



## Seeking Refuge Under the Umbrella: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Organizing Within the Category *Transgender*

Megan Davidson

**Abstract:** The category *transgender* has no singular, fixed meaning. Rather, it is inclusive of identities and experiences of sex and gender variance, changing, and blending. Although no consensus exists about exactly whom this category includes, nearly all definitions share the use of a metaphorical umbrella, which activists agree is a useful tool for political organizing outside current understandings of binary sex and gender divisions. This article details activists' definitions of *transgender* and the identities covered by this umbrella to inform an analysis of how different understandings of *transgender* frame activists' efforts for social change. From transsexual separatists, intersex activists, and genderqueer youth to transgender activists, gender rights advocates, and others organizing within the category *transgender*, the author ethnographically evidences the political implications of inclusion and exclusion in terms of assimilation, social privilege, activist strategies, rights claims and policy changes, and the visions of social change forwarded by trans activists.

**Key words:** activism; contentious politics; genderqueer; intersex; social change; social movement; transsexual

The term *transgender* has no singular, fixed meaning but is instead currently conceptualized by both scholars and activists as inclusive of the identities and experiences of some (or perhaps all) gender-variant, gender- or sex-changing, gender-blending, and gender-bending people. Zachary Nataf (1996), for example, asserted that "transgender says sex and gender ambiguity exists, that all identity is not coherent, that gender identity does not necessarily correspond to the genitals you have, [and] that gender identity and sexuality are constantly fluid and in process" (p. 19). Although the term *transgender* can be traced back to Prince's (1997; also see Ekins & King, 2006) notion of *transgenderists*—heterosexual men living full time as

women without surgical or hormonal treatment—this definition has little in common with contemporary uses of the term *transgender*.<sup>1</sup> Authors such as Kate Bornstein (1998) have suggested that the category *transgender* is inclusive of all people actively transgressing and transcending the gender binary (see also More, 1999). More common is the conceptualization of transgender as an umbrella that encompasses a wide range of people who play with, disrupt, or blend Euro-American cultural beliefs about binary sex and gender. Susan Stryker (1998), for example, defined *transgender* in the following way:

I use transgender not to refer to one particular identity or way of being embodied but rather as an umbrella term for a wide variety of bodily effects that disrupt or denaturalize heteronormatively constructed linkages between an individual's anatomy at birth, a non-consensually assigned gender

<sup>1</sup> For more on the contemporary emergence of the collective umbrella category *transgender*, see Valentine (2002, 2007).

Address correspondence concerning this article to Megan Davidson, Department of Anthropology, Binghamton University/SUNY, 213 Taaffe Place, #306, Brooklyn, NY 11205. E-mail: [megandavidson@earthlink.net](mailto:megandavidson@earthlink.net)

category, psychical identifications with sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance of specifically gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions. (p. 149)

In various definitions of *transgender*, the category is said to include transsexual people (of all operative statuses), cross-dressers, drag kings and queens, genderqueer people, gay men and lesbians who queer gender lines (such as butch lesbians), the partners of trans people, and any number of other people who transgress binary sex and gender in all sorts of named and yet unnamed ways. Although the lists of people included in the category *transgender* vary, with some lists being quite short and others offering a myriad of ways of identifying, nearly all understandings of the category share a use of the metaphor of the umbrella.

This notion of the *transgender umbrella* can be found seemingly everywhere: in nearly every published definition of the term *transgender*, on hundreds of websites and in activist pamphlets, in trainings and talks given by activists and scholars, and in my interviews with more than 100 activists. As one activist stated, "There is consensus about the umbrella model" but, she continued, "there is no consensus about what that means in practice." The range of people able to seek shelter under this metaphorical umbrella varies according to each author, activist, and organization. This capacity of the term to encompass an unfixated group of people, both historically and currently, makes the category *transgender* useful for activists organizing people and ideas that fall outside the scope of contemporary normative cultural productions of binary sex and gender.

An organizing tool that emerged in the 1990s, the category *transgender* has been and continues to be used by activists in their efforts to create social, political, legal, and policy change throughout the United States and, as such, its analysis is essential for understanding this social movement and its aims. My interest here is not so much in how this category is (re)produced, (re)defined, and (re)negotiated as an identity (or collective framework for many identities) but, rather, how various notions of what counts as transgender frame the efforts of activists working for policy reform and social changes within the category *transgender*. Different constructions of the category *transgender*, and who it includes and excludes, are not simply negotiations of a collective identity but, more significantly, negotiations about the boundaries of a social movement and that movement's efforts to effect social change in the United States.

