape recorder, blank tapes, and journals. Each time, I thought that I would find opportunities to tape Festival lore "in context," while also keeping the Festival's guidelines clear in my mind. Festival specifically instructs participants to ask for and receive permission to take photographs of anyone in a

camera's frame in order to protect identities, maintain anonymity, and respect privacy. Based on these guidelines, as well as copyright laws for recorded voices, I find that I will never be comfortable taping events "in context," in group settings where members may have no knowledge of my research, and when there is no occasion to inform participants individually beforehand. During the first two years, I recorded only two ninety-minute tapes at Festival. For four of the first six years that I attended, I rarely took the tape recorder out of my bag.

After Festival, however, back at home in Missouri, I began to tape record interviews with women I knew who were "festi-goers." The local interviews became one strategy for collecting women's Festival stories and voices. All of these one-on-one interviews were conducted out-of-context, at someone's home or in a local hangout, although these recording sessions often mimic actual gatherings of friends, who are also women's festival participants. I determined not to collect narratives in the larger social context, where these women often recount their experiences of festivals-gone-by. However, I am collecting stories in a context that is very familiar to my collaborators. In fact, my role as an insider reconfigures these seemingly a-contextual interviews into one-on-one conversations between

a friend and me. We are members of the larger group that shares Festival land and experiences on an annual basis.

And, finally, I consciously collect informally, forever listening and gathering Festival stories as they are told at the MWMF and throughout the year, from one August to the next. At this point, I seem to have resolved my crisis of fieldwork. As I transcribe tapes, however, I think about my crisis of representation. Of course, I am worried about conveying some truth and meaning to the audience of this study, but I am more worried about how I will choose representative materials without objectifying my friends and co-workers. In a 1994 Journal of American Folklore article, Kathy Neustadt claims that "folklorists are more likely to be haunted by issues like 'authenticity,' 'identity,' and 'tradition'" while anthropologists "[suffer] from . . . anxiety-ridden soul-searching" that is associated with postmodern theories of ethnography (1994:182). Her observation may be true historically if we look, for example, at scholars like Richard Dorson and other "fathers" of folklore studies. However, contemporary folklorists—especially those dealing with human rights, social justice, and politically-motivated and marginalized groups—are searching their souls as well.

The major issue for me in representation is revelation; my friends and collaborators have entrusted me, an insider, with precious memories of their Festival lives and with long-held fears and insecurities. They trust me to make thoughtful and caring choices in the text and in my analyses. I have asked them to continue to collaborate beyond the interviews as readers and editors of my manuscripts, and I invite them to offer up their own analyses of function and meaning. Many of them have read drafts of my work, and some continue to read my revisions, but few have offered suggestions for revision beyond proofreading or the occasional word choice. Still, I have collected stories, monologues, and dialogues about critical issues, such as body consciousness, physical and emotional abuse, sexuality, and gender identity. These issues are evocative among group members and easily misinterpreted and ridiculed by outsiders. As I participate and observe, I recall Emiko Ohnuki-Tierny's conclusion that "a native anthropologist [retains] a far more advantageous position in understanding the emotive dimensions of behavior—psychological dimensions of behavior are hard for outsiders to understand" (1984:584). In an earlier draft of this chapter, I paraphrased some emotion-laden stories that I have collected, trying to convey the tellers' levels of

passion and interpretation to illustrate my points, but I quickly realized that removed so far from context and owner, my editing objectified my friends and silenced their voices. I had to find another way to share their stories.

In September of 1994, I sat transcribing at the computer, fingers flying on the keys, ears stuffed with the headset, right foot on the reverse pedal. I thought my body was fully engaged until I got to a section of Sue's tape. Since I began working at Festival, I have listened and informally collected her stories. That August was the first time I collected her stories on tape. During this interview, Sue told me the story of an accident that occurred on the county road that leads to Festival's main entrance. Campers traditionally park along the side of the road waiting for the gates to swing open on Monday. Some campers arrive as early as Saturday night. By Monday morning, cars often line the road for three or four miles. As the women wait, they host a pre-festival in the road and between their cars. In 1992, two women were hit by a van driven by a local man when they walked across the road. As the coordinator for Security/Communications, Sue was one of

the first women on the scene. The accident victims survived, although they both were badly injured.⁶

I was also working Opening Day; my shift ended just before the accident happened, and I only heard the reports come over the CB radio as I rode a shuttle a half mile into the interior of the land. Over the years, I have heard or read versions of the story of that accident from other workers, other campers, and even from one of the victims herself. I did not know Sue's version. During the interview, I listened intently to Sue's descriptions and her pain. Once I was home, transcribing the tape, I *heard* Sue's version for the first time. I wept as my friend expressed her anxieties about that day and every Opening Day since then. She reminded me about the antagonism festi-goers felt toward the driver of the van; the gory visual images of the victims' bodies; her feelings of helplessness as she waited for the ambulance to arrive. She told me how she sat with the van's occupants while other Festival workers, local law enforcement, and emergency medical staff attended to the seriously injured women. She recalled how she listened and observed in disbelief, trying to understand how the accident could possibly have happened. We both discussed the various stories and speculations that flew around the Festival land during that next week about

the driver, his intent, his rate of speed, and his condition. After I finished transcribing Sue's story, I quit transcribing for months. Even years later, I find that I am overwhelmed; my throat is tight; my eyes water; my body controls my emotions. Yet another tension to be negotiated by the participant and the observer.

As I stated earlier, collaboration is the primary strategy I use to negotiate the tensions of fieldwork. I have modified Elaine J. Lawless' theory of reciprocal ethnography and strive to give fuller voice to my friends, collaborators, and other Festival participants. In her study of clergywomen, Lawless explains that she began with the one-on-one interview but became dissatisfied with this method and moved onto "dialogic sessions" with the women she studied (1991:36). As an outsider ethnographer, she struggled, as I have, with notions of objectivity, distance, and voice. Conversely, in my fieldwork, I tend to move from informal dialogic sessions to more formal, taped interviews. With the advent of the Internet, I often send electronic mail to my collaborators as I draft chapters, asking them to expand on their thoughts, refresh my memory, or read passages to ensure clarity. In addition to these

fieldwork strategies, continuing to converse with my friend and collaborator Julie has helped me overcome many of my apprehensions about divulging Festival lore to an outsider audience, in the mainstream patriarchal society that led Festival's producers to create a separate space in the first place. Not only have I interviewed Julie, but she has also read various drafts of my dissertation proposal and drafts of chapters. Julie, herself a writer and therapist, has discussed my work with me more than any other collaborator. Over a few cigarettes and cups of coffee in the mid-nineties, Julie allayed my concerns about divulging our stories and traditions, convincing me that conducting and completing my study was as important, if not more so, to our community than to academia. She pointed out that I was illuminating our often-invisible history and culture and that there is political and individual power in our visibility.

In the summer of 1996, I also realized that I had been participating in a second collaboration—one with my colleagues in folklore at the University of Missouri. I was in my friend Ginny's garden at a party, and we were talking with Sw. Anand Prahlad about his research leave. Prahlad discussed drafting a new book about the connections between scholarly and creative writing, between folklore and

poetry. He envisioned the new book as a "step toward bridging schisms within [him] self and [his] work" (1996: iii). I had an epiphany somewhere between the Echinacea and the impatiens. I realized that in the folklore program in our English department, the folklorists stuck together, if not always socially, then psychologically. We all had something in common besides our love of folklore; we theorized, agonized, and wrote about our crises of ethnography. Most of us wrote as insider ethnographers and about insider ethnography. Virginia "Ginny" Muller also worked on ethnographies of lesbian communities and traditions, particularly looking at traditions related to identity and place; Kenneth DeShane, mentioned here earlier, is an Assemblies of God believer who studied, and continues to study, his own congregations; Kristen Harmon is an oral deaf woman studying Deaf Culture; and Professor Sw. Anand Prahlad has collected African American proverbs from his family and peers. Throughout my original seven years at the University of Missouri, I had countless conversations, inside and beyond the walls of academia, with these friends and scholars about the theory and practice of ethnography. Each of us suffered crises, sometimes verging on minor breakdowns. Each of us was immobilized by some aspect of the fieldwork or writing

process. Each of us conducted mini-therapy sessions in the office or at the copy machine. Each of us shared a prescription, whether it was a sympathetic ear, a parallel story, or the draft of a chapter about the crisis.

During that pivotal year, 1996, I showed an early draft of this chapter's conclusion to Kristen Harmon, and she reminded me of just such an encounter we had the previous year. She had asked the inevitable question: "How's the dissertation going?" I acknowledged reluctantly that I was not writing, that I was in the midst of a writing block. As the conversation progressed, I told Kristen about a dream I had the night before in which I played endless games of Solitaire (something I did during my waking hours, as well). Kristen interpreted my dream, suggesting that symbolically I was obsessively shuffling and re-shuffling my ideas in isolation. Her insight spurred another flurry of writing. I gave up Solitaire and returned to playing four-handed Spades. I gave up writing in isolation and began to share my writing with my collaborators and my colleagues again.

Ultimately, I have concluded that the schizophrenic split between participant and observer is a false dichotomy imposed and perpetuated within our discipline. Models for an integrated participant *and* observer existed in our

history and thrive in the present. For instance, in the second section of Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon's Women Writing Culture, several feminist scholars recover the integrated ethnographic legacies of women ethnographers and literary writers, such as Ella Cara Deloria, Zora Neale Hurston, and Barbara Myerhoff. Additionally, the more contemporary studies of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival cited in this study (along with the ultimate publications by my similarly conflicted colleagues from the University of Missouri, and a 2005 special issue of the Journal of American Folklore) provide some evidence that the field is shifting again or is perhaps momentarily settled.⁷

Folklorist Dorothy Noyes even asserts that "[r]eflexivity is not the exception but the norm," that "[c]ollage is a technique widely employed in ethnography," and that publishers are very receptive to "well-done experimental work" (quoted in Lawless 2005:4). My ethnographic crises and frequent feelings of foolishness might not have been about re-integration at all, but about accepting my recognition of, and a need to recover, more relevant models erased from (or not then included in) ethnography's canon. Thus, I write, ever mindful of Behar's cautions, of the ways in which I have mixed up the field, the ferns, the

forest, and the Festival with my work, my head, my heart,
and my life.

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was presented in 1994 at the American Folklore Society in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

² In Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Jamaica and Haiti and Mama Lola: A Voudou Priestess in Brooklyn, respectively.

³ Midwest Wimmin's Festival pre-dates both National Women's Music Festival and the MWMF, though it temporarily suspended production for a few years. The do-it-yourself Midwest festival provides shelter at a state park and food for communal meals. There is no formal festival staff, however, and all participants are encouraged to assist in preparing meals and creating activities. According to Boden Sandstrom (2002), the Midwest Wimmin's Festival was one inspiration for Lisa Vogel when she and the WWTMC collective first conceived of the MWMF.

⁴ Eloise is a pseudonym.

⁵ In her autoethnography of MWMF, Sara F. Collas describes similar difficulties: "My identity as a researcher served to place me on the outside and on the margins of this setting. My role as a researcher created distance from what was happening in front of me" (2004:56).

⁶ Amikaeyla Gaston was severely injured and recounts her version of the accident in a 2006 letter entitled "Sistahluv" Lesbian Connection 29(2):4-5.

⁷ Kristen Harmon has published "Deaf identity, language politics, and 'hyphenated' ethnography" in Southern Folklore, 54:1 (1997). Kenneth DeShane completed his dissertation entitled Insider Ethnography: A Believer's Perspective in December 2000 and subsequently published articles in Southern Folklore (1996 and 2000) and Western Folklore (2003) on the topic. Sw. Anand Prahlad published "Getting Happy: An Ethnographic Memoir," chapter excerpts from a forthcoming book length project, in the 2005 special issue of the Journal of American Folklore cited above. More recent University of Missouri students in Folklore Studies

have also published insider ethnographies: Jacqueline L. McGrath published an article in the 2005 JAF special issue "Stories of Ruth: An Ethnography of the Dunne Girls," which is based in her 2000 M.A. thesis Stories of Ruth: An Ethnography of Care; and Elaine J. Lawless now has a forthcoming article entitled "In search of our mother's stories. . . And our own" in Ballad Girls and Absent Gods: Poetry, Fiction, and Other Reflections by Folklorists ed. Frank deCaro, Utah State University Press, in press.

Chapter Four

Narratives of Liberation: "Being Naked" at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival¹

My first festival, and I never knew women came in so many sizes and shapes and colors.

Delightful!

C., from Boston, at Michigan, 1987

(Morris 1999:320)

The first stories I heard about the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival came from my then-girlfriend "Gina" whose first trip to Festival, without me, marked the beginning of my own journey and study. Gina took a convoluted route to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 1989. She traveled via plane, train, and automobiles (not to mention a ferry across one great lake) in order to see her lesbian folk hero Cris Williamson—who is, perhaps, the lesbian community's Joan Baez or Bob Dylan. During Gina's life, she had lived in several states and been a politically active and "out" lesbian in two, playing softball on lesbian teams, organizing Take Back the Night marches, attending her fair share of potluck suppers, and volunteering at a lesbian community center. She was, in fact, a member of the target audience of the early women's music movement. She had attended concerts by Cris Williamson, Meg Christianson,

and Holly Near, but she had never attended a women's festival.² The journey to Michigan marked another milestone in her process of identification. As described by Gina to me, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival sounded like the Lesbian Nation's version of Woodstock or a weeklong Grateful Dead concert. As I noted in an earlier chapter, Gina's story about her first foray into casual nudity in the midst of thousands of strangers marked the beginning of my fascination with and study of women's festivals, their culture, and the discourse that emerges through those spaces. The story progressed from Gina's anxiety about Festival's reputation for casual nudity, to her attempt to alleviate her anxiety with the use of sarcasm, her acceptance of the tradition during the event, and, finally, more than a bit of shock at her own participation in casual nudity. I watched Gina craft and hone that story as she and her friend "Hannah" looked over their Festival photos time and again, and I requested a re-telling of that story often or re-told it myself, especially in gatherings with other women who were active participants in women's festival culture. Eventually, the oft-told story was shortened simply to a "kernel": "we all come from the goddess," which was always delivered with an ironic laugh (Kalcik 1975:3-11).

That little quip, like the personal experience narratives in this chapter, signaled so much—both the power of Western patriarchal culture to narrowly define Woman as a class (a master narrative) and the power of a temporary separatist space to blow that definition wide open and liberate individual women—even for a week (narratives of liberation). The tension between the master narrative and the narratives of liberation is played out constantly in the dominant society where the positive effects of Second Wave feminism are so tangible that they have become intangible. As I write this, a nineteen-year-old student from the prestigious Cincinnati Conservatory of Music has just been crowned Miss America. According to newspaper reports, Kirsten Haglund, also known as Miss Michigan, dressed up as a child and pretended to be Miss America, and her grandmother before her was crowned Miss Michigan in the 1940s. The Associated Press story about Haglund teases at the tensions between the master narrative and her own narrative of liberation: “The new Miss America, a cheery, classic blond, wore a revealing silver sequined dress and black bikini during the evening gown and swimsuit portions of the pageant. As her platform issue, she promised to advocate for awareness of eating disorders, an illness from which she has recovered” (Hennessey 2008). The irony of a

woman from Michigan (but not my Michigan) winning the Miss America contest in order to, among other royal responsibilities, raise awareness about anorexia cannot be lost. Eating disorders are symbols and manifestations of a ubiquitous dis-ease in our most recent American *fin de siècle*, as Woman struggles to shift her body first within, and then in spite of, an air-brushed chimera.

