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LGBTQ Movement, Trans Inclusion In/Exclusion From

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Individuals who today are referred to as trans people have been involved in the LGBTQ rights movement ever since there was a movement. Indeed, if the Stonewall Riots in 1969 are taken as the start of the modern LGBTQ rights movement, then trans people were many of its founders. For much of the 25 years following Stonewall, however, trans people were largely excluded from the movement because of a combination of political expediency and animosity from cis lesbian and gay leaders. In the late 1990s and 2000s, a new generation of queer activists, who recognized the extent and severity of anti-trans discrimination, including within the movement itself, united with trans people in the struggle against gender oppression. Since then, trans issues have become more central to the larger LGBTQ movement, but divisions remain, especially over the failure of many LGBTQ organizations to take an intersectional approach and focus on the experiences of trans people of color.

The Early LGB(T)Q Rights Movement

Because of experiencing high rates of harassment and violence, trans people, especially trans people of color, have often had to fight literally and figuratively for their lives, which has meant that they have had little choice but to be engaged in a struggle for their rights. For example, since trans people of color are more likely to be subjected to police violence than other LGBTQ people, it is not surprising that they made up a significant portion of those who participated in the Stonewall Riots, just as they had been at the center of earlier confrontations with the police, including incidents that occurred at Cooper Do-nuts in Los Angeles in 1959 and at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966. Thus, trans people did not join the movement for LGBTQ rights so much as a movement sprang up around them.

But almost immediately, the movement that they helped to create sought to exclude them for the sake of political expediency, as cis gay members believed that they could gain their rights more quickly and easily if trans people were excluded. Six months after the Stonewall Riots, a group comprised mostly of white middle-class gay men in New York City established the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) to work solely for their own rights. Trans people were not only kept off GAA's agenda but were also not welcomed in the group. Two trans women of color who were involved in the riots and subsequent trans organizing, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, were made to feel uncomfortable when they attended GAA meetings and were often the only people in drag and sometimes the only people of color there. Similar gay groups that marginalized trans people were subsequently organized in other U.S. cities.

Trans people were even pushed out of commemorations of the Stonewall Riots. On the 1-year anniversary of the riots, activists organized the Christopher Street Liberation Day March, named for the location of the Stonewall Inn. Trans people who sought to participate were reportedly told by event leaders that they should march at the back, which they refused to do. Efforts to exclude trans people from the event became more institutionalized in subsequent years. No trans people were scheduled to speak at the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day, which led Rivera to force her way onto the stage and denounce the gay liberation movement for ignoring and marginalizing her and other trans people of color. In response, event organizers gave Jean O'Leary, the founder of Lesbian Feminist Liberation, permission to read a statement that denounced drag queens as an insult to women. This, in turn, prompted Lee Brewster, a drag queen who had fought against the erasure of trans people from the Christopher Street Liberation Day, to likewise push his way onto the stage, where he reminded the crowd that the Stonewall Riots would not have occurred without drag queens, but now they were being insulted and told not to be themselves. He ended his comments by saying that he was quitting the gay liberation movement. At the same time, lesbian separatists and more conservative gay men in San Francisco who were opposed to trans people and individuals in drag being involved in that city's commemoration of the Stonewall Riots organized an alternative march in 1973 that banned their participation. In subsequent years, this event became San Francisco's main Stonewall celebration.

TERF and Turf Battles

Many lesbians left organizations like GAA in the early and mid-1970s because of the sexism of gay men, but one area of agreement between the two groups in general was their rejection of trans people. Some self-

styled radical feminists viewed trans women not as “real” women but as “male infiltrators” into the movement and sought to exclude them from “women’s spaces.” One of their first targets was Beth Elliott, an openly trans lesbian activist and singer who had been the vice president and the newsletter editor of the San Francisco chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis until being pushed out by newer, trans-hating members. These anti-trans feminists also sought to remove Elliott from the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference, which she helped organize and at which she was scheduled to perform. When she took the stage, she had some audience members attempt to shout her down, saying that she was a man. Others defended her. Although more than two thirds of attendees reportedly chose to allow her to remain in an impromptu vote, Elliott chose to leave anyway because of the tremendous harassment she had received.

