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## “The intersections of trans women and lesbian identities, communities, and movements”: An introduction

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### ABSTRACT

This introduction to the special issue on “The Intersections of Trans Women and Lesbian Identities, Communities, and Movements” considers the interconnectedness of “trans” and “lesbian” as identities and as concepts. Our approach challenges a reading of the two communities as largely separate and adversarial. In reviewing the articles included in this issue, we highlight places of intersection between the two identities, including the experiences of the individuals who live at the intersectional point: trans lesbians.

### KEYWORDS

Lesbian community; lesbians; trans lesbians; trans community; trans women; transgender

Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (1974)

As we wrote this introduction, the media was hyper-focused on the public transition of Caitlyn Jenner, with everyone from President Barack Obama to Miley Cyrus responding to her glamorized photo on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Commentary from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) activists juxtaposed the privilege of a wealthy White celebrity like Jenner, who can command a prime-time television interview and a photo shoot with Annie Leibovitz, with the experiences of the vast majority of trans people, who remain marginalized and experience high rates of discrimination, harassment, and violence. Two other highly visible trans women, Laverne Cox (2015) and Janet Mock (2015), have placed Jenner’s transition in perspective, lauding her for finally being herself, but also pointing out some of the differences between her experiences and their own as trans women of color and the lack of access that most trans women have to the surgeries that enable Jenner to be unquestionably recognized as female by most cisgender commentators. Most trans women struggle to be seen as women, including

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within lesbian communities, and trans men and non-binary trans individuals have often been invisible in the mainstream media and in cisgender queer communities.

We agreed to edit this special issue because we have been concerned with the focus on the contentious and adversarial aspects of the ascribed boundaries between “lesbian” and “trans.” The discourses around cis lesbian and trans identities and communities have been represented almost exclusively in negative terms—framed as border crossings, trespassing, battlegrounds, and conquests. While such hostility is clearly prevalent, such as in the use of charged language like “interlopers” (for trans women) and “traitors” (for trans men) in some cis lesbian forums, discussions cannot be limited to these areas of conflict.

These “border wars,” as Judith Halberstam (1998) called them, first erupted within lesbian communities in the 1960s and 1970s over butch and femme identities, which some other lesbians saw as conforming to gender norms and imitating traditional heterosexual relationships. The policing of gender identity and expression became even more intense in a number of lesbian communities when opponents called attention to the presence of out trans women in predominantly cis lesbian spaces and sought to have them expelled. At the same time, some lesbians also began to decry the number of butches who were transitioning to trans men.

In compiling this journal issue, we sought to complicate the interactions between cis lesbians and trans people, highlight recent cross-group collaborations, and give voice to trans lesbians, who have often been caught between these communities, especially if they are butch or have cis lesbian partners. For us, as a non-binary trans person (Genny) and a trans-supportive cis lesbian (Mickey) who write, teach, and provide support to LGBTQ students, these issues are highly personal and central to our professional work, as well as inform our collaborations with each other. We began working together in the early 1990s, when we were both at the University of Iowa, Mickey as a Nursing professor and Genny as an African American Studies/American Studies graduate student. We were part of the planning committee for a national queer studies conference that was held at the university, in which there were vociferous debates about whether to include the “T” in the conference title. We were able to get “bisexual” included, but were outvoted on adding “transgender” (others felt that “trans people could have their own conference”). However, we encouraged trans peoples to attend and present, and trans historian Susan Stryker (2008) credits the conference with being where many U.S. trans scholars met for the first time. In addition, we edited an anthology of selected conference papers, *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology* (1996), which, as the title reflects, was more trans inclusive than the conference itself. Also in 1996, we worked together to have the University of Iowa add “gender identity” to its nondiscrimination statement. We did not know it at the time, but it was the first college in the country to have a trans-inclusive nondiscrimination policy, and probably the first college to have *any* formal trans-inclusive policy. Since then, we have moved to different coasts, but continue to be involved in efforts to further trans inclusion in both queer communities and the larger society.

## Boundary conflicts

Two of the major areas of conflict between cis and trans women in recent years have involved the borders of the concept of “woman” in relation to the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (often referred to as MichFest) and the admission of trans women to women’s colleges. When we began soliciting articles for this journal issue in the summer of 2014, both conflicts seemed intractable, with trans women unlikely to be admitted to either in the foreseeable future. We did not anticipate the tremendous changes that would happen in both instances.