Miss Michigan participated in a pageant and paraded upon the stage in a "revealing" dress and swimsuit in order to elevate her status. The MWMF can be read as a twist on the beauty-pageant-as-festival that has been the focus of folklorist Beverly Stoeltje's studies, which I happened to be reading when Haglund was crowned. Stoeltje tells us that beauty pageants function as "secular rituals" or "rituals of inversion" that elevate the status of an individual member of a democratic society to that of royalty (1996:15). Ideological and nationalistic standards of beauty, however, are not inverted by a beauty contest; those standards are bolstered, paraded, and promoted. MWMF is a secular ritual that actually does invert contemporary Western notions of Woman and revises the hierarchical and ideological notions of beauty. As this chapter will demonstrate, through Festival participants' personal experience narratives, "womyn" undermine ideal standards of

beauty and undo the male gaze. Rather than pitting women against each other and sanctioning judges to elevate one woman to a higher status based solely on her appearance (not much of an inversion in our contemporary Western societies), the Festival community creates a feminist pageant of self-actualization based in alliance, not competition, and upon diversity, not unachievable sameness. Community members strive to revise ideals and elevate themselves, as evidenced through their stories and sense of place—their personal rituals of inversion.

The relationship between personal experience narrative and place can have transformative powers, as folklorist Elizabeth Tarpley Adams notes, with reference to geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1999:181). She and Tuan write that narratives about place can imbue the site with a positive or negative character. With regard to place, Tuan notes that language (or discourse or narrative) “enables us to understand the *process* of place-making” and “the *quality* (the personality or character) of place better” (Tuan 1991:694; emphases in original). My research on the Festival suggests that personal experience narratives about place have the power not only to define a place and its community (process) but also to mitigate dominant cultural scripts and redefine individuals (quality). For the Festival insider, in effect,

defining place is multi-layered—a celebratory event, a safe space, an alternate culture, a spiritual pilgrimage, contested negotiations, and regenerative identities.

Gina's story conveyed all of these layers, and her story often inspired a round of Festival story swapping. Early on—before I attended MWMF myself and when I was still new to the community—I grew certain that every Festival participant must have a story about the Festival and the first time she got naked there. And, because the re-telling of Gina's story, by her or by me, often elicited the exchange of similar stories, my theory seemed to be supported. Folklorist Amy Shuman reminds us that "stories travel beyond their original tellers and contexts" but still "bear a trace or track a connection to that origin" (2005:3). This dissertation is a convocation of women's voices that ties directly back to Gina's personal narrative, as her narrative ties directly back to the Festival. Shuman notes that "the messages [that the stories] convey are larger than an individual incident or an individual life" (6). And, therefore, despite the absence of Gina's individual voice here, in this case, Gina's story is my story, and our stories are threads of the greater lore and discourse that is the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, women's music culture, and feminism.

Today, nearly twenty years since I first heard Gina's story, I have no problem finding these nudity narratives, in context both orally and in print. In the recent proliferation of scholarship about Festival outlined in a previous chapter, most ethnographers note the association of the event with nudity. The MWMF scholars cite specific incidents, like that by ethnomusicologist Boden Sandstrom who recalls the female sky diver landing at Night Stage as part of the spectacular tradition (and "secular ritual") of Opening Ceremonies at the MWMF twentieth anniversary; Sandstrom recalls with wonder that the sky diver was even more spectacular due to "her lack of clothes" (2002:224). MWMF scholars also make general observations, as when Laurie J. Kendall observes that "[o]n the land, womyn feel safe enough to make their bodies visible, and as individual womyn begin seeing the uniqueness of other womyn's bodies, they become more comfortable with their own" (2006:246). In historian Bonnie J. Morris' chapter on the humor of women's festivals, being naked is referenced repeatedly: "It can hardly escape the performer's notice that much of her audience is topless . . ." (1999:179). Morris also includes nine cartoons in this section, and six of them are references to or images of the women's festival tradition of naked women. In fact, the title of Morris' work invokes

Judeo-Christianity's original myth of morally unencumbered female nudity, Eden Built by Eves. Theorist Cheryl Kader asserts that: "At Michigan, the female body asserts itself; making a claim on the landscape, it relishes its lack of anonymity" (138). These references by Festival scholars, who have also been active Festival participants, reveal an enduring and shared tradition of "I got naked at Festival" stories, certainly positing them not as isolated acts or idiosyncratic behavior. It is also significant that in the early-nineties the MWMF sold a bumper sticker at the Cuntree Store that joked: "I saw you naked at Michigan."³

In this chapter and the next, I will focus specifically on the discourses of bodylore that emerged from women-only festivals, particularly MWMF, and on the ways in which folklorist Katharine Young theorizes that "[b]odies prognosticate the discourses they inhabit. Different discourses fabricate different bodies" (1994:3). As discourse, the personal experience narratives presented here become actual re-presentations of the female body that reveal notions about the embodiment of identity within the very physicality of women's bodies. These stories fabricate different bodies, bodies that emerge markedly different from those fabricated in the dominant culture. In this context, I am using both meanings of "fabricate." I am

asserting that different bodies are constructed by Festival participants and that those women's bodies constructed by the dominant culture (like that of Miss America) are fabrications, deceptions, or lies. Festival discourse is a frame for bodies enhanced by self-esteem and by re-defined ideals of Woman that emerge at Festival. The narratives reflect the tellers' and the community's revised cultural scripts.

From the beginning of my research, I have heard transformative stories about nudity and body image. The Festival nudity stories, like Gina's, are often about first experiences with casual nudity, in particular women taking off their shirts in front of peers, casual friends, and strangers—something that, in North America, for instance, men routinely do while mowing the yard, swimming, playing sports, or lounging. Men enjoy casual nudity inside and outside, openly, in both their private and public domains. Certainly, there are inappropriate occasions and locations for men to expose their upper torsos, but no one assumes that the "no shoes, no shirt, no service" sign at the local convenience store is directed at "topless" women—barefoot women, yes. Shirtless women, no. Across the United States,

statutes about public nudity also demonstrate this disparity. Laws, of course, are dynamic and constantly revised based on the current values of a society, and those laws vary from state to state and even town to town. Current public nudity laws for women appear to be more progressive and, recently, most states in the U.S. and the federal government itself have specifically been compelled to enact legislation that makes breastfeeding in public legal. These laws are necessary as interpretations of public indecency and indecent exposure did not clearly exempt nursing mothers, who are currently more visible in the public sphere and have coalesced into a powerful grassroots lobby. Still, a 2004 poll by the American Dietetic Association found that 57% of those polled found women breastfeeding in public offensive (Li, et al). Public nudity, specifically topless women (men go "shirtless"; even the terminology is gendered), is or has been criminalized variously as public lewdness, public indecency, sexual misconduct, or indecent exposure.

These laws have evolved and been amended with challenges throughout the years, especially to rectify sexist biases (while also becoming more punitive as our collective concern about pedophilia increases), and women are less likely to be punished by the legal system for

being topless. The tacit values of a community, however, are more important than criminal codes and legislation. For instance, in 1998, a woman in Columbus, Ohio, was convicted of "disorderly conduct" for mowing her lawn without a shirt (to avoid tan lines) and fined forty dollars. She was originally charged with "public indecency" after a neighbor complained. Dissatisfied, the offended neighbor then petitioned for a public vote on the indecency of topless women, although voters overwhelmingly quashed the proposed criminalization (Associated Press 1998).

Less than a year later, a nearly "topless" woman took the conflict to the national arena. World Cup soccer player Brandi Chastain stirred a national debate about modesty and gendered body taboos when she famously whipped off her jersey (a soccer tradition for men) in the excitement of winning the championship, exposing her black sports bra. Similarly, on August 4, 2001, alternative country artist Neko Case had her show at the Grand Ole Opry immediately stopped and cancelled when she took off her shirt during the performance and revealed her bra. The Opry, long a conservative entity, then banned the artist. Case explained: "I wasn't trying to be sexy or rebellious—I was just getting heatstroke up there" (Chonin 2002). And, an exposed breast on national television is definitely

controversial, as evidenced by Janet Jackson's infamous "wardrobe malfunction" at the 2004 Superbowl. The seconds-long incident not only resulted in an FCC investigation, a hefty fine, and hundreds of thousands of complaints but also triggered "a renewed obsession with perceived public indecency in this country" (Kaplan 2004). Whether in acts of celebration, comfort, or artistic performance, women are criticized and penalized for behavior that is more than acceptable for men.

Historian Chad Ross asserts that "the history of the twentieth century is the history of the body," that the era is marked by its focus on transforming the physical body, even though the physical body is "a constant form" whose "mutability is limited," one that "cannot go beyond its basic construction except and until decomposition occurs."⁴ Conversely, Ross asserts that the *symbolic* body is mutable:

Over the course of time, the body has transmitted different messages to its many interpreters, shed old connotations and acquired new ones. It has been the site of restless struggle between individuals and various political, religious and scientific authorities. The body has literally embodied the values, prejudices, beliefs and ideologies of whole cultures, races and nations . . . There are multiple bodies, each with multiple meanings, often shifting, and all further tempered by the equally shifting and even contradictory perspective of the observer. (2005:6-7)

Considering that Ross writes specifically about the body in Nazi-era Germany, his position on the disparity between a fixed range of manifestations of the physical body and a fuller menu of meaning for symbolic bodies is significant, especially if we compare the hyper-fit National Socialists with Jews and other "undesirables" whose bodies were starved, tortured, experimented upon, and murdered. Despite the shifting and multiple meanings of the symbolic body, as Ross notes, a naked woman's body, especially exposed by her own will, is always controversial in Western culture. The manifestations of controversy are complex, however, and I argue that they are located in the tension between the master narrative and narratives of liberation; the former is fixed and colonized, as the French feminists tell us, by the patriarchal male gaze, and the latter seek to inscribe women's multiplicity on the body (Dallery 1989:55). The gaze is manifest in legal sanctions where, according to legal scholar Reena N. Glazer, "[t]he focus is on the male response to viewing topless women; there is no focus on the female actor herself" (1993:116). The "potential viewers" are the actors, and the women themselves are merely objects, further illustrating the irony as the object herself is the one penalized but not the potential or actual viewer:

the (heterosexual) male myth of a woman's breast has been codified into law. Because women are the sexual objects and property of men, it follows that what might arouse men can only be displayed when men want to be aroused. (116)

And, we can add, only in places where men want to be aroused.

At women-only festivals like Michigan, women's multiplicity, or difference, is foregrounded in rhetoric and narrative, and that diversity is celebrated.⁵ Nudity, or more specifically the active choice to be partially or fully naked, is but one Festival tradition that exemplifies insiders' larger understanding of difference and definitions of diversity. Festival is one place, one of a very few places, where women have the occasion truly to see the multiplicity of women's bodies, hundreds and thousands of them. The woman identified only as "C" in the epigraph for this chapter exclaims: "I never knew women came in so many sizes and shapes and colors" (Morris 1999:320). Her sentiment is one that is a recurring motif throughout my research and my participation. Diversity, in theory and practice, is visible at Festival on several literal and symbolic levels, from designations of specific camping areas and seating arrangements (see Appendices for map and

seating chart) to multiple variations of women's bodies and the blanket Festival assessment that any and all bodies/breasts are physically and symbolically beautiful and natural, whether observed or not.

Evidence of diversity, or a goal to achieve deeper diversity,⁶ is the core of the rhetoric of the MWMF's annual printed program, a publication that serves as a guide not only to events but also to the event's culture. In the 15th anniversary program for the 1990 MWMF, the production staff dedicated a whole page to "Honoring Our Diversity," including this excerpt:

The Festival is unique and powerful because of the diverse group of womyn who come from every state in the US, every Canadian province, and many other countries and cultures. Being here together for such a concentrated time is an intense and empowering experience, one that challenges us to face the differences between us, as well as the individual values that each of us hold. (1990:9)

Upon the 30th anniversary in 2005, the annual publication continues to address the topic of diversity and its importance to Festival culture. The production staff moves this topic from the ninth page to the first, acknowledging both successes and challenges:

For thirty years, August has been a time for womyn to travel from every state and province and dozens of countries around the globe to this 600 acres in Michigan. Each of us had a first time. Whether it was yesterday or thirty years

ago, we arrived here and found a place that allowed us the freedom to cut loose and be ourselves, and the openness to let each other be different. We've learned and grown from that diversity; we've had outrageous fun and deeply moving moments and in the process, we've created a home community that recharges us for the other 51 weeks of the year. As each woman told the next of her experience here, the story has grown about a place, a town, a culture that exists unapologetically for the sole purpose of celebrating and supporting womyn in all that we are—and all that we can be. (2005:1)

And, in the most recent MWMF program, the first paragraph on the first page under the heading "Our Festival Culture" notes that "[f]or more than 30 years, our intergenerational tribe of womyn from around the world has been gathering on the same land, in this same month, to raise our city of tents from the fields and woods of Michigan" (2007:1). Certainly, Festival is not without struggles around diversity, around issues of race, age, ability, class, and, yes, even gender. All Festival participants are openly invited to provide comments, suggestions, and criticisms in writing to the production staff on an annual basis, and the production staff reviews every submission and often responds in writing. Additionally, workers participate annually in community meetings before and after Festival to provide feedback on production, coordination, and community policies. Ultimately, the production staff and many participants openly acknowledge that Festival is a dynamic

experiment and that no issues of controversy or struggles with diversity are ever finished.

The rhetoric of Festival that is outlined in the program is also manifest in the established practices, guidelines, and services of MWMF, many developed in direct response to the community's needs and requests to accommodate a wider range of participants (e.g., sliding scale admission, American Sign Language interpretation, a barter market, and the Womyn of Color tent). Every MWMF performance, for instance, includes an ASL interpreter and designated seating for women with disabilities. These accommodations were established for over a decade before the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and nearly two decades before mainstream music venues routinely began to provide such accommodations. More importantly, if we regard Festival-goers as a dynamic folk group and note the event's longevity, community members have proactively established their own traditions and meta-events to fulfill their own needs (e.g. red-head parade, femme parade, uniform party, butch strut, pancake breakfast, burlesque show, Lansing keg party, Women of Color barbeque, sweat lodge, poetry slam, Shabbat, and a new spelling bee). Within the diversity of Festival's designated camping areas, participants also have established their own camps based on friendship (the

Vortex), geography (Mother Hubbard's neighborhood, a group of women camping in RVs, all originally from Buffalo, New York), politics (Intergalactic Lesbian Separatists), or even status (the Solo Collective—primarily single women camping with other single women). These new and old traditions are testaments to the ways that location and experience enhance participants' self-image and confidence as well as their ability to affirm themselves not only as lesbians but also as *woman*, and all the difference that word now denotes and connotes.

In a special issue of the Journal of American Folklore on bodylore, Marilyn J. Phillips also looks at personal experience narratives about body images; in this case, disabled women are her narrators. Phillips explains in her article "Straight Talk from 'Crooked' Women" that "[c]oncealment is . . . the hiding of natural forms to create an illusion of physiological acquiescence to culturally prescribed norms for eroticism, a phenomenon common cross-culturally" (1993:400). For her participants, concealment of a disability creates an illusion of prescribed norms of eroticism. For the participants at Festival, clothing is acknowledged to conceal their natural

forms, i.e., differences in their bodies. In our society, the eroticized, objectified female body and the unconventional, "ugly" body are the binary choices. Few women, if any, actually attain the former. Many women, even models and actresses who are constantly under public scrutiny of physical appearance, are plagued by perceptions of inadequacy, and identify wholly or partly as ugly. Folklorist Richard Bauman cautioned in his response to a collection of essays in honor of his Verbal Art As Performance that

the bounded event as an analytical frame of reference has certain inherent limitations as well, especially in regard to comprehending in performance-centered terms spans of time that transcend the duration of the performance event—that is, history—and larger social formations of power and authority. (2002:95)

With the example of Festival, the event itself and its discourse only convey meaning in context with and contrast from history and an understanding of power and authority in contemporary Western culture.

