



Settler Rural Imaginaries of MichFest: Connecting Settler Legacies and Cis Fear

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Abstract

Thinking through scholarship at the intersections of anarcha-feminism, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy, this paper uses the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MichFest) as a case study to examine how settler rural imaginaries are mobilized to reify settler and cis hierarchies. The two imaginaries of interest – “safety in the woods” and “Nature is [cis] female” – rely on settler legacies: the first is derived from the emptiness created by settler state violence and Indigenous displacement, and the second is a reproduction of settler sexuality. To understand how these imaginaries surfaced at MichFest, I analyze online media created around the time of MichFest's closing. Given the blame of MichFest's closing was often placed on the issue of trans-exclusion, blog posts and opinion pieces around this time serve as a small sample of the trans-exclusionary rhetoric found at MichFest that reproduced these imaginaries. Most of the texts address concerns about trans-inclusion leading to sexual assault, creating an implicit connection between women's fears and cis fears. The discourse around this time reproduced the wilderness of MichFest as a cis women's landscape, constructing the land as a cis woman. In using these two imaginaries, women at MichFest are producing a cis women's landscape that relies on the exclusion of both Indigenous and trans people, reproducing settler and cis dominance.

Keywords

Settler colonialism; transphobia; anarchism; rural imaginaries; MichFest

Introduction

When I was accepted as part of the “Anarchist Geographies and Epistemologies of the State” paper session at the 2019 AAG in Washington D.C., I was excited to begin a journey into the nexus between the power and authority of the state and womyn’s separatism in the U.S. Following lines of what has been called post-anarchist thought (Call 2002, Clough and Blumberg 2012, May 1994, Newman 2011) and anarcha-feminism (The Perspectives Editorial Collective 2016), I demonstrated the interconnections between the mechanisms of the state, legacies of settler colonialism, and how separatists imagined rurality. In particular, I showed how the settler rural imaginary “safety in the woods” was used at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MichFest), the case study I was working with. MichFest was an annual women’s musical festival in the U.S. that ended in 2015 amid controversy concerning its ‘womyn-born-womyn’ (WBW) policy that excluded trans women from the festival. After presenting, I learned from my fellow presenters and audience members that any inquiry into MichFest required an understanding of transphobia, given how tightly woven the two are in the popular understanding of separatism and women-only spaces. Curious to see where settler rural imaginaries met with the infamous WBW policy of MichFest, I set out to write this paper.

What I discovered was that the connections between womyn’s separatism, settler colonialism, and transphobia were complex. However, it became apparent that what bound them together were two settler rural imaginaries: “safety in the woods,” and “Nature is [cis] female”. As I aim to show in this paper, both of these imaginaries were mobilized at MichFest for various purposes, but specifically as justifications for the exclusion of trans women from the festival. Both imaginaries rely on settler legacies: the former on the mass removal of Indigenous groups from lands across North America (Cronon 1995), and the latter on the heteropatriarchal formations of settler sexuality that legitimize the policing and disciplining of bodies that do not adhere to binary gender/sex (Morgensen 2010, 2011; TallBear 2018). Working with these ideas led to various other connections and insights, but mostly a more nuanced understanding of the settler state’s reach in everyday geographies (imagined and real), the relevance of trans theory to feminist geography, and the usefulness of anarcha-feminist thought in guiding such research.

The goal of this paper is to contextualize and critique two settler rural imaginaries, “safety in the woods” and “Nature is [cis] female,” as they were used to justify trans-exclusion at MichFest. To accomplish this goal, this paper takes two directions. First, this paper traces the role of state violence in the creation of a “safety in the woods” rural imaginary, especially concerning settler colonialism and Indigenous displacement/genocide. I also demonstrate the role of capitalist notions of private property, as well as the way “safety in the woods” is used by particular strains of U.S. feminism. Second, I turn to the iconic WBW policy of MichFest that provoked transphobic discourse across social media. I connect rhetoric about fear of sexual assault produced by such discussions to the “Nature is [cis] female” settler rural imaginary, and further explore this imagining of land through the lenses of cis women’s landscapes and settler sexuality. Throughout, I make use of anarcha-feminism’s critiques of state and interpersonal power, domination, and exclusion.

Before beginning, I would like to address the limited scope of this paper. While a diverse array of women participated in MichFest, this paper looks explicitly to the underlying settler colonialist workings of geographical/environmental imaginaries from the perspective of white settlers. Lesbian separatism, the ideology most influential in the production of women-only music festivals like MichFest in the U.S., has been rightfully critiqued as a white lesbian ideology given its often potent refusal to engage with women of color’s desire for solidarity with men of color, and overall dismissal of other axes of subjectivity as important points of oppression in women of color’s lives (Collins 1990, Combahee River Collective 1978, Herring 2007, Koyama 2006). This paper is meant to understand and critique the working of hierarchies as they appear in geographical imaginaries, and furthermore how geographical

imaginaries are mobilized to justify exclusion. This is not meant to universally criticize women-only music festivals still successfully existing while allowing trans women's participation, nor the other important women-only spaces spurred by separatism, though more work is needed on these spaces. Further, this study is an explicit examination of the U.S. settler state and the rural imaginaries produced therein. This analysis of rurality and settler colonialism is not immediately transferable to other nation-state contexts nor other settler states.