In analyzing what is at stake in various constructions of the category *transgender*, I begin by briefly

summarizing my own research, from which this material is drawn, then document activists' definitions and explanations for the terms *trans* and *transgender*, as well as the different identities they claimed are covered by this umbrella, and ethnographically evidence the political implications of who is included (or excluded) from this category in terms of organizing strategies, rights claims and policy changes, and the visions of social change trans activists are forwarding. From transsexual separatists and intersex activists to gender rights advocates and genderqueer youth, as well as others organizing inside (and outside) the category *transgender*, this article documents my analysis of the impact of differing visions of the umbrella, including the rips in its fabric and the contentious politics within its shadow. I suggest that the specific policy goals and broader visions of social change forwarded by trans activists are conceptualized in and through differing visions of the category *transgender*, although these differing visions are often elided in public consciousness by the category *transgender* itself and the notion of a unified umbrella implied within it.

### Studying Trans Activism in the United States

In 2004–2005, I conducted participant-observation research with a growing trans movement within the United States, chronicling this movement, investigating how the movement is imagined by movement participants, and analyzing the social changes trans activists seek to make. To that end, I attended organizational meetings, protests, lectures, hearings, conferences, and other public events throughout the United States; joined e-mail lists, organizational mailing lists, and Internet-based discussion forums; attended parties, fund-raisers, film festivals, and performances; volunteered for activist organizations in New York City; and interviewed 101 people who identified themselves (and were identified by others) as trans activists.

Following Weston (1997), I contacted most activists through *friendship pyramiding*, asking each at each interview for other potential participants. Although this methodological strategy helped provide access to a larger and more diverse group of activists, I also followed Weston's use of "theoretic sampling" (p. 11), deliberately seeking activists of color and activists with working-class backgrounds, differing gender identities, and different ages. I decided to conduct semistructured interviews, a decision based in part on Blee and Taylor's (2002) assertion that such interviews, in addition to being an excellent way to gain access to "people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words" (p. 93), are also very useful for studying social movements (such as the transgender

movement) that have “unclear or changing memberships” (p. 94). The interviews involved asking activists open-ended questions (Mishler, 1986) about their history, their personal identity, their concept of transgender, the goals of their activism, and their vision of social change.

Of the 101 interviews I conducted, 90 people identified as trans in some way and the other 11 identified as allies. The 11 allies varied in their identification with the movement. Nine of these nontrans activists identified as partners, friends, and allies who were actively involved in trans cultural activism through activist, advocacy, and service organizations or, in one case, an appointed governmental position. The other 2 non-trans-identified activists I interviewed were leaders of national intersex activist organizations who agreed to interviews not as trans activists but to help articulate the difference between trans and intersex activism, a point to which I will return later. The activists I interviewed ranged in age from 17 to their mid-70s and lived all over the United States (although the vast majority were clustered on the coasts), and more than 35% identified as people of color. The gender identities of the activists I interviewed varied widely, with no significant difference between the number of people born male- or female-bodied and about equal numbers identifying as masculine or feminine (more than one quarter identified as neither or both).

Gupta and Ferguson (1997) wrote that what once seemed a logical impossibility, “ethnography without ethnos” (p. 2), now characterizes much contemporary anthropological fieldwork that “cannot be contained within the stereotypical ‘among the so-and-so’ mold” (p. 2). My research with trans activists exemplifies ethnography without ethnos in that there was no “among the so-and-so” and no going there, but rather spatially dispersed people crosscut by differences including ethnicity and race, class, religion, age, background, gender identity, and sexuality, among others, and brought together, perhaps only, by a shared desire to organize for social change within the category *transgender*. Edelman (2001) characterized social movements as “notoriously ephemeral and factionalized” (pp. 310–311). There is no easy claim to boundedness or coherence in an ephemeral and factionalized field, which, as Weston (1997) noted in reference to gay men and lesbians, lacks even a “consensus as to the criteria for membership” (p. 9).

Given this background, my research and subsequent analysis drew largely on the areas of contention, conflict, negotiation, and compromise within the transgender movement. Both scholars and activists often presented social movements as more unified and cohesive than they actually are (Edelman, 2001), failing to recognize what is at stake in the areas of contention

within a movement. According to Burdick (1998), ethnography that strives to represent the movement can help activists refine debates and self-critiques, bridge ideological differences within the movement, and reach out to “people in targeted constituencies who continue to remain indifferent” (p. 182; also see 1995). A central objective of my research project was to create ethnographic knowledge that would be of use not only to anthropologists and those interested in social movements but also, more important, for transgender activists themselves. Thus, in what follows, I detail conflicts and areas of negotiation within the trans movement and argue that the contentious politics of inclusion and exclusion within this movement are central to understanding the trans movement’s potential to create policy reform and broader social change in the United States.