The attacks against Elliott marked the start of the exclusionist policing of “women’s spaces” by some radical feminists. Another target was Sandy Stone, a sound engineer who, as part of the all-women Olivia Records, helped create the genre of women’s music in the mid-1970s. Stone had disclosed her gender identity to the record collective and had its support, but when her gender history became widely known, Olivia was deluged with hate mail from lesbians who threatened a boycott or even violence if Stone was not fired. The collective initially defended her but, fearing that they would be put out of business, reluctantly asked Stone to resign, which she did in 1979.

Arguably the most vitriolic and influential attack on trans people from the lesbian feminist movement was Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, published in 1979 and reissued in 1994. Raymond, a leading scholar in women’s studies, fomented the witch hunt against Stone and effectively made trans women pariahs in many lesbian feminist communities. At the center of Raymond’s argument was her paranoid conspiracy theory that trans women were male-identified, “artificial” women who were being used by the medical and psychological specialties that supported trans people in transitioning—the “transsexual empire” to which her title referred—to secretly infiltrate lesbian communities and undermine feminism. According to Raymond, trans women were rapists because they appropriated women’s bodies for themselves, and their mere presence in lesbian feminist spaces constituted an act of forced penetration that violated women’s lives. Beginning in 2008, Raymond and other anti-trans feminists began to be referred to as TERFs—trans exclusionary radical feminists—in order to distinguish them from the larger radical feminist movement, which had historically supported and been inclusive of trans women.

It is not only trans women whom some lesbian feminists have sought to remove; at times, they have also erased historical figures who seem to have been trans men, misrepresenting them as butch women. For example, jazz musician Billy Tipton lived as a man for more than 50 years, apparently kept the knowledge that he had been assigned female at birth even from his partners and adopted children, and died of a treatable medical condition in 1989 rather than seemingly risk disclosure of his assigned sex by being examined by a doctor. Yet some lesbian historians and writers have argued that he was a lesbian who felt compelled to pass as a man to succeed as a musician, which, besides denying how Tipton lived his life and died, ignores the fact that he continued to live as man after he had retired from performing.

Another example of trans male erasure occurred following the murder of Brandon Teena in 1993. Even though Teena had told his lovers and friends that he was a trans man, many reports of his death referred to him as “she” and treated him as a lesbian woman. For example, writing in *The Village Voice*, lesbian journalist Donna Minkowitz described Teena as a self-hating butch lesbian whose failure to accept “her” body and sexuality contributed to “her” death. The coverage incensed many trans people and led to one of the first public protests by trans people outside of *The Voice*’s offices; Minkowitz apologized for her misgendering and victim blaming, but not until 25 years later.

For trans people, the issue was not only how some lesbian feminists policed the “border” between butch lesbians and trans men, as well as dismissed or refused to recognize anyone who went across it, but also how writers like Minkowitz saw trans men as “really” lesbians in denial. This view denies agency to trans people and negates their experiences, for it means that regardless of how someone might identify or express their gender, only the sex assigned to them at birth matters. Ironically, lesbians themselves have historically not been considered “real” by heterosexist men, who did not take their sexuality seriously. Moreover, many of the lesbian feminists who have claimed Tipton, Teena, and other female-assigned men as their own after their deaths would have likely rejected and sought to exclude them from “women’s spaces” while they were

alive.

Absent “T” ism From LGB Events

The exclusion of trans people from the LGB movement continued into the 1990s. Reflecting the persistence of anti-trans bias among some lesbian feminists, trans women were banned from the National Lesbian Conference in 1991, and a trans woman, Nancy Jean Burkholder, was expelled that same year from the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. The festival, an annual weeklong women’s outdoor music and cultural event, had been a pilgrimage for thousands of lesbians since it began in 1976. While the event had always been for “womyn only,” Burkholder’s removal was the first known exclusion of a trans woman. Afterward, festival organizers articulated a policy limiting attendance to “womyn-born womyn,” and they continued to ban trans women, despite growing opposition to this stance, until the festival ceased operations in 2015.