I have known a number of women since my teenage years who struggle with the often conflicting symbolic meanings that are prescribed daily by Western mass media and cultural traditions, a prescription that our society, and even our mothers, wants us to fill and take as directed. By no means were all of these women lesbians, but for

lesbians, the image is unobtainable on many more levels because that image is explicitly heterosexual; it overshadows all difference. The butch woman—marked as different by her mannerisms, her stature, and attire—cannot attain that ideal physically, sexually, psychologically, or emotionally. And because the ideal image of Woman is couched in the duality of femininity and masculinity, the androgynous woman is unrecognizable in the binary opposition and by default is labeled masculine or butch. The femme/feminine lesbian may pass as Woman outwardly, especially to outsiders, but she will not sexually or socially fulfill implications of the image; her sexuality is invisible. Finally, the additions of race, for instance, and other classes and cultures complicate these “ideals” more deeply.

Psychologists Tamara L. Share and Laurie B. Mintz conducted a research study of both heterosexual women and lesbians to discern if there was difference between the two groups with regard to cultural attitudes about body esteem. Share and Mintz suggest that “perhaps the lesbian subculture cannot protect one against wanting to be thin, as mandated by current standards, but lesbian subculture may be able to enhance its members’ feelings about those body parts most directly related to sexuality” (2002:101).

My study suggests that there are elements in lesbian subculture beyond intimate same sex relationships that serve to undermine the inevitable internalization of cultural norms, and one of those elements is membership in same-sex communities like the MWMF, where women are free to re-evaluate the oppressive norms of the dominant culture and "re-birth" themselves in the safety provided by the place, space, and culture of Festival.

In the radical feminist publication *off our backs*, Pat Groves recalls, in her essay about nudity, disability, and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, that

When one arrives at the Michigan Festival, it is immediately apparent that, as a group, the participants have, at least for the duration of the Festival, transgressed the boundaries of the cultural prescription for the feminine body.
(2002:1)

Even upon observing the line of vehicles that stretches down the midwestern county road outside the gates of MWMF on Opening Day, there is a hint of the transgressions that await participants inside the gates. For insiders, "the Line" manifests the festive spirit that lies on the other side of the fence. "DART Patricia", a Festival regular who blogs online about MWMF, describes the blurred boundary that was "the Line" in 2001:

I pulled onto the dirt county road 3.2 miles from the MWMF front gate. The end of the

line was 2.7 miles in; it was 2:30 p.m. I parked in the shade and got out of the car.

"The line" is a Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF) phenomenon. Every year, womyn get here earlier and earlier to celebrate a pre-festival festival all their own; this year a woman with kids apparently started the line on Wednesday. The MWMF front gate does not open until Monday at 1 p.m.

This is a two-lane county road with a speed limit of 55 MPH, so it is necessary to pull way over to the right, and be extremely cautious when walking up and down the line, which is the activity of choice. On years like this—when rain has been scarce—it is a true dust bowl.

Except for security workers trying to keep us safe and to the side of the road, there are no festival services on the line: no portajanes, no food or water, no entertainment, no healthcare facilities, no childcare. What there is, is terrific community. Womyn come prepared with coleman stoves, coolers, tents, campers, RVs, books, battery-operated CD players, cards, tables, flowers for the tables, comfortable chairs, etc. They set up tarps to sit under or they camp out under the trees for shade . . . (Dart Patricia).⁷

For the outsider, a popular event clearly lies on the other side. Hundreds of cars, many adorned with homemade signs or shoe polished messages in the windows, line up as early as possible and wait for the official, ceremonial gate opening on Monday at 1:00 p.m. In the line, women and children are dressed comfortably or whimsically, often in brightly colored summer clothes. Even women who are attired, coiffed, and marked the most radically still manage not to transgress the ultimate taboo (being naked). Participants in the tradition of "the Line" find their old

friends, meet new ones, and mingle socially and somewhat patiently. On the county road, they still inhabit public space; clothing is not optional. Bodies remain concealed.

As the festies enter or get close enough to glimpse the front gate, however, they are welcomed with clear signs of the *carnivale*, whimsy, frolic, inversion, and transgression. In a typical year, they might be greeted by a colorful clown blowing bubbles; the bearded shuttle driver adorned in lingerie; and another driver sporting a loincloth and cowboy hat. The meadow is a hubbub of women purchasing tickets, parking their vehicles, unloading gear, signing up for work shifts, and gathering at shuttle stops. Festival's wide-striped awning tents are reminiscent of county fairs and Fourth of July fireworks stands. And, yet, this open meadow is still visible from the road, visible to members of the general public who drive by on their way to an RV campground, into town to shop at Wal-mart, or to four-wheel in the Manistee National Forest. Here the gentle reminder for Festival participants is: *shirts on*. The meadow ends at a wide expanse of deciduous trees that run north to south and obscure the public view of the majority of MWMF property. Just past the trees is a small downward sloping hill and a designated area for RV camping. My dear

friend, Festival co-worker, and collaborator, Nancy, recalled her arrival one year at Festival:

We parked up in RV, and I remember cresting that hill from Gate 5. You know, where they ask you not to take your clothes off right at the front gate? And I remember cresting that hill, and [makes whistling noise and gestures to indicate whisking off her shirt] there went my shirt, and there was just this sense of freedom" (August 15, 1994).

Tessa, another dear friend and long-time Festival worker, explained to me (during the first one-on-one interview that I conducted at MWMF) that in the earliest days of Festival it was produced on rented land in nearby Hesperia, land that was very similar in landscape to the current location outside Hart. Tessa believed that creating a safe space for casual nudity was not a conscious goal for the organizing collective. Instead, she felt the first "public" naked acts on the Land—openly and beyond outdoor showers and individual tents—happened spontaneously; as Festival workers were setting up pre-fest, they simply got hot and realized that they could work a bit more coolly and comfortably without their shirts (much like the men in our day-to-day lives do as they mow lawns or work construction). However, Festival producer and co-founder Lisa Vogel stated in an interview with lesbian journalists that a primary reason to exclude men from the original

Festival was "'[w]e wanted to create a safe overnight space, and a safe space for nudity,' apparently harkening back to her 'liberating' experience at the Midwest Wimmin's Festival" (Gelder and Brandt 1996:63-65). Whether organic or planned, the significance of casual nudity for individuals and the community has been the same. Casual, functional nudity for women has evolved into a key aspect that often defines Festival when participants try to convey the event's importance.

In the remainder of this chapter, I rely heavily on women's narratives in order to convey the multi-vocality of a lesbian community and to give a sense of the discourse conveyed through bodies in this "corpus" of stories. In effect, "exposing" these stories is analogous to "exposing" the women themselves. I pause here momentarily to emphasize that it is only through the generosity and trust of my collaborators that I am able to share these narratives with readers in a public forum—out of their original context.

Julie and I conducted our interview in her Columbia, Missouri, home on March 24, 1994. At that time, Julie was a 28-year-old mother of two, divorced, bisexual, and "femme" in her first committed relationship with a lesbian partner.

She had attended MWMF three times and also one or more Midwest Wimmin's Fest reunions. I was 31 years old, also divorced from a man, butch-identified, and in my second long-term lesbian relationship with Julie's childhood friend. I had attended the MWMF twice as a festie and two more times as a worker. I was already anticipating my fifth festival and had been asked back to work on the Security/Communications crew. Julie and I had been friends for about two years at the time of the interview. She and I were members of a wide circle of mostly white, mostly middle-class, mostly Midwestern friends whose identities were strongly tied to women's festival participation, particularly at the Midwest Wimmin's Fest and MWMF—in other words, a folk group.

In order to explain how significant Festival was to her identity, Julie recalled leaving her first MWMF to return home to her then-husband and children:

It was really traumatic leaving for me. It was awful. It was like somebody was ripping my guts out trying to leave that Festival. And, oh, I just cried and cried and cried and cried for three hours of the drive, just sobbing. And, yeah, it was really intense; it surprised me how intense it was and how quickly I just got into that whole world. And I felt beautiful while I was there. I felt just really good about myself and physically I felt really beautiful. I got sun, and I felt strong, and I was doing all this stuff physically that I wasn't used to doing, hauling ice and eating well and so, my whole

sense of myself physically changed from being there, too. So, leaving I was terrified. It was a lot scarier for me to come back out into the real world than to go there. I was really scared and really sad and didn't know what in the hell I was doing, what I was going to do with my life—how I could live; I didn't know how to live (March 24, 1994).

Clearly, Julie felt that her participation at Festival, a mainstay of feminist culture, was transformative and, like me, her initial participation marked a major milestone in her life. She was, in essence, re-born at Festival, coming "home" only to reject her heterosexual identity and leave her marriage.

She compared her Festival experience and her day-to-day life: "It's really different than living in this kind of everyday you live in a house, you get in your car, and you go someplace world. It's amazing when you think about what a radical thing it is to take off all of your clothes and run outside in the rain. What a normal thing it is, but then what a RADICAL thing it is" (March 24, 1994). When I responded that my formal and informal research indicated that "being naked at Festival" for the first time was a resounding theme, she responded with her own story, one that echoed Gina's "we all come from the goddess" story:

Right, I remember taking my shirt off; I thought God, all these women are topless. My God, at first it was like, wow, these women are topless! And then I thought, look at all these breasts!

You know, big ones, little ones, fat ones, skinny ones, long ones, short ones. And just being like a real voyeur, and then it took me about three hours, and I was wearing a pair of shorts and nothing else. It didn't take me long at all; I was right there with the sunburned nipples. (March 24, 1994)

The map or narrative arc of Julie's story is a familiar structure, one that I have observed often. Her story is a brief one and a linear one. She opens by acknowledging that she remembers the occasion ("I remember taking my shirt off", i.e. the first time). Next, she goes on to point out not only the diversity among the bodies that she witnessed (like the opening quotation to this chapter) but to point out her own amazement and some anxiety (punctuated by exclamations like "my God" and "wow"). She notes the amount of time that it took her to overcome her own shock and join in ("about three hours"), and then marks her full participation ("I was right there with the sunburned nipples"). The unconcealed breasts Julie saw at Festival revealed a wide range of possibilities of body image in contrast to the eroticized, objectified, often-artificial breasts and bodies concealed and barely exposed to the general public through the popular media.

Outdoor women's festivals are fairly notorious for nudity, and like Gina and Hannah, the two friends in the first story I heard, Julie wasted little time adopting

Festival's tacit dress (or undress) code. In fact, she adopts the dress code so wholeheartedly that she exhibits one of the simultaneously painful and humorous visible markers of the festie-virgin-sunburned breasts. Her story is similar in style, form, and function to narratives that I first heard about casual nudity at Festival and those that I continue to hear. These stories closely follow the Freitag model, the narrative structure that is so familiar to the student of literature and is often echoed in oral narratives as well:

- Exposition ("I remember . . .")
- Introduction of conflict ("all these women are topless!")
- Rising action ("big ones, little ones, fat ones, skinny ones, long ones, short ones. And [I was] just being like a real voyeur, and then it took me about three hours")
- Climax ("and I was wearing a pair of shorts and nothing else")
- Denouement ("I was right there with the sunburned nipples").

As a folklorist, first and foremost, I recognize that Julie and Gina's stories are examples of oral folklore,

despite the fact that they are individual narratives particular to the individual experience of each woman. The stories share theme, form, and functions. For members of the MWMF cultural group (audience and teller), the stories fulfill folklorist William Bascom's four functions: entertain, validate culture, educate, and maintain conformity (1965). Most Festival women, whether they actually go naked at Festival or not, will quickly recognize the festie-virgin's ambivalence about open nudity. While her anxiety about the impending event may not be fully expressed in the story, it is implied in her hesitancy. The seasoned group members, however, also recognize how quickly the new participant usually becomes educated about the cultural norms of a same-sex tent city in the woods. A prevailing Festival belief and value is that Festival is a safe place for women.⁸ The emic audience members are entertained by the story and find it humorous because they likely have had a similar experience on the Land, or know another woman who has. There is humor in the story but not in any embarrassment about actually being naked; the humor is in the anticipation that each woman initially will be embarrassed to become naked during the event or to observe the nakedness of others. But inevitably, the teller concludes that she is actually

embarrassed by her lack of embarrassment—a lot of stress for nothing. So, upon the occasion of sharing her “being naked story,” the teller is also typically entertained herself by her story, as she is now “in the know,” a member of the community who recognizes that her fears were simultaneously normal and strange. And, finally, the story more often than not indicates that the teller has adopted the different cultural norms of Festival—that she conforms to the “dress” code, symbolizing her membership in the group and its accompanying “shared cultural codes” (Stahl 1989:42).

Folklorist Sandra Dolby Stahl argues in her book, Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative, for the addition of the personal narrative, or personal experience narrative, as a genre worthy of examination by folklorists. She explains “the overall function of the personal experience is to allow for the discovery of the teller’s identity . . . and to maintain the stability of that identity for both the teller and the listener” (21). As I posited in my introduction, a festival is not only an artifact and a text but a discourse—an exchange of narratives by members of the folk group—an ongoing conversation that inspires social familiarity, hones cultural ideals, and redefines individual identity. In

these exchanges, the individual teller discovers, defines, and refines her identity in congress with the identity of the event, its community, and its values. The teller of this "exemplum" (the story about a first time) chooses the intimacy of an emic listener who either shares the event, community, and values, or is likely to in the near future. Her story connects her to seasoned members and invites the participation of other festive-virgins, simultaneously.

The discourse of the MWMF—its collective yet multivalent life history—is intricately entwined with a sense of place. The monthly radical feminist publication off our backs has historically been an avenue where some Festival participants discuss the event, its politics, and political implications. In an anonymous article published in 1990 by a MWMF participant, the writer further reveals the discourse and positionality of the MWMF insider. Importantly, she notably references her own nakedness as she contemplates the significance of Festival's space and its role as a macrocosm of lesbian community:

Where do we imagine we "draw" our imaginary circles? Where do we think we've created our women- or Lesbian-only space in relation to patriarchal space? Do we imagine our "space" to be "inside" or "outside" of male-dominated space? I, for one, have imagined Lesbian/women-only space as being "outside" or "beyond" patriarchal social space in a metaphorical sense. I know that I've thought of it that way

in the past: *Standing naked "downtown" at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, I have thought of myself as "inside" and of the patriarchal world as "out there" somewhere beyond the borders of the womyn-owned land.* While I'm at Festival, I rarely remind myself that the two worlds are connected by the public road that lies just outside the gates of the Festival. The spaces we create for ourselves may have physical boundaries, but, more importantly, they're an idea we nourish in our minds. [emphases mine] (Anonymous 1990:15)

To her account, I would add, Festival insiders nourish that idea in our actions, in our stories, and in the discourse that is Festival. It is important to note that this participant uses the word "idea," and not "ideal," the difference being, perhaps, between a process and a product, the journey and not the destination. These ideas are manifest in personal experience narratives.

Stahl acquiesces that "strictly speaking, personal narratives are not folklore, but they are a primary means by which a special kind of folklore is expressed," by which she means the "non-verbalized lore—attitudes, values, prejudices, tastes" (18-19). Clearly, one value of Festival is to support a woman's option to be naked, whether she actually chooses to remove her clothes and for whatever reasons she chooses to remove her clothes. Inherent in that freedom are additional attitudes and values: a woman can define her own body; the physical and emotional landscape

of Festival is liberating; a symbolic mirror of the community of women's bodies reveals deeper diversity; and that mirror of diversity may reflect psychologically—not surgically-enhanced body images. This non-verbalized lore is expressed first by an act of "public" or open nudity, and then the act is manifested in the personal experience narratives.