Anarcha Geography, Settler Colonialism, and Heteropatriarchy

According to Mott, "Anarcha-feminism brings together anarchism, rooted in anticapitalism, antistatism, and horizontal approaches to social organization, with feminism's emphasis on the significance of intersectional difference in shaping everyday relations of power" (2018, 426). It is also often associated with feminist work that interrogates the state as an institution that works to perpetuate patriarchy and intersecting systems of oppression (Shannon and Rogue 2009), and oftentimes includes anarchist political strategies such as prefigurative politics (The Perspectives Editorial Collective 2016). In this regard, plenty of geographers have engaged in anarcha-feminist work while not explicitly claiming an anarcha-feminist perspective (Mott 2018). This includes work on spaces and social movements that are autonomous and leaderless (Gibson-Graham 2006, Jarvis 2013), using anarchist theory with queer or feminist theory (Merla-Watson 2012, Rouhani 2012), or proposing decolonizing the discipline through a critique of state power and interlocking oppression (Holmes and Hunt 2014). Like some anarchist geographers (Chattopadhyay 2019, Ince 2009, Mott 2018), I believe the potential for anarcha geography has yet to be fully embraced by the discipline, specifically as a frame of analysis. This paper is guided by anarcha geography in a few ways, but primarily as a lens that prioritizes an understanding how state and interpersonal hierarchies and violence must be interconnected, and differentially experienced, through space and place. Additionally, it uses anarcha-feminism as a guide for understanding the complex relationships between settler colonialism, the state, and heteropatriarchy, especially as these hierarchies impact both Indigenous and trans people. In the future, I hope geographers can investigate the implications for an *anarchx* geography that could maybe recognize the inherent fluidity and amorphous character of these contested relationships and hierarchies that this paper is unable to explore.

The hierarchies I would like to point out in this paper are those that normalize and perpetuate settler and cis privileges - being settler colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy - as well as the dominance of the state as a crucial institution in the production of the "safety in the woods" imaginary. Geographic work on contemporary manifestations of settler colonialism (Bonds and Inwood 2015; de Leeuw 2016; Hugill 2017; Pulido 2018; Radcliffe 2017, 2015), Indigeneity (e.g., Coombes, Johnson, and Howitt 2012; Radcliffe 2015), and decolonizing geography (e.g, Barker and Pickerill 2012, de Leeuw and Hunt 2018, Holmes and Hunt 2014) has been especially prolific in making connections between settler colonialism and present configurations of power in the settler state (see especially Tomiak (2017)). Anarchist connections to decolonization have also been particularly fruitful (Barker and Pickerill 2012, Lagalisse 2011). While this research has pointed to the tensions between settler anarchists and Indigenous activists, there have also been prolific collaborations between groups. This includes Barker and Pickerill's (2012) suggestion that conceptions of space and place are particularly important when engaging in dialogue between anarchists and decolonization initiatives. Specifically, they highlight the importance of understanding Indigenous conceptions of land in order to better understand settler society. Like Higgins (2019), who uses whiteness studies as a guide to understanding British migrants' prejudice towards Indigenous Maori New Zealanders, my contribution to the anti-colonial work in geography critiquing settler colonialism will be accomplished by looking specifically at settlers' spatial imaginaries. By exploring these conceptions, geographers can begin to see the underlying white supremacist and settler colonialist attitudes that continue to shape interactions between people, space, and land (Bonds and Inwood 2015).

Especially important in this paper is the relationship between settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy. While geographers like de Leeuw (2016) have pointed to the way conceptions of gender and patriarchy create unequal positions of power in settler society, I turn to Morgensen (2010, 2011) and TallBear (2018) to further think about settler sexuality. According to Morgensen (2010), settler sexuality refers to “a white national heteronormativity that regulates Indigenous sexuality and gender by supplanting them with the sexual modernity of sexual subjects” (106). Similarly, TallBear writes “Settler sexuality—that gives us this hetero- and increasingly homonormative compulsory monogamy society and relationship escalator intimately tied to settler-colonial ownership of property and Indigenous dispossession—*is a structure*” (2018, emphasis original). Though Morgensen focuses primarily on the ways Indigenous peoples considered sexually deviant were policed and assimilated, settler sexuality is hegemonic and expected of settler subjects as well. He further writes that “queer movements can naturalize settlement and assume a homonormative and national form that may be read specifically as settler homonationalism” (2010, 106) and can make “queer subjects as agents of violence of the settler state” (107). Like heterosexual settlers, queer settlers can and do construct ideologies around what constitutes “nature” as well as “natural” sexuality, sex, and gender alignments – being settler sexuality determined by biological essentialism. By reproducing settler sexuality and settler claims to land – both of which have been historically and contemporarily undergone by the state – queer subjects can act on behalf of settler state interests. I will be applying this concept in this paper to think about the way MichFest’s lesbian separatists constructed their own ideas of “natural” yet settler gender and sex and enforced this via the WBW policy. The interworking between hierarchies of settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy as they come together in settler sexuality, as well as how people become agents of the settler state in everyday interactions, have yet to be afforded much critical attention in geography.