### Self-Identities Under the Umbrella: Changing Terms and Contexts

In each of the 101 aforementioned interviews, I asked activists to talk about the words they preferred for describing themselves and how they defined those words. For trans activists, the category *transgender* was not only a political umbrella holding a social movement together—although many expressed this view—but also a part of how they identified themselves. Thus, before detailing the more contentious areas of inclusion and exclusion within this category, I present some of the ways in which activists identified themselves and their places under a transgender umbrella. For many, how they framed their own identity and embodiment in relation to this category was intimately tied to how they conceptualized the term *transgender* and, therefore, how they perceived this social movement and the gains for which it should fight.

In nearly every interview, activists reported that *transgender* is an umbrella term, suggesting, as I stated previously, that it is inclusive of varying lists of identities. Even though most were quite vague about their definitions of the category *transgender*—either saying only that it is an umbrella term or citing a published definition (such as that of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission)—activists were able to very quickly name the terms that they most closely identify with and offer one- or two-sentence responses about their self-identities. Examples of these brief responses include such comments as:

I am transgender—that is the umbrella term....  
Obviously, I am MTF.

I am a transgender lesbian woman.

I’m a preoperative transsexual, and that is self-explanatory.

I'm an African American transgender man.

Well, initially I identified as a cross-dresser and now I identify as a transsexual.

I identify as trans, as FTM, as a transman.

I typically either just refer to myself as transgender or as a tranny girl.

I am a female-to-male transsexual. Is that what you want?

Two activists became frustrated with this question, stating: "Oh, I don't know what the hell it means really" and "Oh, Christ. I identify myself as a transsexual woman. What does that mean to me? I don't know. Honestly."

Many activists stated that they did not feel strongly about the exact terms used to describe their identity and listed several options:

I don't get too hung up on terms at this point. I feel pretty comfortable identifying as FTM, trans man, trans guy, transgender, or man. I mean, I think any of those for me are fine.

I identify as a transgender woman and also as a transsexual woman and also as a genderqueer woman and also as a gender-fluid woman. I have many identities. I am very fluid about how I express my gender.

I identify as a lot of things—as transgender, as butch, as queer, as a dyke, as third gendered. I do not identify as genderqueer. I identify as mixed heritage and mixed gendered.

Activists, such as those quoted above, who suggested that they were comfortable with a variety of identity terms often suggested that the terms they used varied a great deal depending on the context in which they were being asked to identify. One activist, for example, explained that with other trans people, he would say he was "on the FTM spectrum" but when talking with nontrans people, he would just say that he was FTM, although he stated that he does not actually "identify as male—it is something short of male, a gray area." Another activist made a distinction between the identification he used with people close to him and the public identity he claimed as an activist. He stated:

My current personal identification with the people who are close to me is a butch genderqueer boy who is poly-pansexual. For the outside world, for talking to mainstream people, I am an FTM. I joke and call myself a strategic FTM. I am on the FTM spectrum and I have recently decided that I can say FTM because I am not saying female-to-male, I am

saying female-to-masculine because I don't identify as a male or a man but I am definitely masculine. I am FTX as well—female to something...I might be a preoperative transsexual FTM, and in the paper I have been classified as that, but in my activist life and in my community I am genderqueer.

The distinction between people's private sense of identity and the more public identity they claimed as activists came up in about one quarter of the interviews. For example, an activist running a recently formed national transgender organization cited her public work as a limiting factor in her self-identification: She stated that although she is "technically a transsexual," she does not use this term. She reported that she identifies herself only as transgender or trans because she does not want people to think that she cares more about transsexual people than others or that the organization she runs is a transsexual organization. When I asked her what the terms *transgender* and *trans* meant to her and how she defined them, she told me that she, and the organizations she runs, do not define these terms but serve anyone who wants to self-identify as trans or transgender, however they define it. Avoiding the term *transsexual* to refer to herself and leaving the definitions of trans and transgender open are in part a response to what she labeled "a transsexual separatist movement." Although no formal transsexual separatist movement exists, this activist was referencing the political desires of some transsexuals to organize for their rights outside of a transgender umbrella—a contentious debate over inclusion and exclusion that I discuss in the following section.