In April 2015, Lisa Vogel, producer of MichFest, announced that that year’s festival—its 40th anniversary—would be its last. While Vogel did not provide a specific reason for ending MichFest, she did acknowledge “that there have been struggles,” which would undoubtedly include the contentious debate over the admittance of trans women. Their exclusion has led some performers to decline to play at the festival, and is seemingly a factor in declining attendance in recent years, along with changing times and the aging of attendees (Ring, 2015). At least one trans leader directly links Vogel’s decision to end the festival to her refusal to consider allowing trans women to attend openly. Cristan Williams, editor of the online site *TransAdvocate*, argues that Vogel would “rather kill Michfest than meet with trans folk and talk about it [inclusion] (something she’s never done)” (Ennis, 2015).

The organizers had long sought to limit the festival to “womyn-born womyn,” but as the article in this issue by Elizabeth A. McConnell, Charlynn A. Odahl-Ruan, Christine Kozlowski, Mona Shattell, and Nathan R. Todd demonstrates, the views among attendees were more varied and nuanced than might have been expected, given that the most trans-supportive cis women were unlikely to participate in the festival. While some participants expressed ambivalent attitudes, there were some clear divisions among the mostly lesbian festival goers. Supporters of trans inclusion believed that feminism addresses all oppression, sought to move past the gender binary, thought the festival should change with the times, and wanted to share the benefits of the festival with trans women and with younger cis women who boycotted the festival because of its position on trans women. By comparison, those who espoused support for limiting the festival to “womyn born womyn” argued that cis and trans women have different experiences and therefore need separate spaces, believed that including trans women would threaten the physical and emotional safety of cis women, considered trans women to possess “male energy” and to retain male privilege, and feared that opening the festival to trans women would ultimately lead to cis men attending. Although the festival has ended, these different attitudes among cis lesbians remain and will continue to inform relationships between cis and trans lesbians.

While the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival represents a site of resistance to trans inclusion, women’s colleges are increasingly changing their admissions policies to admit trans women, beginning with Mills and Mount Holyoke Colleges in

mid 2014, and today also including Simmons, Scripps, Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, Smith, and Barnard (although only Mount Holyoke admits non-binary trans students as well). In her article in this issue, Shannon Weber traces this dramatic paradigmatic shift to queer student activists, who operate from a postmodern understanding of gender, define “queer” as an all-encompassing term for sexual and gender transgression, and seek to challenge false divisions between trans and cis women. Whereas a significant number of the lesbians who attend MichFest see the exclusion of trans women as preserving a “women’s space,” many queer activists at women’s colleges argue just the opposite: that their institutions cease being “women’s colleges” if they exclude a particular group of women, and that denying admittance to trans women is transmisogynistic because it implies that they are not actually women. Weber concludes that women’s colleges can continue to be “spaces that promote female leadership and the importance of fighting back against continued gender inequality *while also* embracing the reality of the fact that there are more than two genders in the world” (emphasis in original).

MichFest and women’s colleges are not the only women’s spaces where discussions have occurred about the inclusion of trans women. Writing about the Spanish feminist movement in this issue, R. Lucas Platero and Esther Ortega-Arjonilla examine the factors that led first to trans women being included in the National Feminist Conferences and then to the movement embracing transfeminism. Platero and Ortega-Arjonilla show that feminism can be welcoming to and inclusive of trans issues and people, and that the cis lesbian—trans conflicts that have often characterized U.S. feminist and lesbian politics are not universal. Their work highlights the importance of understanding the specific political and cultural circumstances of cis and trans women.

### **Trans and lesbian**

Three of the articles in this issue address the experiences of individuals who live in the intersections of the two identities—being both trans and lesbian. Nerissa Gailey and AD Brown consider the development and articulation of trans identities and lesbian sexualities through examining published memoirs of gender transition. They focus on how the trans writers define themselves in relation to particular conceptions of a lesbian identity in order to show how these narratives contribute to discussions about being both trans and lesbian. Gailey and Brown’s work offers valuable insights into how discourses around trans lesbian sexualities, identities, and communities have changed significantly over time.