The context for discussions of settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy is MichFest and the implementation of the transphobic WBW policy. It is therefore necessary to further extrapolate the connections between heteropatriarchy and biological essentialism as they apply to transphobia. For this, I draw upon various trans theorists from other disciplines and backgrounds (Bettcher 2007, Connell 2012, Jacques 2014, Jaffe 2018, Koyama 2006, Stone 1992), as well as geographers working with trans theory and populations (Doan 2010, Hines 2010, Jenzen 2017, Lewis 2017, Nash 2010, Rosenberg and Oswin 2015). Trans theorists have continuously worked to demonstrate the myth of a natural connection between sexuality, sex, or gender (Connell 2012, Stone 1992) and critique transphobic exclusion from various branches of feminism (e.g., Koyama 2006, Lewis 2017), while trans geography scholars have largely focused on disrupting the gender binary (Rosenberg and Oswin 2015). Some scholars, like Koyama (2006) and Lewis (2017), have specifically turned a critical eye to MichFest in regard to its politics. Both write about the ideologies perpetuated by specific branches of feminism (such as lesbian separatists, ‘radfems,’ or transphobes) that recognize patriarchy as the most important or primary hierarchy in peoples’ lives, while simultaneously reproducing biological essentialist ideologies concerning proper categories of binary gender and sex. In this paper, as I argue these ideologies are present in the rural imaginaries of MichFest participants, I draw from trans theorists’ work to discern the transphobic prejudices that appear in discourses of trans-exclusion.

The literature I have outlined above do coalesce in interesting and productive ways. For example, trans theorists have made connections between state domination, trans oppression, and binary sex and gender, or settler sexuality. The state in many cases becomes the gatekeeper of binary sex and gender, and therefore reinforces settler sexuality; as of writing, plenty state-level governments in the U.S. refuse to recognize changes of gender, as well as agender or non-binary gender identities on birth certificates or other official documents (Beauchamp 2009, Herman 2015, Spade 2003). Tranarchism, according to Herman (2015), has the potential to subvert state power by undermining the state surveillance of gender non-conforming bodies – to resist the heteropatriarchal colonial construct of binary gender and sex that is reinforced by the state. This is just one example of the ways these ideas intersect and create new

meanings. For this paper, thinking through the connections between trans embodiment and state power comes through in the ways that the “queer settlers” of MichFest become agents of the settler state by policing and excluding gender deviance, and by doing so actively reproduce notions of settler sexuality.

Finally, these connections between settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy are applicable to rural imaginaries. The fixation on rural areas by lesbian and womyn separatists specifically is an area readily explored (e.g., Bell and Valentine 1995, Herring, 2007, Sandilands 2002, Valentine 1997). Bell and Valentine (1995) explain that one reason for the separatist movement to rural communes was part of the embraced binary between civilization/man and nature/woman. Going back to ‘mother earth,’ many women believe that ‘nature’ is more feminist and woman-friendly than man-made cities (see also Browne 2011, Lee 1990, Rose 1993, Valentine 1997). The proliferation of lesbian communes, ranches, farms, and rural festivals in the 1970s was part of an ideology that “a return to nature, a break from the nuclear family, and freedom from men could all best be realised on farms and ranches” (Bell and Valentine 1995, 118).

As a gathering that took place for decades in the Huron-Manistee National Forest, an area currently contested by the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians (“Little River Band of Ottawa Indians” n.d.) and Chippewa Ottawa Resource Authority (CORA n.d.), MichFest was less in the vein of farming lesbian back-to-the-landers and more like other separatist LGBT groups that specifically sought out ‘wilderness’ (see Morgensen (2011) for information about the Radical Faeries). This attention to wilderness, which I return to in the analysis, may be best explained by the concept of rural idylls and what Bell (2006) calls wildscapes. Wildscapes are a kind of rural idyll – that is, a kind of idealized geographic imaginary of rural space – that can be summarized as “pre-cultural, pre-human, untamed nature – the wilderness” (Bell 2006, 150). Coming from a U.K. context, Bell emphasizes the romanticization of wilderness on the part of bourgeoisie urban dwellers and tourists. In the context of the U.S. settler society, as I aim to demonstrate below, wilderness and wildscape imaginaries are laden with historical violence and settler authorization of land.

Taking these ideas together, this paper draws upon research critiquing and connecting the state, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy to understand the formation and mobilization of two prominent rural imaginaries: “Safety in the woods” and “Nature is [cis] female”. These two imaginaries, as I argue below, were used by MichFest attendees to justify transphobic biological essentialism and reinforce ideologies of settler colonialism and settler sexuality. I proceed this review with a brief background of MichFest. I then outline the historical context of “safety in the woods” in the United States as it stems from Indigenous displacement and genocide. I also use previous researchers’ work on MichFest to uncover the use of “safety in the woods” by MichFest attendees. Following, I focus on the “Nature is [cis] female” settler rural imaginary and how it conceptualizes a cis woman’s landscape through the lens of settler sexuality.

Background

The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, or MichFest, was held annually in the Huron-Manistee Forest of western Michigan from 1976 to 2015. It was one of the largest and longest-lasting women-only music festivals in the U.S. – at its height, the festival would draw in upwards of 10,000 women. Its legacy has had a lasting impact on the imaginaries of womyn’s separatism in mainstream media, and its notorious womyn-born-womyn (WBW) policy often plays a substantial role in many people’s condemnation or appreciation of the annual event. In 2006, MichFest founder and landowner Lisa Vogel defined the WBW policy as only allowing “womyn who were born as and have lived their entire life experience as womyn” (Browne 2009, 548). The refusal to allow trans attendees led to the creation of Camp Trans, a counter protest that began in 1994 and protested MichFest until its closing (Browne 2009). The group was initiated after a trans woman was evicted from MichFest and had her ticket refunded.