References to nudity and nakedness at the MWMF in scholarship, underground lesbian-feminist publications, popular media, and even etic rhetoric are so ubiquitous that the state of "being naked" has become a significant Festival tradition. More importantly, there is a corpus of personal narratives from the MWMF that are traditional because they share theme, form, and function. Stahl and other personal narrative scholars, including Henry Glassie and Gary Butler, readily agree that a hallmark of the genre is that the self is the "story's central character" (Butler 1992:36). To further establish the importance of this Festival tradition, I want to include here five additional representative examples of the "being naked at Festival" exempla from a variety of sources: two lesbian publications, a one-on-one exchange via email correspondence, and the MWMF electronic bulletin board. I include these stories here in their entirety.

The first example, which was included in a 1989 issue of the radical feminist publication *off our backs*, supports my contention that "being naked" has become an "initiation" tradition for Festival women. The story is similar in structure to Gina and Julie's stories, but the narrator takes longer to adopt the tradition of being shirt free:

The Michigan festival is one of the few opportunities a North American womyn can have to walk among other womyn shirtless or naked (or anything within that spectrum) and feel accepted and affirmed. *The first year* I went to the festival I felt extremely uncomfortable at the sight of womyn clothed only in a string of beads around the waist, or perhaps a scarf with hanging fringe. I did, however, take off my shirt. *My second year* I envied the womyn with the fringy scarves but all the vendors selling those scarves were charging \$45 so I settled for a triangular piece of fabric I brought from home. *My third year* I felt uncomfortable at the sight of so many clothed womyn! [emphases mine] (Anonymous 1989:20)

Like Julie's narrative, this Festival participant progresses from embarrassment as a "festi-virgin" to full participation as she adopts the cultural traditions, adapts the codes, and, in fact, is finally uncomfortable with participants whom she might describe as resisting conformity with Festival culture.

The following two examples are included in a 1996 lesbian travelogue Into the Heart of Lesbian America: The Girls Next Door written by Lindsay Van Gelder and Pamela Robin Brandt. The book, which is based both on the authors' travels and dozens of interviews with lesbians, is divided into three sections: identity, social arrangements, and politics. Each section includes three subsections, and each subsection is associated with an iconic lesbian event. Gelder and Brandt include the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in the first section, which is about "identity," calling this subsection "The Way We Were." In the Festival section, the authors share direct quotes from informants, many of which include the significance of the tradition of nudity at Festival. A long-time Festival participant who recalls her virgin year at the event told the following story to the authors.

Mary Sims, a fifty-year old florist and longtime feminist activist from Miami, has been coming to Michigan off and on since the seventies. In fact, she thinks she may have been the first black festie on the land. "*That first year my lover and I drove up in our funny little Honda with the tents on the back, and we started unpacking. And in the middle of the field there, there were women with absolutely no clothes on,*" she recalled. The fact that there were no other folks with black skin on didn't, at that moment, even seem to register. "I said, 'We have arrived! Freedom!' It was like the greatest high you could ever have. I never was in a place before with no men. Like right now the three of

us are here, but if a man walks in he wants all the attention. Everybody's conversation goes to him. There was none of that, there. So Judy starts stripping. I said, 'Not yet for me, girl.'" Sims reflects: "I finally did let my saggy tits hang out. But her pubic hairs were the only thing covering her." [emphasis mine, except "arrived," from the original] (1996:47-49)

Again, this story follows the familiar pattern and familiar themes we have come to expect from a Festival woman. Mary, a MWMF insider, recalls her initial surprise at the tradition, but then she, much like her companion, quickly adopts the practice associated with Festival, to be free and open to take off her clothes.

Similarly, Beth Ackerman's story in Gelder and Brandt's travelogue reflects the recurring motifs of diversity and personal acceptance that I have identified in the other oral narratives discussed in this chapter. The authors retell Ackerman's story, closing it with a direct quote from her that serves as a narrative aside, exposing a sub-text from the dominant culture that is often embedded in these narratives.

"I always thought I was fat, and when I came here *for the first time* and saw naked women *in all shapes and sizes*, feeling comfortable, it was very empowering," said Beth Ackerman, a therapist from Ohio. She remembers going bicycling on a blistering hot day with her then-husband. He was shirtless. She began thinking about how nice it must be to feel the wind on one's chest. "I said to him that I wished I could go naked. His response was, 'Guess who's horny?'" (emphases mine, 1996:48)

In this story, Beth indicates that at Festival she has found the "conditions necessary for formulating the self-representations" that liberate herself from a "collective male view of women" (Lawless 1994). Festival provides a space unlike many others in our culture, one where exposed female bodies are not automatically marked as "sexual." In an article in The Journal of American Folklore on "female-sexed texts" and clergywomen, Elaine J. Lawless explains "men have usually created representations of women out of their [men's] fears and fantasies" (74). In women's day-to-day lives, they are expected to cater to those fears and fantasies by participating in the eroticization of the female body and subjecting themselves to the male gaze. But, in the context of Festival, Beth no longer has to cater to the male gaze. At Festival, she is no longer "fat," and the alternative is not thin, slim, skinny, or slender but "comfortable." Additionally, being naked or shirt-free is not ridiculed or fetishized but is deemed by her Festival peers as "empowering." Festival's same-sex separate space provides the conditions for Beth to reformulate her identity and her self-confidence in a community of all women.

My dear friend Ginny, a white, middle class woman who grew up in St. Louis, shared the next story with me. An occasional writing partner, Ginny is also a member of the folk group of Columbia women who have been active in the women's festivals community. In 1997, she shared the story of her first experience with Festival nudity with me through e-mail as she and I drafted an essay on Festival narratives and somatic memory to present at the American Folklore Society. In the past, we always had written side by side at a computer, often finishing each other's sentences, but the long distance between where we each lived at the time forced us to use technology to discover new ways to collaborate. While we sometimes discussed the essay's content on the phone, we mostly used e-mail to brainstorm, draft, and revise. We had exchanged only a few e-mails in the drafting process when Ginny paused to shift roles from scholar to collaborator, friend, and Festival woman. She has attended the MWMF as a worker three or four times, but her first women's festival experiences were at the Midwest Wimmin's Fest in the Missouri Ozarks. As we were discussing the content not only of our essay, but also just of the stories I had been collecting, she felt compelled to share her own story, which includes similar themes of

initiation, diversity, the dominant culture's taboos, anxiety, and, ultimately, full participation.

It has been a long time since my first festival. And *my first festival* was Midwest, a much smaller festival than Michigan. I was sooo young. I hadn't even come out very far yet. I was at the beginning of my coming out process. In fact, the reason I was going to this festival was because one of the first women I had talked to about being a dyke was going. A friend of hers had purchased a ticket, but couldn't make it, so ["M"] offered the ticket to me. I had no idea what I was getting myself into (though I was encouraged by a warning from my father who said that I should be careful because these women's festivals were full of lesbians). So, I drove into the parking lot very innocent. I remember two women commenting on my cute car as I drove in and parked. In the distance I could see a small cabin with the kind of activity around it that looked administrative so I headed that way thinking I'd find information about registration there. I had no idea how I was going to find M, the only person I knew at the festival. I hadn't taken ten steps towards registration when I saw this woman without a shirt on running towards me—all breasts a'flying, *to my wide eyes*—calling my name. It was [M], and she had come running to shepherd me into the festival. I spent most of the festival in my shorts and shirt, reserving a few moments to go shirtless in more intimate settings. I can remember being fascinated by all the breasts. *It really is true; they come in a wide range of shapes.* I think back on that festival and laugh at how uncomfortable I was with my own body—with exposing my own body in such a comforting and safe atmosphere. It wasn't long after that festival that I was participating in and organizing shirt-free demonstrations in the city parks and on the city streets of Columbia. [emphases mine] (October 26, 1997)

I found the fifth example at the MWMF online bulletin board at www.michfest.com/forums, described on the website as "a forum for all of us Michigan womyn to keep the Festival energy and connections going between Festivals." Most of the registered posters have attended MWMF at least once, and, unlike most online social networks, many of the posters meet each other face-to-face (in August). Some posters also socialize with each other beyond the Festival setting, and the bulletin board helps to blur the already muddy temporal boundaries of the event. The bulletin board, however, is also a rich resource for the uninitiated. The website itself is both a marketing mechanism and a wealth of information, including the annual performance schedule, ticket prices, travel information, and answers to some frequently asked questions. The bulletin board is also the place for anxious first timers to get firsthand information from seasoned Festival campers and workers, especially in a forum entitled "Thinking About Coming to Festival." Every year, it seems, anxious questioners come to the bulletin board and ask about the "tradition of nudity," especially with regard to showering outdoors in the open, and every year, stories are swapped. Last year, "bluvoice" (her username) sought to ease anxiety and provide encouragement

to another poster, one of the uninitiated, by sharing the story of her recent first time experience, just four months before:

I was really nervous about showering, too. I was nervous about any revealing of skin...even going braless. Within half an hour of getting to my campsite, I was braless and shirtless and it was wonderful. I'm not a thin chick, and I'm proud of my curves.

I found the showers delightful. Showering outdoors to the sound of drumming and women laughing was great. No one stares at you. It felt so natural and, after a few showers, actually quite nurturing to head down there with my towel around my waist, topless, swinging my bag of soap and shampoo. Humming. Waving to other Festies. Feeling the sun on my skin.
(December 20, 2006)

bluvoice is a Midwesterner of German and English descent and a working student in her early thirties. A festie-virgin in 2006, she found the Michfest bulletin board months before her original trip to the Land, and I recall watching her anticipation and excitement grow as she asked questions and participated in various forums. I grew to know her somewhat through these online conversations, as we talked about yoga and even her stepfather's cancer and devastating death. While she and I have not yet met in person, she did find a solid network of peers before she even attended Festival. Afterward, she moved to a community in Indiana full of women that she met at that first

Festival. At Michigan (and within the Festival community), it seems, bluvoice found friends, family, and comfort.

Around the same time that bluvoice posted, another thread was started on the bulletin board entitled "Defining Festival Moments" in a new forum called "Festival Stories and Lore." The original poster started the thread in mid-November 2006, and over the course of the past year, the log shows sixty-two replies on five pages. Within those posts, sixty-five memories, mostly in narrative form, have been shared. Another nineteen posts have been submitted thanking one or more posters for sharing their stories, all of which are evocative for insiders, eliciting knowing nods, chills, tears, or laughter. Of the sixty-five personal experience stories in this thread, eighteen narrators fondly recall how they unexpectedly found help at just the right moment in a small or large crisis at the Festival (i.e. Festival is a safe and nurturing space); another eleven women remember the power of a particular stage performance; and over twenty stories are about topics like being a festie virgin, meeting someone, or seeing an extraordinary natural phenomenon (shooting stars, a swarm of dragonflies, or large flocks of birds flying in sync over a campsite). Not surprisingly, ten women also reveal stories about being naked, whether they are personal

experiences of nudity or personal recollections of another festive's nudity. There are stories about showers, spontaneous mud baths, and body painting. Common adverbs and sentiments found in the stories are "nice," "comfortable," "incredible," "profound," and "beautiful."

Culturally and legally, our society marks female bodies, particularly breasts, as obscene objects unsuitable for display in the public sphere. Simultaneously, women's concealed bodies and breasts are objectified and eroticized for public consumption. In "The Creator Gods: Romantic Nationalism and the En-Genderment of Women in Folklore," Jennifer Fox discusses "cultural scripts" as ways that gender roles have been negatively embedded into the very foundations of the discipline of folklore (and society) looking specifically at Herder who heralded tradition as a primary vehicle for education, an education that sustains patriarchy. Fox notes that French feminists look to discourse as the means for order, and for change: "discourse helps shape our vision of the world and structure our roles and relationships in ways that need not, and frequently do not, register on a conscious level" (1987:563-4). The MWMF is such a recurrent and recursive discourse, relying heavily on and producing a rich body of personal experience narratives, stories about transforming

individual identity in the context of positive communal or cultural definitions.

This first set of stories reveals individual women's narratives of liberation and their inversion of the oppressive cultural ideals found in the public sphere beyond the literal and figurative gates of Festival. Additionally, these first person personal narratives, when collected and grouped together, provide overwhelming evidence of an enduring community tradition that holds profound significance. I have also collected stories, both from fieldwork and from secondary sources, which shift from the first person narrator as subject to the third person, or the "known other," as subject (Butler 1992:36).

Folklorist Gary A. Butler elaborates

[s]tories concerning 'known others' may be classified as either family-experience narratives, where the narrative character is a close kin of the narrator, or community-experience narratives, where the principal character . . . is recognized as being a member of the narrator's social and historical community network. (36)

The narratives in the following section are mostly community-experience narratives, with one family-experience as well.

When I first moved to Columbia, I had returned from my first Michigan Womyn's Music Festival just days before the start of the 1990 fall semester at the University of Missouri. Unbeknownst to me, during the week prior to and the weekend of Labor Day that year, most of my soon-to-be friends were all at a state park in the Missouri Ozarks participating in the Midwest Wimmin's Festival. Still new to the culture of women's festivals, I was unaware of the regional festival and of the strong lesbian feminist community in Columbia. I remember, however, attending an informal gathering at the campus women's center, where I noticed a participant still wearing her MWMF wrist ticket. When I pointed out that I had also attended the event, she remarked that she was still getting "power" from the reminder wrapped around her wrist. In addition to meeting a few women, I also gathered information about events and resources in the local lesbian feminist community.

Among the fliers was a description of a talk show on the local community radio station. When I tuned in that week from the isolation of my stark graduate dorm room, I learned the topic for the evening was "ways to identify lesbians." Two women, the radio hosts, were leading the discussion and others would call in to share their

experiences. Imagine my surprise as I listened to find a caller who was describing me: a white, thin woman with short curly hair in the English department who carried an Army surplus messenger bag adorned with feminist political buttons. The caller's question to the radio hosts: is she or isn't she? After the initial shock, I eventually got up the nerve to call in and confirm: yes, I am. Within the week, I met the caller, Pam, another doctoral student in English with whom I became friends. Eventually, Pam, a white, middle-class Midwesterner, introduced me to all the women who would eventually comprise my folk group in Columbia, that circle of friends who shared a love of feminist culture, skinny dipping in a rural pond, and women's festival culture.

Over the course of that semester, I also did my first three interviews in Columbia to record Festival nudity narratives. Pam agreed to share a story one evening while we sat and had beers at a popular local pizza joint. Her story is a community-experience story—the story of a known other, a woman who accompanied Pam and friends to the Midwest festival one year.

I took a friend down there, Anna⁹, and we went down there, and she had two shirts on and did not want to take off her shirt. I'd been there before so I knew what it was like. And I walked in—I always feel uncomfortable at first, but

then I take off just my shirt and hang out. Well, Anna came in there with three or four shirts on, and she was visibly very uncomfortable and did not want to take her shirt off. And I said "okay, it will be all right; you'll be fine." A few hours later, I see Anna—totally naked. And shortly thereafter, she had her nose pierced, and she had changed her name to Indigo. It's a great story. She'd also been painted with mud. In a matter of hours, a transformation. (December 4, 1990)

Another festival tradition is to bring new, like-minded women into the fold. The shuttle drivers at the MWMF have a motto "less gear, more women!" In other words, decrease stuff, and increase participation. For years, women's festivals were advertised primarily by word of mouth. Women who come to MWMF alone without being invited by an insider, are fairly rare, so community-experience stories like Pam's are common. Similarly, Mary Sims, the African-American woman whose story appeared earlier in this chapter and was included in the lesbian travelogue, also tells a story that echoes Pam's. American Studies scholar Laurie J. Kendall interviewed Mary Sims for the 2006 ethnography "From Liminal to the Land" (approximately ten years elapsed between Mary's first and second interviews in these two publications). In Kendall's dissertation, she shares several narratives from Sims, including a nudity narrative in a section discussing definitions of *communitas* and "family." Notice how closely the motifs in Mary Sims'

story about MWMF from August 2005 mirror the motifs in
Pam's story about "Midwest" from December 1990:

We brought a woman from Miami with us, and when she got here she was pissed [because she perceived the culture as geared toward young woman], and we told her to go hang out with the older women. "Go to the Over 40s Tent," we said. And a few days later that woman came back, and she had all her hair cut off, and she was nude. The only thing she had on was a backpack. Those women freed her up. That's what Michigan does for us, it let's us be who we want to be. That's why I think all the women bring those costumes. Cause you can make the statements you want to make, that you couldn't out there in the "real world." I guess that's what they call the "real world," but I'm doubting it. This must be the real world. Yeah, this gotta be the real world."
(258)

Kendall would argue that, within Festival culture, the community-experience narrative and the family-experience narrative are frequently interchangeable, that the definition of family is much broader than blood kin and extends to chosen kin.