But the trans lesbian memoirists, like almost all of the trans women who achieve social visibility, are decidedly feminine in their gender expression. Hannah Rossiter explores the difficulties experienced by butch trans lesbians, who are often expected to present and act like feminine, cisgender women by other trans women, cis lesbians, and the wider society. Transmisogynistic thinking among all three groups leads to the question often raised about butch trans women: “why did you

transition if you were going to look like a man?” The existence of butch lesbians also furthers the still common belief that trans women are not truly women. The result is that trans women are placed in a double bind: if they present as traditionally feminine, they are often viewed as parodies of women, and if they do not, they are seen as not “really” women. Butch trans lesbians are especially considered to be “failures” as women. Rossiter’s article demonstrates the need to challenge the cisgenderist assumptions that are prevalent among some cis lesbians and even among some trans people and to have a broader, more inclusive understanding of trans identities and communities.

Charlotte Chucky Tate and Mercedes D. Pearson suggest one way to develop this broader understanding of trans women’s identities. They propose what they call the Inclusive Model of Female Sexuality that incorporates trans women into how lesbian identity formation is conceptualized. Compared to some previous models, their work can better capture the complexities of female sexuality, not just for trans lesbians, but also for cis women, such as women who do not readily disclose their attraction to other women. Their model also makes it easier to discern the convergences and divergences between cis and trans women in how they experience themselves as female and develop a lesbian identity.

### **Necessary bedfellows, if not bedmates**

Taken together, these articles demonstrate that “transgender” and lesbian” cannot be wholly separated, either as people or as concepts. Most obviously this is the case because there are trans lesbians, many of whom have long been involved in lesbian communities and movements, despite attempts by some cis lesbians to exclude them. At the same time, there are trans men and genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, and other non-binary trans people who at one time identified as lesbian and, in some cases, still do. They often continue to have ties to lesbian communities through social networks and political activism, even if they do not see themselves as women and therefore do not identify as lesbian.

“Transgender” and “lesbian” are also indelibly linked as concepts, because both represent challenges to gender norms, as a result of either the gender of the individuals to whom one is attracted or one’s own gender. Moreover, a significant degree of discrimination against cis lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals stems from perceived violations of gender norms, as those who would discriminate, harass, or use violence against LGB people often do not know an individual’s sexual orientation, but instead rely on gender cues. Thus the growing acceptance of trans people by the dominant society and the increasing number of trans-inclusive nondiscrimination laws also benefit cis queer people. As discussed in Weber’s article in this volume, younger cis lesbians, who are sometimes gender nonconforming themselves, typically embrace trans people and see them as allies, not only in the struggle for LGBTQ rights, but also in the fight against gender-based discrimination.

The same cannot be said for many older cis lesbians, who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, when lesbian separatism was more commonplace. Having felt largely invisible and unrecognized in LGBT communities during the emphasis on gay men and HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, they again often feel overlooked today by the growing attention to trans issues. Their sense of invisibility needs to be acknowledged, as does their fear that they are disappearing in a world where some butch lesbians are transitioning to male identities and where many younger women are identifying as queer, pansexual, sexually fluid, or another non-binary sexual identity, rather than as lesbian. But these fears should not be displaced onto trans women, who are likewise seeking to be acknowledged and included in a community.

Our hope is that this set of articles helps spark productive dialogue that leads to the further recognition of the intersections of identities and the value of different communities, as well as draws further attention to the common interests that can build a stronger movement for LGBTQ rights and liberation. We can accomplish much more in terms of social, cultural, and political change if we can find ways to work together, rather than simply toss barbs across the amorphous lines on the map of identity politics.

### Guest editors

**Genny Beemyn**, Ph.D., is the Director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and the Trans Policy Clearinghouse coordinator for Campus Pride. Their many books include *The Lives of Transgender People* (2011) and *A Queer Capital: A History of Gay Life in Washington, D.C.* (2014). They are currently working on a book entitled *Campus Queer: The Experiences and Needs of LGBTQ+ College Students* (Johns Hopkins University Press) and an anthology entitled *Outside the Gender Box: Trans and Non-Binary Gender People in Higher Education* (SUNY Press).

**Mickey Eliason**, Ph.D., is a Professor of Health Education at San Francisco State University with 30 years of experience in LGBTQ health scholarship. She recently completed one of the first health intervention studies of a holistic health program for older LBQ women funded by the federal Office on Women's Health. She has over 100 journal articles and four books on LGBTQ health.

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