Camp Trans occurred annually at the same time as MichFest on nearby public camping grounds. Camp Trans had been a source of great controversy, both with outside opponents and internal tensions (Koyama 2006). Growing debate after Vogel's 2006 statement, which reinforced and further justified the WBW policy, led to multiple organizations including the Human Rights Campaign (2014) to criticize and boycott the festival as long as it maintained the policy.

Vogel, who was the owner of the private property where MichFest was held, decided to end MichFest permanently in 2015, with many attendees and supporters in the aftermath accusing trans people and Camp Trans for its demise. According to an op-ed piece in *Advocate* by Anderson-Minshall (2015) and Lewis' (2017) piece in *Salvage*, the festival was in economic decline compared to other women's festivals with trans-inclusive policies, such as the Ohio Lesbian Festival. As Lewis (2017) writes, "While Camp Trans is a convenient scapegoat, the reasons for Michfest closing were in fact manifold, including financial difficulty and declining attendance." With this context in mind, this paper examines the "safety in the woods" imaginary as a necessary precursor for lesbian separatism's rural inclinations, and further examines this imaginary alongside "Nature as [cis] female" to understand the rhetoric produced in the wake of MichFest's closing.

Safety in the Woods: The Formation of Settler Rural Imaginaries

The myth of the wilderness as 'virgin' uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the [Indigenous groups] who had once called that land home. Now they were forced to move elsewhere, with the result that tourists could safely enjoy the illusion that they were seeing their nation in its pristine, original state, in the new morning of God's own creation. – William Cronon 1995, 77

Popular with lesbian separatists, and apparently glampers (Boscoboinik and Bourquard 2012), the "safety in the woods" wildscape imaginary has a long history in the U.S. During the eighteenth century, wilderness did not conjure images of safety and comfort. Cronon's (1995) work on wilderness looks to American and European wildscape imaginaries as they were originally influenced by Christian doctrine. He writes that "to be wilderness then was to be 'deserted,' 'savage,' 'desolate,' 'barren' – in short, a 'waste,' the word's nearest synonym" (8). Settler interpretations of land during the beginnings of colonization in the U.S. were centered on concepts of waste and emptiness. As the ideology of *terra nullius*, literally empty land, was a driving factor for dispossession and genocide in Australia (Howitt 2019, Pateman and Mills 2007), the idea similarly had an impact on U.S. settler colonial tactics (see Safransky (2014) for how 'emptiness' is still mobilized in U.S. urban settings). Though settlers created treaties with North American Indigenous nations, the idea that Indigenous groups were using land ineffectively and inadequately created an assumption about the availability of land and the emptiness of land insofar that it lacked "civilized peoples" (Harris 1993, Harris 2004, Seawright 2014). During this time, "safety" was hardly in the purview of optional adjectives for wilderness. As Cronon (1995) elaborates, fear of wilderness, and the people within it, was paramount in the beginning construction of a settler-colonial U.S. wildscape imaginary.

The association of fear with wilderness changes with the displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples by the U.S. settler state. I argue that state-sanctioned violent processes led to an opening that allows for safety to be associated with wilderness, without which "safety in the woods" as it is used today may not be possible. As displacement and genocide occurred over hundreds of years, the culmination of the American Indian Wars became a milestone where wilderness began to be constructed as empty and safe (Cronon 1995). This is only because the end of these conflicts marked the final mass movements of Indigenous groups onto reservations. "Once [Native Americans were] set aside within the fixed and carefully policed boundaries of the modern bureaucratic state, the wilderness lost its savage image and became safe: a place more of reverie than of revulsion or fear" (Cronon 1995, 15). Therefore,

while “safety in the woods” seems like an innocuous rural imaginary - as Glenn (2015) writes: “settler colonialism obscures the conditions of its own production” (59) - the concept of safety is predicated upon the sense of emptiness produced by settler state colonial processes of displacement and genocide. And, as Veracini (2010) explains about the work settler colonial ideology does, it allows the assumption that “the settler enters a ‘new, empty land to start a new life;’ indigenous people naturally or inevitably ‘vanish;’ it is not settlers that displace them” (14). Empty, safe rurality is based on settler epistemology – specifically a settler way of knowing land – that insidiously plants itself within the taken for granted assumptions of U.S. rural landscapes.

The replacement of fear with safety in the wildscape imaginary was only afforded to specific privileged populations. White settlers, and especially those from cities (Cronon 1995), were the ones who produced this association. As Finney (2014) writes, African Americans in the U.S. continue to have wildscape imaginaries of fear given the historical and contemporary white supremacist violence associated with wilderness and rurality. The “safety in the woods” settler rural imaginary was effectively born out of state and white settler violence and can be mobilized to justify continued exclusion and violence.