For women's festivals that are long-lived, like MWMF, we have seen a few women over the years blur the lines between community and family even more, bringing the ultimate newbies to the Land—their mothers. During my first year at MWMF, Judith Casselberry performed both Friday and Saturday nights. Casselberry, an African-American woman who resides on the East Coast, was one half of the duo Casselberry and DuPreé from 1979-1995, and more recently,

she has led a New York-based trio called JUCA, while completing a Ph.D. in African American Studies at Yale. She has toured also with Odetta, Stevie Wonder, Sweet Honey in the Rock, and Elvis Costello. Her music has been a constant for me throughout the years at Festival, and I often see her in Workerville. She is a performer who also works the Festival, producing Opening Ceremonies at Night Stage since the mid-nineties. In the women's music documentary *Radical Harmonies*, Casselberry told the story of sharing Festival with her mother.

I was able to bring my mother with me to Michigan three times, which was just a totally wonderful experience for both of us. Uhm, I didn't tell her that women mostly didn't wear clothes until after she'd bought her non-refundable [airline] ticket. And, I didn't tell her that the showers were outside until she was on the land in the van coming from the airport. And, but we had been on the land like maybe two days, and we're walking down the path, and she turned to me, and she looked at me, and she said "I now know what freedom is." She said, "I never knew this before."

Especially in the early years, when homophobia was rampant, the Festival community was simultaneously shocked and proud to have a festi-goer's mother (especially a heterosexual one) attend the event. Many women, like me, cannot imagine their biological families blending with their chosen families. We imagine only culture clash. While Casselberry's narrative does not indicate if her mother

adopted the tradition of casual nudity, the story is yet another one of liberation.

The exchange of narratives, our Festival discourse, counters key traditions of the mainstream culture. With regard to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a dominant (outsider) cultural script about the event is spelled out in a 2001 article posted at a website for "The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood." The author, Russell D. Moore, teaches at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and is the executive director of an institute for "evangelical engagement." Moore penned an essay for the site called "We Are Womyn, Hear us Roar?" in response to a Washington Post newspaper article about MWMF called "XX Marks the Spot." Reporter Teresa Wiltz wrote this descriptive and mostly positive article with a title that plays on chromosomes and treasure maps. From Moore's title through to the last line of the essay, the reader sees his disdain for the event as he mocks its counter-traditions. His method is simple; he must only quote and de-contextualize phrases from Wiltz's report: "giddy concoction of music, community and politics, a week-long outdoor paean to all things female"; "lesbian mecca"; "tractor driving bearded ladies"; "earth mamas"; "naked giggling toddlers"; "the primal screams ricocheting through the trees, the order and chaos that come only from

5,600 womyn—women with a 'y'—jamming, fists raised, bodies pumping to the rhythm of their own drums;" "safe is a mantra;" "a utopian vision of what the world would look like if women, certain women, ruled the world." One can almost hear his audience's ever-increasing gasps with each line.

For Moore, Festival women are unknown others, foreign in his script of Woman. He de-contextualizes Wiltz's descriptions, and he re-contextualizes MWMF itself in juxtaposition to a mainstream world that is fixed in conservative Judeo-Christian traditions, traditions that are the paean to all things male, to demure femininity, to a vision of a world in which men, certain men, do rule the world. And, then, he dismisses Festival women's very real search for safety and freedom with a simple solution—return to tradition and seek God the Father. In public and private protest, "womyn" challenge these long-held and contradictory beliefs; they re-appropriate the power to define their bodies and their identities; and they mark their personal authority with oral testimonies.

Like folklorist Jennifer Fox, third-wave feminist Rebecca Walker also points to dominant cultural scripts in her Foreword to Body Outlaws: Young Women Writing about Body Image and Identity:

In our North American culture, and indeed in cultures around the world, the body is a sign, a text to be read and interpreted. For each body part, there is at least one widely accepted script already written, a bit of subtext that flashes out, so to speak, the extremity in question . . . While these scripts purport to be objective observations, they are more often propagandistic narratives, self-serving tracts that operate primarily in the construction of community, be it based on ideology, race, vocation or class, on a local, national or international level. (2000:xiii)

Biblical scholar Moore, not surprisingly, ignores the bodies that Wiltz portrays, ignores the self-possessed women who undermine his master narrative. His audience never sees what Wiltz saw, what the insider sees:

Flesh, female flesh, is queen here. Bare breasts are everywhere, sometimes pierced, sometimes tattooed, pendulous or perky, and almost always sunburned.

Some women have only one breast to display, a jagged scar giving mute testimony to their courage.

On "The Land," outside notions of womanhood are gender-bent into oblivion. There is the butch bodybuilder, her thighs and shoulders tautly muscled ebony, who sports a cowboy hat and a lacy black bra. There are the seriously hirsute who refuse to pluck, shave or wax, and there are the gamins who shave everything, choosing instead to cover themselves with piercings and paint.

There's the barrel-chested one, all crew-cut, sideburns and swagger. And then there is the coquette, all blond hair and see-through micro mini, sashaying through the campgrounds, navigating the rocky dirt paths in six-inch platform heels. (2001:C01)

For Moore, these images are taboo, even pornographic. These are not Eves building Eden; they are Jezebels, Lot's wives, and Bathshebas. These women, like the women in this chapter who have shared their stories, are still largely unrecognizable outside the gates of Festival.

In my interview with Julie at her house back in 1994, she described a telephone conversation she had with her mother and sister, calling from Festival back home to check on her children:

What was interesting about that first Michigan. I called home, and Mom didn't recognize my voice. And my sister said I sounded like I was on drugs; she was going "what is wrong with you." And, I'd had a fabulous time, and I guess I just didn't realize how far out there I'd gone, and I, it started pouring down rain. Do you remember that rain we had? It was an intense downpour, and it was really warm out, and I took off all my clothes, and I just went running through the woods back by the trail, Trailmix, where nobody camps. I went running back there, and it was pouring down rain, and I just had the best time, and when I came back I was just muddy and stickers were stuck to me, and I was dripping wet, and I called and told my sister about it, and she thought I was doing drugs. They thought something bad was happening to me. (March 24, 1994)

In her original narrative, also about her first MWMF, she explained the anxiety and surprise she felt upon being in the company of the diversity of women's bodies and of women who were comfortable in their bodies and with themselves. This second story more fully illustrates a personal and

cultural shift for Julie, a shift that clearly conflicts with the dominant script as expressed by her family, an alteration in her body and her being that is recognizable to them upon hearing her voice and her story. They observe her altered state even without seeing her in person, and their perception is that "something bad" has happened. The stories included in this chapter, however, indicate that something good happened for the narrators. In the context of diversity, of real images of women, they found comfort and beauty in themselves. At Festival, or with the assistance of the cultural traditions and community space of Festival, women are able to temporarily erase the loaded codes and scripts of the dominant society that keep women from seeing themselves, from seeing each other, and from knowing that women come in many different shapes, sizes, and colors. For a moment, or a week, they fabricate their bodies anew, re-present their cultural scripts, and reshape their life histories.

¹ An earlier version of this chapter, "Sunburned Nipples, or 'We All Come from the Goddess': Bodylore at Womyn's Festivals" was presented in 1995 at the American Folklore Society in Lafayette, Louisiana; the paper won the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Folklore Section's 1995 Student Prize.

² These three artists are the most widely recognized and celebrated in the early women's music movement. Williamson and Christianson, who both recorded for Olivia Records,

famously played Carnegie Hall to celebrate the label's tenth anniversary in 1983. Near performs the womyn's festival circuit but also has more crossover visibility in folk music for her longstanding musical contributions to peace and human rights movements.

³ "Naked" in the MWMF context is typically a reference to topless or shirt-free women. Common attire, especially in warmer years, is shorts, shoes, and no shirt. Naked, however, can also include full nudity (no top, no bottoms) and arrays of partial nudity: only wearing a bra; only wearing underpants; a shirt or bra and no bottoms; a simple sarong only tied strategically to maximize breezes and minimize sunburns.

⁴ His assertion is not surprising if we bear in mind that much of the 20th century was an escalating rebellion against a late 19th century marked by Victorian proscriptions against suggestive exposure of the body, including the use of "bathing machines" for swimming.

⁵ Chandra L. Hinton informed by "multiracial feminism" and her own participation as a Black woman at MWMF, argues that Festival is not as diverse in race or class as it should be: "The White women are the owners of women's culture and they are the ones to extend an invitation to Others" (2005:63).

⁶ The concept of "deep diversity" was introduced to me in a personal conversation by Mary Ellen Capek, co-author of Effective Philanthropy: Organizational Success through Deep Diversity and Gender Equality, which was published in 2006 by the MIT Press at Cambridge, Mass.

⁷ As a Security worker at the Front Gate, I remember noting each year that the first car in line appeared earlier. We would make notations in our logbooks and announce the arrival of the first car in line at Worker meetings after dinner. My fieldnotes from 1994 indicate that my partner at the time, Melissa, arrived in the line on Sunday night; her car was more than a mile from the front gate. In 2002, the year after "Dart Patricia" described the Line, the Oceana County sheriff finally quashed that aspect of the tradition, asking MWMF to notify participants that the presence of the line of cars for days on end caused safety concerns and should not start before dawn on Opening Day.

⁸ Festival insiders often refer to MWMF as “safe space” with regard to a noted absence of the kinds of gendered violence that often curtails women’s movement in their day-to-day lives. For instance, a common refrain is that Festival land is the only location in which participants feel comfortable to walk alone at night. While there are occasional acts of physical violence (between intimate partners, for instance) and property theft, these incidents are so rare that the vast majority of participants feel immune. Additionally, the presence of the Security/Communications crew posted at Festival gates engenders a sense of safety from threats by outsiders, particularly men.

⁹ Anna is a pseudonym.

Chapter Five

Muscle Memories: Shifting the Shape of the Personal Experience Narrative¹

It is often said that 'if you have a body image problem when you come to Michigan, you won't leave with one.'
(Kendall 2007:246)

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is an intricate sub-culture of codes, narratives, and traditions grounded in a sense of place. The Festival's body of nudity narratives, whether tellers recall their own stories or those of "known others," reveals a shared discourse, albeit a discourse that is often about sharing differences. To this emic ethnographer, a valid conclusion, or at least a working thesis, is that every Festival participant tells a story about her first-time experience with nudity in the setting of women's festivals, although those stories may take unconventional forms. Verbal, emotional, and spiritual reconstructions, or personal inversions, are created, honed, and performed in Festival culture. These reconstructions are also complemented by the rich material culture that is, for instance, produced in the hand-painted signage with gyno-centric graphics that marks the Festival's services and stages. Similarly, in the Crafts

Bazaar, naked female bodies are reproduced in various artistic media, from screen-printing to jewelry. Two visual artists work for the Festival throughout the week under a couple of shade trees producing rich landscapes and intricate abstracts; their canvases are faces in cooler years and full bodies or torsos when the weather is warm. Another familiar sight in the crafts area is an annual array of drying white plaster casts, each of a woman's torso, all produced during a workshop; the casts are visual echoes of the diversity recounted in the narratives. At the Over Forties Tent, the annual quilt always inverts and reconstructs Woman and the body. The 1986 quilt, entitled "Safe Space," placed Festival's Tree-ano logo in the center of an abstract womb, and the 1991 quilt reconfigured Michelangelo's classic "The Creation of Adam," replacing the nude figure of Adam with a reclining naked woman nestled beside the Tree-ano in receipt of a celestial touch from her creator, also a naked woman.

In More Man than You'll Ever Be (the first and still the only full-length book on gay folklore), Joseph Goodwin explains that gay personal experience narratives function in a number of ways within the subculture: communication, identification, cultural cohesion, and both esoteric and exoteric conflict management (1989). Goodwin's functions

clearly recall William Bascom's four functions of folklore and provide a preview to Richard Bauman's 2002 acknowledgement that performance does not ignore the "larger social formations of power and authority" (95). The connections and disparities between gay and lesbian communities are not the focus of this work (and would fill several books), but Goodwin's assertions about personal experience narratives can also be applied to lesbian personal experience narratives, especially with regard to managing esoteric and exoteric conflicts, or the conflicts between the esoteric and the exoteric. As I posited at the beginning of this study, Festival is a macrocosm, and in the tent city on the Land, women are fully in power and are empowered to fully explore cultural alternatives to what they find in their day-to-day lives. The discourse of Festival, evident in both its verbal and material traditions, negotiates the exoteric and esoteric models of power and authority. Participants are fully cognizant that they must move between macrocosm and microcosm, between the esoteric and exoteric. Festival discourse manifests the participants' abilities to shift gears, to live bi-culturally, and to transgress physical and social boundaries. My collaborators, the tellers of the personal experience stories in the previous chapter, clearly joined

the Festival community by adopting the community's customs and behavior and by crafting and sharing their stories with their peers at Festival and at home. As these women continued to participate at festivals and to re-play their stories, they re-wrote their bodies, re-configured them not in relation to the limiting dichotomy of male/female, or man/woman, but within the more inclusive spectrum of possibility of Woman (or Womyn). The stories and the bodies are not static but recursive as the narrators negotiate their Festival experiences, the so-called "real world," and the tensions of moving between them.

In the previous chapter, the personal experience stories were confined to a specific time and space, to the first moment on Festival land when the narrator confronted her anxiety about nudity and chose to be openly naked. Because those stories are exempla, first time stories, they are easily honed and fixed. However, Festival is also the location for constructing other kinds of nudity narratives, ones that are dynamic, emergent, sometimes unwieldy, and sometimes contradictory. The stories may even be unfinished precisely because the narrators must re-negotiate annually between the macrocosm and the microcosm. In the short film "Busting Out" made in 2003, filmmaker Laureen Griffin juxtaposes interviews with shirt-free Festival women with

images of women who are icons in popular culture, images that reinforce the dominant cultural script that women are sex objects. Griffin's informants sit comfortably at various Festival locations. They are filmed from the neck down to protect their anonymity and to illustrate the filmmaker's thesis. Griffin's informants are diverse in age, race, and size. These women and their breasts embody the diversity motif in Festival stories, as Julie said: "big ones, little ones, fat ones, skinny ones, long ones, short ones." In the safety and comfort of Festival, these informants discuss the relentless gaze and criticism inflicted upon their (clothed) bodies beyond the Festival gates. Griffin primarily critiques the pervasive aspects of Western culture that instigate the increasing prevalence of breast implants, despite the potential dangers to the health of recipients. In the final Festival clip, the 48-year-old white informant says of her own breasts: "sometimes they're just right, but other times they're not big enough, and sometimes they're just right" (Griffin 2003). Her statement reveals the complexity of body reconstruction through personal experience and narrative. Because she moves in and out of the Festival gates, her narrative is recursively unconstructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. The narrative she tells in August 2002 may

be different than the one she tells in 1997 or 2008, but each new version of the narrative is a collection, a collage, perhaps narrative femmage, in which the narrator crafts "seemingly disparate elements into a functional, integrated whole piece" for the appropriate occasion (Turner 1983:7-8; Limón 1983).