Like the commemorations of the Stonewall Riots in the 1970s, national marches in the 1990s were not welcoming to trans people. Despite the efforts of trans activists and some cis LGB allies, “transgender” was not included in the names of the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation and the 1994 International March on the United Nations to Affirm the Human Rights of Lesbian and Gay People—the march that was held in New York City to observe the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. The 1993 march organizers were persuaded by trans activists to add trans people to the event’s platform, which, among other demands, called for a LGBT civil rights law and legislation banning discrimination against LGBT people. But only one of the individuals invited to address the rally self-identified as trans—Phyllis Randolph Frye—and she was relegated to speak at the assembly point stage, rather than the main stage, after most participants had left to march. For many lesbian and gay leaders, trans people remained peripheral and expendable; while ostensibly part of the movement, their presence and specific struggles were ignored, especially when doing so could potentially further lesbian and gay rights and visibility.

LGB and T

Gen Q

Influenced by the work of trans activists, writers, and scholars, a younger generation of cis lesbian and gay individuals—many of whom started to refer to themselves as “queer” instead of “lesbian” or “gay”—became supportive of the rights of trans people and considered them a critical part of what increasingly became known as the LGBTQ movement. While many lesbian feminists in the 1970s and 1980s were influenced by *The Transsexual Empire*, many young queer women in the mid and late 1990s—some of whom had yet to be born when Raymond’s book was originally published—had their attitude toward trans people shaped by Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* and Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw*. Feinberg’s semiautobiographical 1993 novel tells the moving story of Jess Goldberg, an individual who journeys from being a butch lesbian in the years before the Stonewall Riots, to passing as a man in order to survive the economic recession of the 1970s, to living outside of a gender binary in the 1980s. Bornstein’s 1994 work combines memoir, performance, and commentary to offer insights into how society constructs gender. Many young queer women activists, as well as trans individuals, considered these books necessary reading, and many instructors in LGBTQ and sexuality studies assigned them in courses in the 1990s.

Some younger cis queer women also became more supportive of trans people through their involvement in drag king culture. While individuals assigned female at birth had long experimented with gender and challenged gender categories by performing in traditional men’s clothing, the specific form of performance known as drag kinging developed in the mid-1980s in London and San Francisco. Initially, many of the performers were trans men and cis lesbians, and as drag kinging became popular in cities throughout the United States, it led to more interactions between the two groups and helped de-emphasize and blur the boundaries that had been the basis of the “border war” that butch lesbians waged against trans men in the 1980s and 1990s.

LGBTQ Organizations Becoming More Trans Inclusive

By the late 1990s, the efforts of trans activists and allies had resulted in many national, state, and local organizations in the United States that had focused primarily on LGB rights to begin to address gender identity issues. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force added trans people to its mission statement in 1997 and changed its name to the National LGBTQ Task Force in 2014. PFLAG (formerly Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and GLAAD (formerly the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) added trans people to their missions in 1998 and 2013, respectively, and rather than changing their names to be trans inclusive, the groups stopped spelling out their acronyms. The largest lesbian and gay rights group, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), amended its mission statement to include trans people in 2001, although this change was not immediately reflected in its work, as it continued to focus on LGB issues.

While no non-trans-specific national LGBTQ rights organization has had a trans executive director as of 2020, many have hired trans people to senior staff positions, often with responsibilities related to outreach to or advocacy for trans communities. Long-time trans leaders in LGBTQ organizations include Shannon Minter, the legal director for the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR); Jennifer Levi, the transgender rights project director for GLBTQ Advocates and Defenders (GLAD); Beck Bailey, the director of the Workplace Equality Program for HRC; and Nick Adams, the director of Transgender Representation for GLAAD.

At the state and local levels, most of the organizations established since the mid-1990s have included trans people in their names and missions. Cases in point are the offices and centers that have been founded at U.S. and Canadian colleges and universities to support LGBTQIA+ students, staff, and faculty. Among the 26 professionally staffed offices and centers that were created before 1995, all but 2 had names indicating that their constituencies were “gay and lesbian” or “gay, lesbian, and bisexual” individuals. As of 2020, there are more than 175 such centers and offices, and all are trans inclusive in both their names and mission statements.