When shifting the analysis to the scale of the forest, and the 650 acres of land owned by Vogel and used for MichFest purposes, it too has a history of use and formation that is closely linked to the settler state as well as capitalist processes. The 1836 Treaty of Washington, also called in official documents the Treaty with the Ottawa etc., or the Ottawa-Chippewa Treaty, was between the United States and representatives of the Ottawa and Chippewa nations (CORA 2018). This treaty detailed the conceding of over 13 million acres of modern-day Michigan, including what now makes up the Manistee National Forest, to the federal government. The national forest where MichFest was located was created through state intervention during the Great Depression. The role of the state in the production of the Manistee woods is briefly summarized by the USDA website on “History and Culture,” which claims that the Forest Service purchased land during the Great Depression to help local farmers and landowners. The land purchases during this time were broken up, with some farmers holding on to adjacent productive lands and selling to the state unproductive land. This resulted in the Huron-Manistee National Forest being fragmented with pockets of private property, leaving opportunity for people like Vogel to be a part of the forest while still claiming private ownership.

Notions of property in the settler state as they are continuously reproduced in contemporary time have been previously addressed by geographers (e.g., Blatman-Thomas and Porter 2018, Safransky 2014, Tomiak 2017). It is no secret that ideologies around capitalist private property were key in the execution of Indigenous displacement (e.g., Blatman-Thomas and Porter 2018, Harris 2004, Park 2016). As Harris (1993) argues, only white forms of possession and ownership were recognized and legitimated by law. Indigenous claims to land were therefore unrecognizable, as U.S. court rulings demonstrated that whiteness was a “prerequisite to the exercise of enforceable property rights” (Harris 1993, 1724). Important to this analysis, capitalist private property relations are premised on the right to exclude (Harris 1993). The enacting of those rights will be the major focus of the following section.

In addition to capitalist claims to land, the formation of national parks is part of the movement after the final American Indian Wars to preserve areas of “pristine” uninhabited wilderness (Cronon 1995). It is directly tied to both the state’s deliberate clearing of wilderness and rural spaces via forced Indigenous displacement and dispossession, and the state’s intervention with presumably uninhabited land that was the direct result of displacement. A critical piece of national parks and forests are the legacies of settler colonial practices and enactments of white supremacy on the landscape. These can be found in the Manistee National Forest where MichFest was held. Additionally, state-sanctioned practices of private ownership over settled land (Harris 2004) can also be found in the landscape, in the breaking up of public and private over an area previously subjected to forced displacement.

Given the historical context of settler and white violence that produced “safety in the woods,” it is interesting to see how it has come to be used by lesbian separatists. Plenty of scholars on separatism have explored the connections between safety and rurality for lesbians (Berlant and Freeman 1992, Cheney 1985, Herring 2007, Sandilands 2002, Valentine 1997). The way this imaginary surfaces at MichFest, however, further points to the way wilderness and wildscapes specifically are positioned in the separatist rural imaginary. To demonstrate this relationship, I draw from Browne’s (2011) qualitative questionnaires. In her research, Browne looks to the re-imagining of rural idylls by lesbian separatists as subversive. Rural imaginaries are often constructed through hegemonic interpretations of masculinity and heterosexuality (Little 2002, 2007; Little and Austin 1996), and lesbian separatists reclaiming rurality challenges these dominant discourses. For example, Browne (2011) finds that not only is MichFest “renowned as a safe rural space for lesbians, and lesbian sexuality,” (17) but that:

The place of ‘wilderness’ in the ‘Midwest’ in participant’s accounts not only points to the reworking of potentially hostile ruralities, they also place Michfest positively within rural spaces. Not only does this give meaning to ‘the land’ and the collective of womyn therein, it also recreates rural images that are passed through (feminist) generations, creating and being created by traditions and informed by literature, the media and storytelling. (Browne 2011, 17)

Browne continues with different utopic visions produced by MichFest attendees that further subvert the heteropatriarchal construction of wilderness, such as respondents describing MichFest as “5000 naked women in the woods” (2011, 17). These responses provide an example of how “safety in the woods” becomes filtered through specific lines of U.S. separatist feminism.

On its own, the “safety in the woods” imaginary is not inherently negative. As Browne (2011) demonstrates, this reclamation of wilderness is in many ways liberatory for lesbian MichFest attendees. It is also worth saying that presumptions about “safety in the woods” should be thought of as a potential goal especially for populations that are systemically excluded from participating in rural life (Finney 2014, Leslie 2017, Wypler 2019). However, as I further explore below, the construction of *a safety that seeks to be exclusive* makes for a reproduction of settler/cis hierarchies. When taken with its settler state context, exclusive claims to wilderness by queer settlers should be scrutinized because queers can equally contribute to the naturalization of settlement (Morgensen 2010), settler-capitalist claims to land are premised on the right to exclude (Harris 1993), and settler sexuality relies in part on settler conceptions of property ownership and Indigenous dispossession (TallBear 2018).

“Nature is [Cis] Female”: Cis Fear and Settler Sexuality

Plenty of feminist scholars, including geographers (e.g., Rose 1993), have critiqued the connections between women and Nature as a reinforcement of binary gender, as well as the rationale for thinking of women as inherently nurturing, passive, and needing control. Despite these critiques, the “Nature is female” environmental imaginary is one that has been mobilized by various groups, whether they be environmentalists, ecofeminists, or Exxon mobile (Seager 1994). As mentioned in the literature review, womyn and lesbian separatists also used the connections between Nature and women to legitimize their ideology’s reappraisal of rurality (Browne 2011, Lee 1990, Valentine 1997). In this regard, MichFest is no different, with attendees making positive connections between themselves, the woods, and the land (Browne 2011). What attendees also did with this imaginary, however, was use it to justify trans-exclusion at the festival.