Like the women who shared their stories of their first naked experiences at Festival, I grew up memorizing an assigned cultural script and internalizing the propagandistic master narratives of feminine roles and behaviors, despite conscious and ongoing attempts to counter them. I was raised to be "good" and "sweet." In fact, in my family, instead of saying goodbye, it is common instead to say "be good" or "be sweet." I am certain that good and sweet never, ever included being openly naked or camping in the woods with 5,000 feminists. To this day, I simply tell my family that in August I am camping in the woods with a bunch of friends. In my immediate family, I am the only daughter. I had my own room, my two brothers shared a room, and my privacy was inviolable. After toddlerhood, I was almost always naked only behind closed and locked doors, usually in the bathroom. I only glimpsed naked women when my mother scurried for a forgotten bath

towel or when I discovered a novelty telescope with images of 1950s "pin-up girls" hidden in my father's handkerchief drawer. Even my experiences at Girl Scout camps, in P.E. class, and at local gyms were similarly modest; I always changed behind a curtain or in a locked stall. My personal history is an important part of the context here, as I am, in fact, a "central character" in this ethnographic study. Like most festie-virgins, I suspect that I was as anxious about seeing naked women at my first women's festival as I was about being naked myself. I suspect that I was anxious because of the way I was raised and the scripts I had internalized. Still, I shed my shirt when the weather turned warm that first August in the woods, and I showered in the open, under the trees, in broad daylight. After collecting "naked at Festival stories" for about eight years, however, I had an unexpected "aha" moment, while exchanging e-mails with Ginny, my old friend, Festival buddy, and occasional co-author. When she paused to share her story as we drafted a conference presentation in 1997, I realized that I do not have my own personal experience narrative about being naked at Festival the first time.

That 1997 conference paper was the last analysis I wrote about Festival until returning to this dissertation in 2006. Reconciling the body of lore that I had collected

with my personal lack of an example of Festival bodylore was disconcerting. My earliest memories of Festival are almost always about the journey, how I got to the Land, when I got to the Land, and who came to the Land with me. My first two years of participation are blurry, not absent, but not distinct. I went to concerts, I ate some Festival meals, and I did my volunteer work shifts. I do not have a story, but I do have pictures. In 1996, I dipped into a shoebox where I keep some of my personal photos. I was looking for older photos of myself with very long hair to illustrate a story (unrelated to Festival) that I was telling. Instead, buried (or hidden) near the back of the box, I found about ten shots from my first Festival in 1990. I almost did not recognize myself. In the photos, my hair is newly cut, six or seven inches shorter. I wear a straw hat, trying to tame the curls that had screwed tighter once their weight was diminished and because Michigan's humidity was high in August. Just a week before these pictures were snapped, I had a farewell dinner in Arkansas with my parents and younger brother, only hours after the monumental haircut, and they freely expressed their dislike for it, a chorus iterating the master narrative ("What happened to your pretty hair?" "I liked it better before." "Why would you want to do that?").

Thankfully, I was on the road leaving home a mere forty-eight hours later, so their criticism was short-lived. Out of their sight, I thought my body was out of their minds. I marked my exodus from Arkansas with that haircut.

I spread the Festival pictures across my desk, holding each up again and again to inspect my younger self, my emerging dyke self, my Festival self. In the first image, my three campmates, including "Gina," and I pose, all naked from the waist up—an echo of Gina and Hannah's experience in 1989 ("we all come from the goddess") and the epitome of my favorite bumper sticker: "I saw you naked at Michigan." In another snapshot, I am standing at the cab of the red Ranger pickup truck, packing our gear for the trip back to Missouri, wearing just the hat and a pair of Hawaiian-print boxer shorts. I look happy in the photos, excited to be out of the closet of my home state, thrilled to be in the company of three women who welcomed me into their group, and awed to be in the midst of thousands of lesbians. I had spent a week in the woods with more women than I had ever seen gathered in one place, camping with my friends in the RV area, walking back and forth across Festival paths to attend concerts and meals, listening to women's music live at all three stages. My most vivid memory—still—is an unexpected fireworks show that erupted over our heads at

Night Stage, a special moment to mark the Festival's fifteenth anniversary.

In these photographs, though, my body is rather thin, the bones are visible at wrist, elbow, and hips. I can count my ribs. This is the body that I hated for its awkwardness, the body that resisted curves and produced hard angles no matter how much I ate. It is the body that boys ignored and men fetishized. It is the body for which my mother grew nostalgic once I gained my "freshman twenty" during graduate school. Not only am I thin, but also I do not look incredibly dykey in these first Festival photos; the haircut is short but not very androgynous—the look I really wanted, the look I felt inside, the look my family suspected at the farewell dinner. In effect, I was in a liminal space as I unlearned the rules that applied to my traditional "place" and uncovered possibilities in a new, and sometimes foreign, place. Today, I can page through fourteen years of my festivals in photo albums. As the years progress, I add pounds; I take up space; I grow into my comfort. In one photo, probably from 1994, I am working a Security shift outside Festival gates on the county road. I have become that woman in the orange safety vest who directs traffic through the front gate on Opening Day. I wear combat boots, cut-off Levis, and spiky bleached blond

hair with a ball cap that tames my cowlicks. My body has shifted physically, too, with muscular and unshaven legs, two tattoos, and larger breasts. This photo of me working "the Line" lived on the refrigerator door in my kitchen in 1994, a place of honor for art and favorite images.

Melissa, my second lesbian partner (and now longtime friend), framed another photo of me working at Festival, and she proudly displayed a third Festival photo of us together (happy, half-naked, and a little sunburned) in our living room (unless her mother came to visit). These photos, like me, were out. I had rejected the master narrative and adopted a new cultural script.

Still on the Journey
July 31 - August 1, 2007

The old red Ford Ranger is parked at the curb in front of our house. Dead branches wait in the back to be dumped at the city mulch site. The tailgate is broken, the air conditioning gave out the last time in 1996, and the clutch needs to be replaced. I sold the camper shell that was my Festival home for eight years at a yard sale. No more road trips or festivals for the Ranger. This year, I am driving my new-to-me black Saturn Vue to the state of Michigan from

mid-Missouri for my latest pilgrimage to the Festival. This is my fourteenth trip to the Land, my first in several years to drive alone. My crew arrival day is Tuesday, August 1st, but I leave on Monday afternoon because making the drive in one day has become grueling as I get older, even when Cassandra (my partner now for ten years) and I drive it together. I leave Monday afternoon, July 31, after putting in a couple of hours at my office, turning in a grant application, printing three sets of directions from Mapquest, and icing my foot, which is swollen by a small stress fracture. Beginning to feel my age, I am thankful for cruise control, power steering, and a reliable air conditioner.

On this warm Monday afternoon, my trek takes me again through rural Illinois east and north on I-57. Fields of corn hug the shoulders of the road, stalks yellow and brown in this year's hot, dry summer. The Vue is strategically packed with gear for two weeks and two people. Cassandra will fly up in a week, after she works at her office for another week. We have worked seven or eight Festivals together, though never on the same crews. In her new profession, she has very little vacation time, so we have purchased a five day ticket for her. She will be a festie, with a special "tent-mate" wrist ticket that allows her to

sleep at our tent in Workerville. I no longer worry if I have forgotten to pack anything. We have translated our memories and handwritten packing lists into an extensive color-coded Excel spreadsheet. Now, I worry a little that I have brought too much gear. I also worry about my mother in Arkansas, who has been ill for two weeks. Somewhere around Champaign-Urbana, I call her on my cell phone for a lengthy chat about her health and doctor appointments. Change quickly becomes a personal theme during this trip, from the cell phone, Excel spreadsheet, and new Vue to the much stronger and ever-improving relationship with my mother.

At dusk, I roll into the driveway of a good friend and colleague who lives near Gary, Indiana. She is out of town, but her sweetheart and their dog welcome me, providing an imported beer, a lovely meal, good conversation, and a comfortable bed. Tuesday morning, we share breakfast, and my host critiques the Mapquest directions to my next destination, a Gary Metro stop. Rather than send me on my way, he offers to guide me to the station, so I follow his Ford Explorer. He leaves me there with a smile and a wave, and I am amused to think that I have just spent an evening alone in a house with a man for the first time in almost two decades. I park my Vue perpendicular to the tracks and the Plexiglas shelter and wait for "Nela," a Festival

worker who was added to a Worker crew at the last minute.² The MWMF office put her in contact with me for a ride, and I agreed, with the caveat that I would not drive into the city of Chicago. At exactly 8:43, the train pulls up, and she hops off. She carries the bulk of her gear on a full frame backpack. We have never met before, but we recognize each other as members of the same community—and, of course, she is the only passenger to depart in this modest residential neighborhood on a Tuesday morning. Within minutes, we are heading east on Interstate 80 to our next destination, the Gerald R. Ford International Airport in Grand Rapids, Michigan. There, we will pick up another worker who is flying in from Victoria, British Columbia. I have not made such a convoluted trip to Festival since that first trip in 1990. Every time I think I know the route, my path to and from Festival, I am reminded that in tradition there is always change and variation.

In 1990, the route was new and often complicated by deliberate and accidental detours. I arrived with a small group of women that I thought to be my tribe, my chosen family, but within two years, after deliberate and accidental detours, my tribe and my path changed. The constant is the Festival, the familiar gates and bodies on the other side. In 1994, I wrote that the route was "mapped

in my body." I could jump in the red Ranger at dawn in Missouri and arrive home at the gates of "Michigan" in time for supper. The rhythm of my year was marked more by the opening and closing of the Festival gates than by the opening and closing of the academic year. My newfound knowledge of my body and my self was reflected in the full-length mirror that is this festival and less in the rear view mirror where I have put my family's gaze.

This August, after lagging behind due to ubiquitous road construction and rushing ahead because I forgot about the change in time zone, "Nela" and I pull up to the airport arrival area for Lyn and her gear. With just a little pushing, we three add Lyn's bags into the Vue and head immediately to a Meijers department store to shop for last minute supplies, including beer. On the road again, Lyn, who works on the Transportation crew, rides shotgun and points out an exit for fast food, then buys our lunch at the Wendy's drive-thru. She and I catch up in the front seat while "Nela" makes her last phone calls. There is still little to no cell phone reception at Festival. From the airport to our exit, the road is a four-lane split highway with trees lining the shoulder and filling the median strip. Michigan is absolutely verdant compared to Illinois, despite the heat and drought. Near the Hart exit,

Lyn navigates us through an alternate, more direct route used by off-land Festival drivers. We drive past my familiar Hart exit and take the next one instead, skipping my familiar landmarks, like the International Hairport, but we do pass a Christmas tree farm, billboards for vacation resorts, and a vibrantly green golf course. We drive east, jog north to a local bar, then east again to the last stretches of paved road before turning onto the county road. The dry summer has created a treacherous washboard, so we cannot rush to the front gate. Once there, we are greeted by the Security/Communications women, though they are mostly new since I switched crews in 1999. After a quick visit to the "PortaJanes," I drive "5 miles an hour" into downtown Festival, passing an occasional car and stopping for workers who hang a banner high above Lois Lane near Triangle. The rest of the Festival is much like many others; we work hard, and we play hard.

A few memorable moments stand out from these two weeks, like an evening domino game that is light on playing tiles and heavy on swapping stories or the hot day that the Cuntree Store crews up. It was so hot that I quickly shed my shirt, and another woman spent the afternoon in Worker Healthcare suffering from heatstroke. One evening I run into historian Bonnie Morris at the worker showers, where

we briefly discuss my dissertation, and, as encouragement, she hands me a bumper sticker that reads: "TRUST WOMEN." And, this year, at the Opening Ceremonies, I am part of the production, the annual "ritual container" that focuses everyone's attention on one spectacle, setting the tone for the Festival week. My old friend Sue and I, along with 49 other pairs of workers dressed in white shirts and dark pants, stand during a poem about intention and vision to light up large, primary-colored, rice paper sky lanterns. As ours fills with hot air, it begins to rise; Sue and I firmly hold onto the edges, and the poem concludes:

Send that best intention
From your whole self
That self that is connected
Vast and free
Heal yourself, heal the planet
Send it out
Let it go
Release, release, release
VAST and FREE³

Fifty blue, orange, red, white, and green lanterns rise into the Michigan sky, where they drift higher and higher together, in an uneven chorus. Slam poet Staceyann Chinn redirects the audience's energy back down to earth, igniting passions with her rousing spoken word performance. By the end, the audience is on its feet, once again blurring the line between performer and audience, and a band of Festival all-stars eases into the familiar opening

lines of Maxine Feldman's gift to the community: "Amazon womyn rise; Amazon womyn see the rainbows in the sky."

The realization that I do not have my own story about the first time I took off my shirt at Festival bothered me at first. Yet, I realize that others in my folk groups do not have such a story either or are not comfortable being naked in the open, even at Festival. I returned to my field notes, searched through interview tapes, and reflected upon memories within my own Festival folk groups. I re-evaluated my thesis that the festive-virgin "being naked" narrative is universal. I began to see stories from my fieldwork that I previously overlooked—narratives that did not fit neatly into my understanding of personal experience narratives. The original stories that I collected, and others that I have found more recently, fit into recognizable patterns of content, structure, and length, as demonstrated in the previous chapter. However, I had bypassed another body of stories; I set these stories aside, as they did not meet the "androcentric assumptions" that still, and ironically, informed my understanding of narrative (Langellier and Peterson 1992:162). These stories counter a Festival norm that I have documented. Some seem cumbersome, long, and winding. Some are the anti-thesis to the recurring

"exempla" that I have documented. All of them, however, are key voices in the Festival's life story and key moments in the tellers' lives.

In 2006, I was at a dinner party in Columbia, Missouri, with a group of ten lesbians who ranged in age from twenty to near eighty. I had never before met two of these women, an academic couple (married three years earlier in Canada) in their sixties who were visiting from the western United States. During a conversation with one about finishing my dissertation, "Miriam" chuckled and suggested that I should interview her partner "Sal" who had attended Festival in one of its very first years.⁴ Miriam explained that Sal had described herself as the only woman with her shirt on in a sea of naked women. Sal's story, or her kernel story, immediately reminded me of one of those stories that I had previously put aside—a story from a woman who chose not to participate in the naked tradition. Cindy and I worked together on the Security/Communications crew for a few years. We were both assistant coordinators at the same time, we both lived in the Midwest, and we were both about the same age and white. While our crew was its own folk group, our coordinating staff of five women (which included Sue, another white woman from the East Coast, and Nancy, a Cuban-American woman from the Midwest, whose

stories are mentioned in earlier chapters) was a sub-set of the occupational folk group. We met with each other on a daily basis to pass on information from one shift to the next, to discuss actions for any potential issues, and to "check in" personally with each other since our shifts often did not overlap. When we were off shift, we often chose to socialize with each other, especially hanging out around our central post, which was called Home Base, where we would soak up warm rays and observe the spectacle of women and children who traipsed back and forth on the paved path. When I chose to interview members of my at-Festival folk group, I narrowed my focus for interviews in 1994 to the four women that I worked and socialized with daily. My interview with Cindy, like all four of those interviews, was guided by specific interview questions about general participation at Festival. I did not ask specifically for "being naked" the first time at Festival stories, and only Nancy offered one. However, I did follow up with Cindy over the years via e-mail and specifically asked her in 1996 if she had such a story to share, which she did.

After my second year working at the Festival, I decided I would become one of the suntanned topless gals. I was a returning Security veteran and felt very confident about my position in the scheme of things there. So, when M and I were sent off to whack down ferns at Triangle, I stripped off my shirt and got down to business.