However, the proliferation of “LGBTQ” organizations has not always resulted in greater attention to the needs of trans people; in some cases, the “T” seems to stand for “token,” rather than “trans.” The most infamous example of trans inclusion being little more than rhetoric involved the Human Rights Campaign. In 1994, the organization helped draft, and had allies in Congress introduce, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), a bill to protect workers based on their sexual orientation. Trans leaders were incensed by the exclusion of “gender identity” and lobbied Congress and the public for it to be added—only to have HRC work to thwart their efforts. Following the failure of the bill by one vote in the Senate, HRC continued to insist on shutting out trans people when the legislation was reintroduced the next year, fearing that a more inclusive bill would lose votes. In response, trans activists and allies picketed the organization’s fundraising events, until HRC agreed not to oppose an amendment to add “gender identity” as a protected class. Neither the amendment nor the original bill was approved by Congress, and the legislation was stalled for the next decade.

In 2007, ENDA was revived by openly gay Representative Barney Frank, who, after failing to gain support for a trans-inclusive version, put forward a measure without trans protection. Despite the Human Rights Campaign’s promise that it would support only trans-inclusive legislation, the organization did not oppose Frank’s bill. HRC’s about-face showed that some within the mostly older, more conservative lesbian and gay establishment continued to see trans people as dispensable. However, more than 400 LGBTQ groups—virtually every major LGBTQ organization other than HRC—formed a coalition called United ENDA to advocate for the restoration of gender identity protection. Although the effort failed to change the bill, it represented a major turning point in support for trans rights, and the coalition succeeded in having gender identity language included in ENDA thereafter and in the subsequent Equality Act, which, if passed, would ban discrimination based on gender identity, sex, and sexual orientation in employment, public accommodations, education, housing, and credit.

LGBTQ Organizations’ Support for Trans Rights

Along with including trans people in larger nondiscrimination legislative efforts in the 2010s, LGBTQ groups

also became more involved in trans-specific advocacy and support. Particularly noteworthy has been the work done by LGBTQ legal organizations, including Lambda Legal, NCLR, and GLAD, to protect the rights of trans people, which has resulted in landmark legal victories addressing anti-trans discrimination in employment, education, housing, health care access, and prisons. For example, NCLR and GLAD led the challenge to the Trump administration's ban on trans people serving in the military, and Lambda Legal won a critical federal court case involving employment discrimination against trans people that helped set the stage for the U.S. Supreme Court's far-reaching decision in 2020 that "sex discrimination" in federal employment law includes discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

National LGBTQ organizations have also become involved in publicizing the Transgender Day of Remembrance, including calling attention to the fact that the vast majority of trans people killed annually are trans women of color. However, these groups have come under criticism for not addressing the intersectional issues faced by trans women of color, who not only experience high rates of violence but are also more likely than other trans and cis LGB people to be subjected to harassment and discrimination, live in poverty, experience homelessness, and struggle with addiction. For example, LGBTQ organizations are largely not involved in efforts to establish a living minimum wage, enact universal health care, decriminalize sex work, and defund the police—all changes that would greatly benefit trans people, especially trans women of color.

Thus, while the LGBTQ movement in general no longer explicitly excludes trans people, many national LGBTQ organizations still need to do more to be truly trans inclusive. Moving forward, the movement needs to center the lives of trans people of color, which means that LGBTQ groups must hire more trans people of color to senior staff positions, support and work more closely with trans organizations, and operate from an intersectional perspective that considers the combined effects of racism, sexism, and genderism. Ultimately, the movement can only be considered successful if it uplifts and liberates all LGBTQ+ people.

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See also [History](#); [Lambda Legal](#); [National Center for Lesbian Rights](#); [Stonewall Riots](#); [Teena, Brandon; TERFs](#); [Tipton, Billy](#); [Trans Men](#); [Women's Movement, Trans Inclusion In/Exclusion From](#)

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