Though others have explored how the WBW policy at MichFest reified a biological essentialist understanding of gender and sex (Koyama 2006, Lewis 2017, Luis 2018), this has yet to be understood within a geographical context. I argue that both “safety in the woods” and “Nature is [cis] female” settler rural imaginaries emerged in transphobic discourse surrounding support for the WBW policy, especially

around the time of MichFest's closing. In making this argument, I draw upon Luis' (2018) description of a women's landscape, which encapsulates separatists' gendering and sexing of landscape through essentialist characteristics, and well as trans theorists' work on critiquing transphobia and biological essentialism. Even though this paper is expressly interested in the mobilization of settler rural imaginaries for the purposes of maintaining settler and cis hierarchies, it should be noted that plenty of MichFest attendees were trans-allies and supported the removal of the WBW policy (Browne 2009, McConnell et al. 2016a, McConnell et al. 2016b).

Studying contemporary lesbian womyn's lands in the U.S., Luis (2018) finds that women living in rural lesbian communities actively remake the landscape as female, referring to environmental features such as mountains, plants, animals, and trees as "she". The making of the women's landscape further imbues the landscape with agency and emotion, transforming the landscape discursively. Luis' work captures a mode of lesbian separatist thought that takes form geographically – the relationship between a women's landscape and Nature being interpreted as female is solidified by the active reworking of wilderness and rurality as feminine, womanly, and literally a woman. MichFest, oftentimes referred to as "the Land" by attendees, is simultaneously constructed as a safe space in the woods via the "safety in the woods" imaginary, and as a women's landscape via the "Nature is [cis] female" imaginary. To show how these two settler rural imaginaries are mobilized to further reproduce settler and cis dominance, I turn to social media posts and online news articles publicly available online, as well as previous scholarly research. I analyze three different reactions to trans-in/exclusion at MichFest: (1) fear that the inclusion of trans women will lead to sexual assault, (2) fear that trans women's "male bodies" will trigger cis women who have previously experienced sexual assault, and (3) fear that the inclusion of trans women, and in general trans advocacy work, will lead to an extermination of a cis lesbian class. Each of these three points arise from discussions of allowing trans women on the Land and into a women's landscape, and the supposed threat they pose to MichFest attendees' safety in the woods.

Much of the discourse in support of the WBW policy at MichFest revolves around the fear of sexual assault. As feminist geographers have shown (Pain 1997a, 1997b, 2001, 2009; Pain and Smith 2008; Valentine 1989), cis women have high perceptions of fear in relationship to the possibility of male-perpetrated sexual violence in public space. This fear, however, becomes misdirected at trans women in two ways. First, in a metaphorical way, where trans women are accused of "raping" the women's landscape. Second, in a literal way, where the inclusion of trans attendees creates a gateway for predatory cis men who will supposedly pretend to be trans to be allowed admittance. The first piece of evidence for these discourses comes from Tobi Hill-Meyer, a trans producer and actress involved in Camp Trans. She is cited throughout media and opinion pieces to having written the following post on her blog:

When I attended [MichFest] in 2011, I made it a point to talk with many people about the trans exclusion. The topic of sexual assault often came up. Sometimes trans women's attendance was likened to a "rape" of the festival. Sometimes trans women's existence was called a "rape" of women's bodies (a really weird, logic, I know. Apparently trans women ourselves are seen as men, but our bodies are seen as women's bodies, and so by possessing a woman's body it is a form of rape). But sometimes it was not rape as a metaphor, but a fear of actual sexual assault. More than once I was told that someone feared allowing trans women to attend would mean that cis men perpetrators could pretend to be trans women to get on the land and rape the children. All of this was predicated on the idea that a woman only space is automatically a space free from sexual violence. (Hill-Meyer 2015)

Hill-Meyer (2015) goes on to say that this assumption is untrue, given that there have been reports of sexual assault at MichFest as perpetrated by cis women. In the first half of the post, one can see that trans-inclusion is likened to "rape of the festival" (2015). Approaching MichFest as a women's

landscape, the accusation is symbolic of how attendees imagine the festival. Like Luis (2018) found on women's lands, the wilderness landscape itself is personified as a cis woman, capable of being assaulted. In the second instance, trans women become symbolic of the acceptance of cis men to the festival. While the people Hill-Meyer (2015) spoke to did not claim that trans women themselves will be assaulting anyone, trans women nevertheless become at fault for the possible assault of children. The connection between accepting trans women and accepting cis men into the safe space is a cis fear repeatedly raised in contemporary time (Jaffe 2018). Lewis (2017) writes that "[radfems] look at us and they see men, contamination by men, rape" - this association has a long-standing history in particular transphobic circles.