Of course, I did not put any sunscreen on and had the whitest of white skin on my chest, breast and belly. But not for long! Later that day, I became one of the reddest gals on the land. Ouch! Showering was a horror; I was quite embarrassed by my stupidity (everyone had to comment on it), and the showers hurt my skin. I couldn't even sleep on my belly. Eventually I blistered and peeled, but it is a rare day anymore that my shirt comes off for more than just a few minutes down in the Belly Bowl.⁵ I learned a lesson that year; some of us were meant to be bare-breasted babes, and some of us are meant to be comfortably covered. I bring plenty of shirts to the Festival. (November 26, 1996)

Like "Sal," Cindy actually has a story that fits the content, length, and structure of those included in the previous chapter, and in telling that story, she acknowledges the community tradition, participates fully in it, and then mostly rejects it, for obviously wise personal reasons.

Around the same time, I also asked for a story via e-mail from another Festival co-worker, Edie, a white, working class Canadian who is seven years younger than me. I have known her since her first Festival in 1993 when she joined the Security crew. Since that time, Edie has continued to work on the same crew every year, except one, and she is currently the coordinator for Security. In my Festival memories, Edie is always there, usually with a hand-held radio in her pocket or to her ear. We have a

special bond and share similar interests, probably, she would say, because we are both Aquarians. I have never interviewed Edie for this project, but she has always been interested in my research and willing to discuss it. So, in early 1996, when e-mail was still very new to both of us, I wrote to Edie, who lived in Vancouver at the time, and simply asked her if she had a story about being naked at Festival. She responded not with a first time story but one that was most recent in her memory, from her third Festival in August 1995.

This year, before I came to Michigan, I felt really gross about my body. It was hard for me to imagine getting over the clothing barrier when I got there, as I couldn't really remember what it was like to see thousands of womyn walking around naked. I mean, I knew it as a fact, but I couldn't remember how it felt. I met Paula at the beach just before I left, and told her that I would remain clothed the entire time because I'd gained so much weight, etc. and just felt really gross. It's ridiculous, really. I don't know how I could have regressed so much as I was this year, and I think that because it was a result of my not exercising . . . I felt twice as negative about it. But I got to Michigan, and saw Judith and Nancy C. and the first thing we did was admit how much weight we'd gained during the year. The shirts came off. I still didn't feel proud or free; that took about a week of seeing hundreds of naked womyn of all different body shapes and sizes. Then, I remembered what we as womyn really look like, and that the picture is multi-faceted. It felt good. I felt freer. Not like the first time, when it was just such a revelation. More like a muscle memory of sorts, a realization of what was already known, but simply forgotten for a time.

When I see other womyn with bodies that don't fit with the societal norm, and I observe how they carry themselves, how natural they seem to feel/be, it always gives me courage to be as I am. I see them as beautiful and then look upon myself as being beautiful. It's a wonderful feeling. (January 14, 1996)

In Edie's story, comfort and courage are key components for a definition of beauty. The other women find comfort and courage in themselves as they move unfettered by narrow definitions in the "safe space" of Festival. Those women trigger Edie's "muscle memory," allowing her to remember, to re-member her body. Edie changed her body, she shape shifted, and she revised her body and her story from "seemingly disparate elements."

Taken together, Cindy's story and Edie's story, along with my lack of a story, illustrate a caution pointed out by ethnographer Olga Najera-Ramirez. Ethnographers have been known to too narrowly define their studied communities, and Najera-Ramirez suggests that this problem can be

further complicated when dealing with festival because of its multidimensional/multivocal aspect . . . Each year an individual may develop a unique perception of the festival. Therefore, to reduce the festival to one point of view is to ignore one of its most distinctive features: its multiplicity. (1999:186)

My largest and longest struggle with an ethnographic study of the MWMF has always been never to narrowly define the

Festival community. I have worried that a Festival insider would someday crack open my dissertation and remark that she did not see herself, that I had not fully represented the spectrum of Festival experience and community.

Ironically, much of the description of Festival that I drafted over the years has been about my journey to the gate and not the journey inside the gate. From my front yard in Columbia to the front gate of Festival is my singular experience; my journey beyond the gate is colored and clouded by my own scripts and by the smaller circles of women with whom I move on the Land. My strategy, then, has been to include as many voices as possible within my text, from full narrative texts to a rather lengthy survey of MWMF scholarship. I also sought out narratives in secondary sources in order to provide additional voices and to present them through the lenses of other ethnographers. Finally, I solicited feedback from more Festival insiders than I have formally interviewed. Still, with all these pre-cautions, I originally held on to my working thesis too tightly and almost missed the multiplicity of women's experiences of being naked at Festival, or not being naked at Festival, or reluctantly being naked at Festival.

Since I began this project in 1990, other events also occurred that caused me to rethink my thesis, research, and

theoretical foundations. The world has continually shifted, as has the so-called "lesbian community." For instance, out in the so-called real world, three famous performers—Melissa Etheridge, Ellen Degeneres, and Rosie O'Donnell—chose to self-identify publicly (or "come out") as lesbians, through the media, to straight America in the mid-nineties. Each of these women's stories generated a lot of space at the time, although now in 2008, their sexual orientation is common knowledge and rarely deemed worthy of attention. Simultaneously, MWMF shifted from being an event that was covered only in feminist and lesbian publications to one that is written about occasionally in national magazines and the New York Times. These shifts, relocations, and resulting stories in, and out of, the media help to prove my revised thesis. Festival, its stories, and its bodies all comprise a discourse that is informed by process and revised by what Judith Butler calls "citationality" (1993). For Festival participants, citations shift back and forth across the Festival gates. In the "real world," and in the master narrative, the citation is an ideal—a fixed and finished, classical performance of gender (Miss Michigan/Miss America). At Festival, in those carnivalesque inversions that occur inside the ritual container, the citations are unfinished,

"grotesque" bodies, performances of somatic memories that can only be invoked amid juxtapositions.

Bakhtin's discussion of finished and unfinished bodies articulates my argument that Festival creates a space for women, especially lesbians, to locate themselves vis á vis "real world" performances and somatic memory, to arrive in and enjoy more experiential bodies (1968). In Bakhtinian terms, the everyday body of women is the representational body. The represented body is Bakhtin's classical body—complete, seamless, closed, sealed off from contamination. It is overdetermined (the body crafted by the discourse of Madison Avenue or the Miss USA Pageant, for instance). Bakhtin's grotesque body of carnival is much different. The body loses its individual definition and is collectivized. The grotesque body is open, protruding, and gaping, and is epitomized by events and activities where boundaries between bodies, and between bodies and the world, are blurred the most—at carnival, at Festival. The body of representation is finished, like Stahl's definition of the personal experience narrative. The body of carnival is unfinished, like Edie's story. Carnival, with its grotesque body, is a process. Representation makes a product. The carnivalesque counters the effects of representation. Women's festivals provide carnivalesque moments where not

only is the self inserted in the body but the self may be inserted in the body via a narrative. Therefore, Stahl's notion that the personal experience story is increasingly honed and stable are concepts that need to be re-examined (1997). The Festival stories that I have collected, heard, and lived are more fluid than what I have documented and analyzed in the previous chapter. Just as the carnivalesque atmosphere of Festival facilitates shape-shifting for the narrators, that space also encourages shifts in their narratives. Even Stahl later acknowledged that the personal narrative is a "very malleable form" (1989:24).

Memory obviously functions in oral tradition. However, it is perhaps equally important to see how memory functions in and on the body. Somatic memory, or body memory, is typically the purview of psychiatry; those imbedded memories are considered to be the result of traumas. In effect, Festival discourse moves between the systemic traumas upon women of sexism, homophobia, ableism, classism, and racism to the reconstructions of body and memory that are enabled by a process, shifts in geography, and politics. Festival discourse becomes the vehicle for re-membering the parts of our bodies that are dichotomized in Bakhtin's separation of classical and the grotesque bodies (1984). In other words, through narrative,

consciousness is shifted from normative, finished, heterosexual representations of Woman to re-presentations informed and complicated by the deviant, unfinished lesbian discourse/body. Re-presentations, then, inscribe upon the body both an internal world and the Festival world (and so many other citations). The re-inscription is evident in Edie's story. In her internal world, she has almost forgotten her own comfort and beauty, but in the context of the world of Festival, she can re-member her comfortable, courageous, and beautiful self—at least for a while. As Judith Butler states:

if a performative provisionally succeeds . . . then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices. (1993:226-227)

The performance, the story, even the body are successful because they acknowledge—even rely upon—shifting citations and shifting consciousness.

Take, for instance, a story of a "known other" retold by "Boo" Price, a former co-producer of the MWMF. The story appears in the lesbian travelogue, The Girls Next Door, and authors Van Gelder and Brandt provide a contextual frame for Boo's story and quote parts of it:

Well, it **is** true that thousands of women run around shirtless at Michigan. So do thousands of men on Miami Beach, Jones Beach, Malibu, Waikiki, and the Bradford Pool and Tennis Club in Upper Montclair, New Jersey. At Michigan unclothed women are just as routine—although for some “festie virgins,” as newcomers are known, the sight takes some getting used to. “I have an old friend I grew up with, very straight, who came to the festival in 1993,” recalls Boo Price. The friend sought Price out for a reality check, telling her, “A woman came to breakfast this morning, and she didn’t have any clothes on except hiking boots and a down vest. Would that shock you?” Price replied that she probably wouldn’t even notice. (bold in original, 1996:47-48)

Boo’s friend is, in effect, a Festival tourist, and her story acknowledges her liminal position on the Land. Her memory, her body, her performance of gender are shocked and shifted by the juxtaposition of representational memories of appropriate nudity (traumas?) and Festival enactments, or processes of being naked (healings?).

In 1992, I had my first successful interview at Festival with Tessa, a white Canadian from Ontario who was just a few years older than me. In 1992, Tessa was a Festival veteran, participating since 1982. She and I met when her mechanics crew came to Gate 5 during pre-fest to hook up our C.B. radio. We bonded a bit when she gave me juggling lessons to pass the time as we waited for another mechanic to complete the installation. Later, Tessa was very open and willing to talk to me about Festival on tape—

a first. We have always kept in touch and started corresponding by e-mail in 1996 after working on Security/Communications together; that fall she shared a story with me.

I never wanted to go to the festival. I had heard of the festival in 1980, two years before I attended for the first time . . . but knew I could never go because of the nudity. I came from a family that hid their nudity so well that I can honestly say I've never seen my mother naked even once. Needless to say . . . this was a very strong family value. So, even though I longed for strong lesbian community . . . I didn't consider Michigan an option.

It was in the summer of 1982 that I was faced with a curious turn of events which led me to drive onto the Land through Gate 5 one early August morning with dread in my heart and a coffee in my hand.

I was working in Toronto at a lesbian production company named Womynly Way Productions. The production company, at that time, operated on a cultural grant provided by the federal government, recognizing lesbianism as its own culture. There were only three of us working there, of which I was the outreach worker to the hearing impaired community. Several months before Festival, I was informed that as a requirement to fulfill the expectations set out in the grant, I was to travel to Michigan to witness first-hand the building and organizing of a community-based festival. I was horrified. I went to my boss and informed her that I had no intention of attending. It was made clear to me in pretty simple language that it was a job requirement and that if I didn't go, I'd be looking for another job. Today, I look back on this as some sort of divine intervention. I had no real choice. I couldn't afford to lose my job.

Secretly, what I began to dread most was the inevitable sight of my boss naked. If there was anything in this world I was not up to

seeing, it would be Ruth's huge breasts. When Ruth sat at her desks, her breasts would rest squarely on her knees, and I became almost phobic at the thought of actually seeing them. In my head, I devised strategy after strategy on how to avoid any contact with Ruth during my ten day stay on the Land. Fortunately, there would be no need for these plans, as Festival did the job for me. What's now the workers area, was then for coordinators only. Ruth camped there, and I camped with the festies. Coordinators ate out of the cantina, and workers ate out of a four person canvas tent in the Witches' Clearing (formerly the Witches' Kitchen). Tess and Ruth did not cross paths at all.

So, where does that bring me to now? Oh yes . . . departure day. The three employees of Womynly Way Productions—Ruth, Tess and Karen—all cram into Ruth's 1956 Dodge Rambler and head off into the general direction of the Land. We lollygag all through southern Ontario and stop at some interesting backroads general stores where Ruth manages to find some vintage lesbian love trash-type paperbacks. Later . . . these paperbacks would have cameo appearances in "Forbidden Love," the movie.

Finally, we reached the border, where we are hauled aside, and the border control officers tear the car apart and almost don't let us pass. But, we get across and travel all night and go directly to the Old Land in Hesperia where Ruth and Karen stand quietly in the field and seem to grieve. I stand quietly beside them and pray they don't remove their clothing. After a short while, they get back into the car and together, we travel to Hart. By now it is showing on Ruth's face that she is allergic to everything that is green and grows, and we have been driving through forests and standing in grassy fields, and Ruth is now growing some sort of topographical map on her cheeks and forehead. She treats this with green clay, which I had never seen before, and now Ruth's face is not only bumpy, but startlingly green as well. This is when Ruth decides to stop in Hart for breakfast.

This is the first year on the land in Hart, and we are among the first to present ourselves to the local community. So, here we are, a 20-year-old baby dyke with long blonde hair (me), and two very large, late-thirties stereotypical lesbians, one of which had a green bumpy face. We are drawing stares, and I am so uncomfortable, I go out to the car to finish my breakfast. Soon after, Ruth and Karen return to the car, and we drive to the Land. We follow the map carefully, and when we finally arrive at Gate 5, we park just outside the gate and debate as to whether we are in the right place. Absolutely nothing marked the land in a way that would help us to recognize it. We decide to press on and hope we don't get shot or something for trespassing on private property. We drive slowly down the two track (now Lois Lane) and bottomed out the car every fifty feet or so. Finally, we see an obvious lesbian strolling through the woods and know we are in the right place. This is exactly when Karen and Ruth peel off their shirts. Ohmygosh!! The unthinkable has happened right before my eyes! It was like the morbid fascination of driving past a car accident late at night. I could not look away. I saw Ruth's breasts.

At this point, I made my departure from the car. I asked to walk in the rest of the way, and would Ruth be so kind as to stop the car and let me out. This she did, and we agreed to meet up downtown and sort out our belongings and set up camp.

I walked a lonely road that morning. I was afraid of where I was and what was about to happen to me. I had never camped in the forest before, and I had never wanted to come here. But here I was. And I felt completely alone.

As I walked in further towards the worker village, I saw the odd woman walking about butt assed naked. I was impressed with their comfort level, but tried to look away as much as possible. At one point, I saw a woman approaching on the trail. She was completely naked except for her Birkenstocks. She was smiling and came right over to me and began asking questions. Where was I from? How long did

I drive? How long have I been here? Have I ever been here before? She extended her hand and began to introduce herself. It was at this point that she did something that so took me by surprise that I shall never forget it. She squatted down and began to pee. She did not let go of my hand. So, now I am standing in the forest, holding the hand of a naked woman while she peed, and the earth was beginning to tremble beneath my feet. Somehow, I managed to get on my way again, and she disappeared into the woods. To this day, I do not know who she was . . . I didn't catch her name . . . I was definitely too distracted.

Now I am somewhere just before Triangle, and I am seeing even more naked women. (By comparison, there were more naked women in the early 80s than there are today by about 30%). Now, it was becoming common place to see these women, flitting like deer through the woods. And as I turned the corner through Triangle and started the last leg into the workers area, I saw the image that changed my philosophy on nudity forever. I saw a woman walking along the road, smiling broadly and with a skip in her walk. She was obviously so happy to be where she was, and she seemed so at home in her environment that it seemed to make perfect sense that she would be naked but what set her apart from the others was the image her body presented. She had been involved in a fire and scarred over about 90% of her body. What passed for her skin was three or four different shades of brown and pink . . . to the point that I could not be sure of her ethnic origin. She had no hands, just two stumps at her wrists, and in that instant, I saw the ridiculousness of my own petty hang-ups.

By the time I reached the workers area, my shirt was unbuttoned to my waist, and my breasts were bouncing in and out of the opening. It took me a few more days to feel comfortable enough to go with no clothing at all, but I got there with pride.