As Valentine (1989) and others have shown, fear of assault is one of the greatest driving fears of women in public space. By taking this women's fear, and suggesting that it justifies trans-exclusion, the cis women who make these claims are transforming women's fear into cis fear. The use of children in this example, too, is reminiscent of how the safety of children was paramount when discussing both the possibility of gay marriage and trans-inclusion in bathrooms (Beauchamp 2019, Rubin 2011). Using the safety of children against trans women at MichFest is a (re)production of the heteronormative attitude towards children's sexuality and their vulnerability to gender- and sexuality-deviant bodies.

While the testimony from Hill-Meyer (2015) is telling of the way women's landscapes come to be gendered and the way that fear of sexual assault becomes part of transphobic rhetoric, there has been discourse that frames trans women as violent men themselves. Williams (2015), a trans blogger, writes that in 1999 a group of Lesbian Avengers - including a 16-year-old trans girl - went to the festival and were subsequently attacked by a mob. According to the interview Williams (2015) conducted with the group, the mob at the festival shouted things such as: "Man on the land," "You're a rapist," "You're raping the land," and "You're destroying womanhood." Someone also reportedly threatened the 16-year-old with a knife. The statement "you're raping the land," is, again, symbolic of Luis' (2018) finding that separatists view women's landscapes as beings capable of emotion, agency, and embodiment. In this case, the agency of the Land is supposedly robbed by the admittance of a trans attendee. The use of "Nature is [cis] female" in the production of a women's landscape is mobilized to justify exclusion on the Land for the sake of cis women's safety.

Both Hill-Meyer (2015) and Williams (2015) identify discourses and actions that reify trans women as perpetrators of sexual assault and cis women as harboring fear of assault. Using cis fear as a justification for transphobia is relatively routine for so-called radfems and other separatists (Jaffe, 2018). As it has been demonstrated by feminist geographers studying fear (e.g., Pain 2001, Valentine 1989), cis women's fear in place often revolves around the fear of male violence via sexual assault. The fear that MichFest attendees are proclaiming is playing into this well-known phenomenon. By making claims to fears that have been repeatedly legitimized by feminists, MichFest attendees reinforce the importance of women's landscapes and the exclusionary policies targeting out of place bodies.

Fear of sexual assault is not the only fear present in these discussions. McConnell et al. (2016b) conduct interviews and online surveys with attendees following the 2013 festival; their findings suggest many different approaches to trans-inclusion at MichFest, including unwavering support. One finding, however, is bounded to this discourse of cis women's fears. They write:

Another common belief expressed by supporters of the WBW intention was that including trans women would *threaten the physical and emotional safety cis women experience at the festival*. This was frequently connected with a fear of having 'overt bio-markers of masculinity,' like penises and male voices, on the land, as they may trigger cis women who are survivors of rape and/or child sexual abuse. (McConnell et al. 2016b, 18, emphasis added).

This finding is representative of the discourses aforementioned. The women's landscape is symbolic of a safe space in the woods for women who have experienced abuse and assault. Trans women represent a threat to this safety by virtue of having "overt bio-markers of masculinity." Looking past the problems with assuming trans women have male bodies, and the sex binary being reinforced, one can see cis women's fear of male violence again being misdirected. In this case, the myth is that trans women, because they may have markers of masculinity, are bringers of male violence. Koyama responds to this kind of discourse:

To suggest that the safety of the Land would be compromised [by trans inclusion] overlooks, perhaps intentionally, ways in which women can act out violence and oppressions against each other. Even the argument that "the presence of a penis would trigger the women" is flawed because it neglects the fact that white skin is just as much a reminder of violence as a penis. (2006, 8)

The myth that there is inherent violence in body parts periodically resurfaces with questions of trans-inclusion. Recent examples demonstrating this include the notorious bathroom bills (Schilt and Westbrook 2015). This myth rests on a false belief that gender identity (or even personality) is inherently tied to genitalia. Luis (2018), in examining the transphobia that appears on women's lands and at MichFest, writes that the belief that trans women are men comes from a biological determinist perspective she calls the precultural body. The myth of the precultural body suggests that there is a natural body that exists prior to cultural information. This, in conjunction with myths of "naturally" dichotomous gender and sex that come to be reinforced in space and place (Doan 2010, Stone 1992), make for the heteronormative tenets of settler sexuality. The focus on genitalia, and what it represents to assault survivors, again is an attempt to legitimize cis women's fears and justify exclusion in a cis women's landscape.

The two above examples, both of which include biological essentialist rhetoric, demonstrate how settler sexuality becomes projected onto the landscape. In these examples, lesbian and womyn separatists decide what constitutes an appropriate body for the women's landscape, which happens to fall within the expectations of settler sexuality. As Morgensen (2010, 2011) argues, queer groups can become representatives of the settler state in both their appropriation of Indigenous ideologies and their rejection of gender, sex, or sexuality that fall outside settler sexuality expectations. MichFest attendees, by policing non-cis gender embodiments and by imagining the wilderness as a cis woman, in effect project settler sexuality onto the Land in their "Nature is [cis] female" settler rural imaginary. Settler notions of exclusive access to land for particular bodies, histories of Indigenous dispossession, reinforcements of settler sexuality via transphobia, and legacies of settler state violence all come together in the fearful deployment of "Nature is [cis] female" at MichFest.

Finally, though the issue of trans-ex/inclusion is usually met with the fear of assault, there is another fear that surfaces in the discussion. Cogswell (2015), the author of *Eating Fire: My Life as a Lesbian Avenger* (2014), wrote an opinion piece after the closing of MichFest. She expresses opinions such as that cis women deserve a space to recover from misogyny (e.g., Morris 1999), and that closeted trans women attend MichFest all the time (e.g., Callahan 2014). However, Cogswell (2015) takes this one step further. She writes:

Nope, the real obstacles to trans progress are those filthy bigoted dykes at MichFest who should probably all be exterminated. Am I exaggerating? Not much. The Internet is awash with anti-MichFest posts that end with diatribes attacking lesbians as a class, many wishing for our collective demise. (Cogswell 2015)

She also repeats some of the rhetoric analyzed by McConnell et al. (2016) above, saying that, "half the women I know have PTSD from a life of having a cunt and tits in public" (Cogswell 2015) – reifying the

issue that cis women are seeking a safe place from trauma. Cogswell also makes comments that MichFest should not be closed down, “unless men have quit raping women this week” (2015). From this opinion piece, one can see the entanglement of the primary fears of cis women. MichFest is again reproduced as a women’s landscape meant to provide cis women with the safety of not being around men who they believe will sexually assault them. The underlying idea, which is not directly addressed by Cogswell (2015), is how trans women somehow disrupt that safety by existing in the landscape.

Cogswell (2015) adds another unique element to the discourse, however. Her above quote makes it seem that trans women’s right to women’s landscapes will lead to the extermination of a lesbian class. The connection is not direct; rather, the concerns over trans women’s inclusion will lead others to advocate for the end of a lesbian class. Cogswell reemphasizes this point by saying that critics of MichFest “encourage other trans people to attack both organizers and participants with a level of rage and hate that we do not see directed toward anything or anybody else” (2015). To unpack this, I turn to Luis’ (2018) interpretation of MichFest transphobia as it relates to how trans women are perceived. Luis (2018) argues that letters written by Vogel show that, first, cis women are framing themselves as victims of trans women’s hate, and second, that cis women believe the “tone” of trans women is harmful to their objectives. Cogswell (2015) participates in this discourse as well by saying that trans people are “attacking” organizers and attendees, and that there is too much “rage and hate” on the part of trans women who are being excluded from the women’s landscape. It also makes an indirect parallel that suggests that cis women in the women’s landscape do not have this same level of hatred and rage, and that their “tone” is more acceptable. This obviously does not take into consideration Williams’ (2015) interview that detailed how cis women at MichFest threatened a 16-year-old with a weapon.

What Cogswell’s (2015) piece demonstrates, like in the previous examples, is how cis women’s fears are mobilized to justify the exclusion of trans women from the safety of a cis women’s landscape. In this discourse produced by cis women, if trans women are allowed into the safe cis women’s landscape of MichFest, they will bring physical and emotional violence and the downfall of a lesbian class. It is also a reinforcement of settler sexuality as its projected onto rural space. The creation of imaginaries of presumably cis and rapable land relies on settler sexuality for its binary interpretation of gender and sex. It also is dependent upon on settler sexuality and a homonationalism where private property rights to exclude, sometimes through violent means, is done in the name of claiming cis, empty, and safe settled wilderness.

Ultimately, MichFest attendees who use transphobic rhetoric reproduce ideologies of the settler state, and do the work of the settler state, by both naturalizing settler claims to wilderness that intend to be exclusive and by policing gender embodiments that exist outside the restrictive notions of settler sexuality. Both of these actions have historically been undertaken by the state itself, through displacement, genocide, treaties, and boarding schools (Morgensen 2010). The argument is not necessarily that MichFest participants intend to act on behalf of settler state interests. Rather, when the discourses and actions at the intersection of transphobia, land, and the settler state are evaluated, one sees that MichFest attendees’ actions mirror the work of the settler state.

Conclusion

Inspired by anarcho-feminist thought, this paper began as an experiment to draw connections between settler state processes and womyn’s separatism in the U.S. To this end, I uncovered the legacy of the “safety in the woods” settler rural imaginary produced through the emptiness brought on by Indigenous displacement and genocide by the state around the end of the American Indian Wars. Particular to white settlers, this imaginary continues to be embraced by lesbian and womyn’s separatists who seek to reclaim wilderness. At MichFest, this imaginary comes through in the reworking of the wildscape rural idyll (Browne 2011), as attendees think of wilderness, the woods, and the Land as a safe

haven for lesbian sexuality. This safety, however, comes at a cost: the exclusion of both Indigenous and trans people.

In making the case for the exclusion of bodies that do not adhere to core tenets of settler sexuality, the “Nature is [cis] female” settler rural imaginary is mobilized to justify trans-exclusion. With this imaginary, the Land of MichFest became personified as a cis woman, demonstrative of Luis’ (2018) women’s landscape. Attendees used both imaginaries to argue for the need for a safe place in the woods, particularly from sexual assault, and to accuse trans women of harming or assaulting the Land. Both imaginaries are capable of being mobilized for transphobic purposes, specifically to reify cis privileges and hierarchies; at the same time, both imaginaries harness and reproduce settler state legacies of empty/safe land and settler sexuality, while also making use of notions of private property and the right to exclude (Harris 1993). In this way, the hierarchies produced through the interconnections between the settler state, settler colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy find themselves at MichFest via the medium of settler rural imaginaries.

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