After ten days on the land, it took a group of six to convince me to get back into the car and go home. I cried the entire way. That was

fifteen years ago, and I haven't missed a year since.

I still think of that woman who changed my life. I never knew who she was. I never saw her again. I never knew anybody else who knew her. Sometimes I wonder if she was real but certainly her impact on me was. (October 31, 1996)

Today, Tessa has been a Festival insider for well over twenty years and always a worker. Since 1982, she has only missed Festival two years, in 2001 when she immigrated to Australia and in 2006 when her dog Xena lost her leg to cancer. Tessa's attention to detail in the story does not surprise me because the story is informed both by her many years of participation and by her personal lens, as she herself documents Festival, although her medium is film.

In effect, Tessa's story encapsulates all of my narrative analyses. She weaves together stories: her own, the known other, and adds a new twist, an unknown other—the woman who takes on almost mythical qualities. Her anxiety about being naked, seeing her boss naked, and being in the company of many naked women resoundingly echoes the other Festival narrators. Hers is the most evocative story that I have collected. Like the others, her story is a linear one, and it follows the Freitag model. The length and detail, however, are unusual for the honed personal narratives with which folklorists are familiar. The climax of the story comes with the introduction of the near mythical burn

survivor: "And as I turned the corner through Triangle and started the last leg into the workers area, I saw the image that changed my philosophy on nudity forever." Tessa, more than any other narrator, illustrates the diversity of women's bodies and breasts when she describes the cast of characters, including herself, her boss, the hand-shaking woman, and the burn survivor. Like Julie, Tessa has to be driven away reluctantly from her first Festival, and she is crying. She is forever changed by the experience. Tessa's story stays with me because it is ultimately an unforgettable and dynamic coming of age story that reads in some ways like an old fairy tale. She has challenges to overcome in order to achieve her goal (keeping her job and gaining new knowledge). Each challenge is a test, from crossing the Canadian border and eating in a rural Michigan diner to hiking through the Festival forest to find her camp and, eventually, her reconstructed identity. And, Tessa is assisted by three different women as she makes her transformative journey.

Ultimately, this chapter has become my own attempt at femmage as I seek to take seemingly disparate stories that re-present being naked at Festival and pull them together into a creative whole, one that adds depth, layer, and nuance to notions of gender, narrative, and performance.

Tessa's story is the most vivid illustration of the process of reconstructing the finished, representational body in a carnivalesque setting. The body is inverted from the moment that she is told that she must attend Festival; the ritual container for her is the body. The boundaries of the Festival are expansive and extend to her office in Canada, the Dodge Rambler, the Hart diner, the Festival's old site in Hesperia, and the county road outside the new land. Through stories like Tessa's, Festival and the Land are invoked in participants' imaginations with the simple introduction of bodies, bodies that may be refined and honed into neat structures or those that are dynamic, reconstructed, and revised, as the narrator chooses which pieces to juxtapose in her collages.

¹ An earlier version of the chapter entitled "Shifting the Shape of the Lesbian Body: Relocation of Somatic Memory" and co-written with Virginia L. Muller was presented at the 1997 annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in Austin, Texas. Our original thesis and discussions continue to inform my analyses of festivals, narratives, and bodylore.

² Nela is a pseudonym.

³ Composed by MWMF performer Krissy Keefer for the Opening Ceremonies in August 2007.

⁴ Both Miriam and Sal are pseudonyms.

⁵ The Belly Bowl is the Workers' dining area.

Conclusion

Throughout this ethnographic study, which is based on seventeen years of field research at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, I have included extensive descriptions of the event and the culture that has been created around the grassroots event turned cultural institution. Additionally, I have included my own personal experiences as an active participant, including three journeys to the MWMF as one example of Festival's fluid boundaries and to demonstrate the dynamism of traditions. Additionally, I have included a series of narratives collected from primary and secondary research about Festival participants' experiences with regard to their own body consciousness, especially of "nudity" at an event with a pro-feminist culture in a remote, rural location. I have examined these narratives as folkloric texts and as key components of Festival's unofficial, but prevailing, discourse. The narratives are also investigated in juxtaposition with more mainstream taboos against female "nakedness" in contemporary Western society. In order to be as transparent self-reflexive as possible, significant portions of chapters examined the theories and methodologies of participant-observation ethnographic research as well as an extensive survey of the

body of ethnographic scholarship that has been produced around the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival.

In my conversations with a variety of Festival women, we often discuss the unobtainable ideals that seem to have become even more ubiquitous in our society, despite at least three waves of feminist thought and action. The consensus is that we women have a love/hate relationship with our bodies, but a relationship that is more hate than love. In the United States, specifically, we are taught to "love" an ideal form that is almost impossible to achieve. Even women who have the "ideal" body achieve it through extraordinary actions: shaving, waxing, tweezing, threading, whitening, bleaching, coloring, tanning, dieting, and exercising. Additionally, the ideal body requires extraordinary products: makeup, support garments, high heels, extensions, weaves, flat irons, relaxers, highlights, and lowlights. Finally, we are told that these actions and products are ultimately insufficient, and we are inundated with emotional appeals to try: rhinoplasty, breast augmentation, Botox, orthodontics, diet programs, diet pills, gastric bypass surgery, liposuction, and Photoshop. These contemporary artificial "ideals" appear on magazine covers. Historical variations appear in "classical" art. All ideals are typically the result of the

so-called "male gaze." Even women have been trained to be complicit, which ultimately results in more hate than love of actual female bodies, including our own. This so-called "love" of the female form is a cultural fetish, a fairy tale, and the only happily-ever-after is the bulging pockets (front and back) of the patriarchy.

Madison Avenue, Hollywood, People Magazine, and the local mall create such a cacophonous and ubiquitous discourse that women (and men) can only alleviate the pressure if they conform or seek alternate spaces to reconstruct discourses. The ideal or classical body is not a new phenomenon, as evidenced by a quick survey of art history, especially scholarship on "the nude." In The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form, Sir Kenneth Clark articulated the naked/nude dichotomy:

To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word 'nude,' on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone.

Since his 1956 study (reprinted in 1970), Clark has been resoundingly dismissed for his idyllic, biased, and inaccurate assessment of nudes (c.f. Nead 1990). In 1972, painter John Berger in Ways of Seeing countered that

To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an

object in order to become a nude . . . Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise. (1972:53)

These two visual arts experts illustrate a debate in semantics that is relevant to performances of verbal art and gender.

The tension between the words "naked" and "nude" became particularly important to my study upon the insistence of Frances, another Festival co-worker and dear friend who read drafts of this dissertation over the last two years. Frances has been a Festival worker for ten years; she is a white, middle class woman from Canada's Pacific Coast who taught history and Women Studies then shifted to a career in public sector arts, including festivals production. Frances immediately forced me to think about word choice in the context of the MWMF nudity narratives, particularly because she was familiar with Berger's work. Frances wrote:

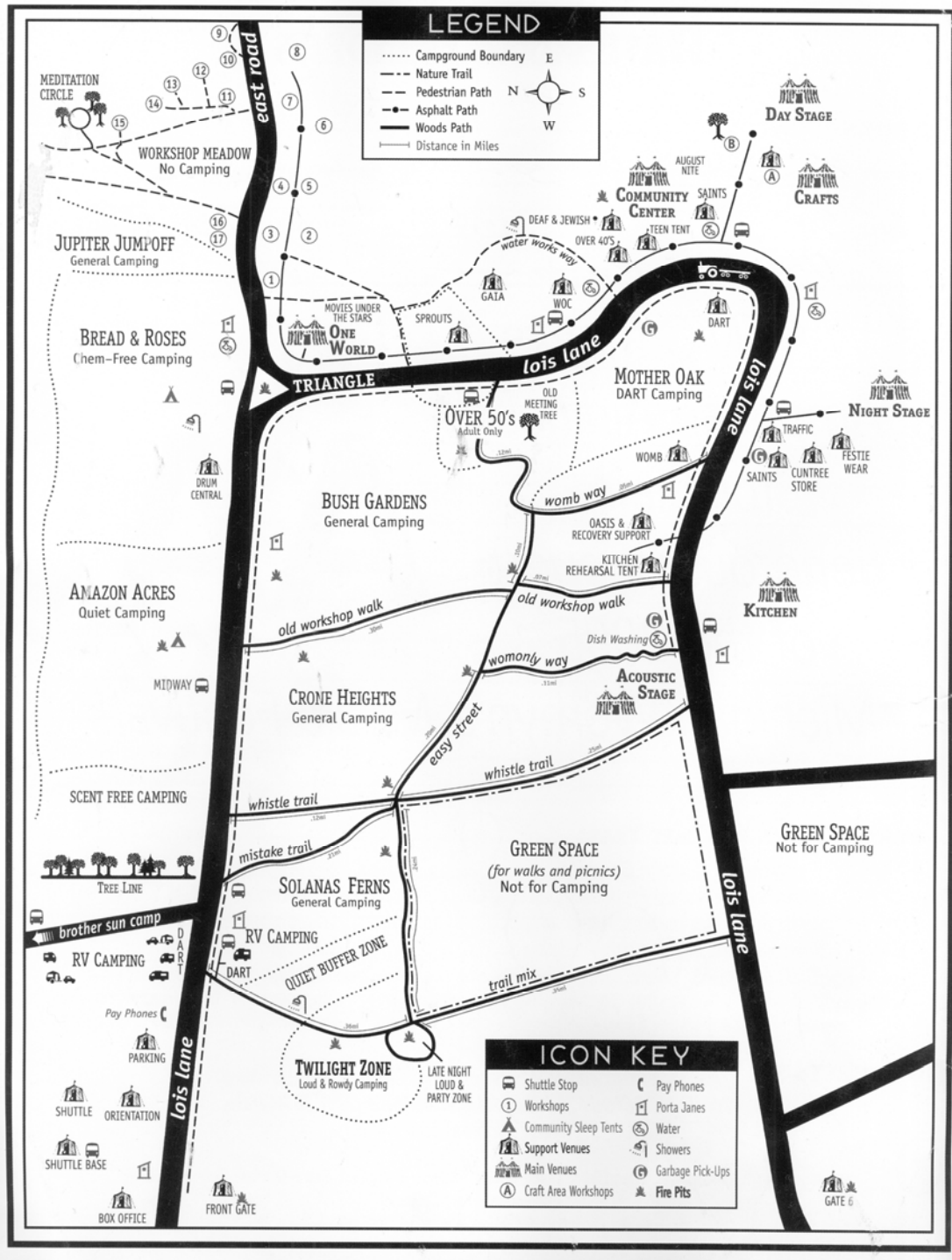
I don't like the word nudity. Not surprisingly, it's about the politics of representation. To be "nude" is to be a surface, presented for observation, for the gaze of the viewer. It is not to be a person, with a life and feelings and thoughts. A nude is sometimes used to describe paintings, which are possessions and about money and power. To be naked is to be a person without clothes on, a person with a life, not only a surface to be looked at as an object. (January 23, 2007).

For Frances, as for Berger, to be nude is a passive state and to be naked is an active choice. When nude, one is objectified by another's gaze. Being naked is a personal action on the part of the subject. Frances insisted that I see that Festival participants are making conscious choices to be naked, not to be on display. Art historian Rosemary Betterton suggests that "women have an ambiguous relationship to the nude visual image. This is because they are represented so frequently within images yet their role as makers and viewers of images is rarely acknowledged" (1987:3). In effect, my collaborators acknowledge their role as makers and viewers of remembered bodies and reconstructed gender, although their artistic medium is the narrative. Their narratives are opportunities to shape-shift away from positions of being actively viewed and of being passive viewers, to become both the changer and the changed.

In this dissertation, I examine the ways that a temporary separatist space, the tent city in the woods that is affectionately known as the Land, is transformed and defined by community discourse, a discourse that is decidedly feminist and that privileges diverse performances of Woman. The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is more than an occasion to observe musical performances. Women

initially come for the music, but they return for the community. Festival is a ritual container in which women are able to convert the restrictive and unrealistic cultural scripts of appropriate behavior and appearance that have been imposed upon them often since their births.

As an ethnographer, and a Festival insider, I have crafted a collage of Festival voices, including my own. Over the course of seventeen years, fourteen on the Land, I have observed and participated in the traditions of Festival, particularly the tradition of being openly naked. That tradition is one that ultimately repositions Festival participants. They move between citations; from audience to performer; and across the Festival's fluid boundaries seeking to liberate and remember their selves.



Map of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival from the back cover of the 2005 Program

CONCERT SEATING ETIQUETTE

CHAIRS AND BLANKETS

Full-height lawn chairs block the view of those behind you... but those great, low sand chairs are available at the General Store if you didn't bring one. Everyone behind you will be glad you got one or are using a blanket or some other type of chair that sits low to the ground. 6pm is the earliest time you may reserve seating space at the Night Stage with chairs and/or blankets. Our security gals will help direct you.

FLASH CAMERAS AT THE NIGHT STAGE

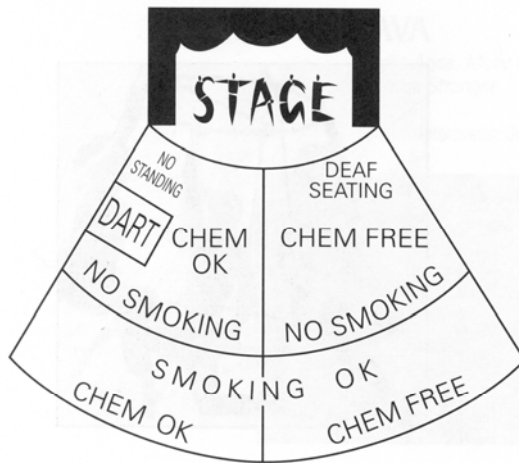
Please, do not use flash cameras at the Night Stage. They are unsafe and distracting to performers and audience alike. Also, they aren't powerful enough to actually light your subject from the audience to the stage.

WALKING DURING SONGS

There are aisles through the audience at all stages; please use them, but try not to use them during performance pieces. Please be especially sensitive to not cut in front of the audience at the Acoustic Stage. During the opening celebration on Wednesday night, the aisles will be closed so please find your seat by 8pm.

ACOUSTIC STAGE QUIET

When approaching this stage, please be aware that the very good acoustics of the glen amplify and project your speaking voice, disrupting performances.



CHEM-FREE AND CHEM-OK

The general concept for seating at all three stages is chem-free on the right side of the audience. This means do not sit in the chem-free area if you have been drinking alcohol or plan to at any point during the concerts.

SMOKING

In all general seating areas, please, no smoking. You can move to the far back of the audience for smoke breaks and at Night Stage, DART smokers can stop at the top of the hill near FestieWear.

DART SEATING

This section is located on the left side of each stage. If you are sitting in front of the DART section, you are in a no-standing section.

Concert Seating Chart and Etiquette of the
Michigan Womyn's Music Festival from
the 2005 Program

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VITA

Lisa L. Higgins was born in Paragould, Arkansas, the daughter of Betty S. (Hendley) Higgins and Jerald W. Higgins, and was raised in the "Mid-south" region of Northeast Arkansas, Southeast Missouri, and Western Tennessee. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Arkansas State University in 1987 and her Master of Arts degree in English, with emphases in Women's and Minority Literature in 1988, also at Arkansas State University. While earning her Doctor of Philosophy degree in English at the University of Missouri-Columbia, Higgins received both a departmental teaching award and a dissertation fellowship. Her doctoral areas of emphases are Folklore and Rhetoric. During a sabbatical from her doctoral research, she began working in public sector folklore, first at the Southern Arts Federation in Atlanta, Georgia and then as the director of the Missouri Folk Arts Program (MFAP), a collaboration between the Missouri Arts Council and the University of Missouri's Museum of Art and Archaeology. Higgins is completing her 9th year at MFAP; her research interests continue to include narratives, festivals, and public arts policy.