### A Rip in the Umbrella: Transsexual Separatists, Intersex Activism, and Gender Rights

Paisley Currah (2003; also see 2006) has explained that trans and nontrans people are the same except that trans people are less likely to have their public presentation of their gender recognized and respected. In my own work, I abandoned the lengthy lists of identities said to seek shelter under the same metaphorical umbrella in favor of this explanation about recognition of and respect for gender identity. Framing the category *transgender* in this way, much as Stryker (1998) did, as a broad coalition of people who have nonnormative gender identities and expressions and who identify themselves in vastly different ways, appears to be a useful way to organize this social movement—one agreed upon, in theory, by many trans activists. In practice, however, these agreements often fall apart, with conflicts between groups of activists fighting to renegotiate who counts as transgender and, therefore, who can benefit from trans activist efforts.

Given that transgender is intended to be an umbrella category that includes all sex- and gender-variant people, these conflicts evidence a “rip in the umbrella term” (Howe, 2001, p. 36).

In discussing how different activists conceptualized the category *transgender*, I evidence the political implications of who is included (or excluded) for organizing, for making rights claims, and for transgender activists’ visions of social change. First, I analyze the contentious politics of inclusion and exclusion via the example of transsexual separatism and the internal contestations over the category *transgender* offered by transsexual activists who object to this term and to organizing within it. Second, I examine tensions and debates raised by the inclusion of people with intersex conditions underneath a transgender umbrella and within trans organizing efforts and the desires of (at least some) intersex activists to be excluded from this category. I conclude by outlining the challenges that a growing contingent of genderqueer youth face within the movement and pose to it, as well as the related conflict that exploded in 2000 with the organization GenderPAC (Public Advocacy Coalition) and the distinction between organizing for transgender rights and fighting for gender rights.

### Transsexual Separatists: Contestations Over Inclusion

Although none of the activists I interviewed called themselves transsexual separatists, several were critical of the term *transgender* and how it brings together different identities under one political and social umbrella. As I stated previously, Currah argued (2003) that trans and nontrans people differ only in the extent to which others acknowledge and affirm their gender identities. For trans people, this difficulty has involved negotiating not only the attitudes of psychomedical professionals who have constrained and contained the possibilities for transgender identifications and embodiments but also the U.S. American beliefs about binary sex, gender, and sexuality that have informed the discourses and technologies of such professionals.

Transsexual activists voicing objections to organizing within the category *transgender* are reacting both to transgender theory as a critique of sex and gender ideologies and, relatedly, to transgender as a site of identity mobilization. Trans authors and activists (see, for example, Bornstein, 1994; Feinberg, 1998; and Wilchins, 1997, among others) have been rejecting the sex and gender binary and the coherence of sex, gender, and genitals. Some transsexual people experience these rejections as disabling access to medical treatment and legal status,

precisely because these theorizations contradict the discursive and institutional structuring of transsexual identities by psychomedical professionals. Trans people desiring surgeries were, and are, required to participate in and nominally subscribe to medical discourses of disorder and pathology that prescribe the behaviors and beliefs necessary for those who wish to receive hormones and surgeries.<sup>2</sup> The growth of transgender theory and activism has fostered critiques of genital reconstruction surgeries and the pathologized categories of *gender identity disorder* and *gender dysphoria* used to describe and diagnose people with nonnormatively sexed bodies and gender identities.

Some transgender activists have called for a removal of gender identity disorder and gender dysphoria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (1994) and other psychiatric and medical diagnostics manuals. These activists assert that transsexuality is not a disease or pathology; they have called their condition gender euphoria instead of gender dysphoria. Additionally, many transgender activists and authors have been critical of the notion that surgeries are necessary for sex and gender changing.<sup>3</sup> They have argued that moving away from surgically defined identities is important for

2 The Standards for Care, used for diagnosing gender identity disorder and determining access to hormonal and surgical treatments, can be viewed at the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association website (<http://www.hbigda.org/>). This organization is named after the grandfather of transsexual care, Harry Benjamin (see Benjamin, 1966).

3 The 1993 International Bill of Gender Rights (IBGR) of the International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy—organized by Phyllis Frye, a transgender lawyer and longtime activist—exemplifies activists’ call for moving away from diagnosis and surgery as the only way to mark sex and gender changing. Grounded in “individual liberty and free expression,” the bill comprises “fundamental human and civil rights from a gender perspective” and was intended to be “a transformative and revolutionary document” with basic rights that “can be claimed and exercised by all human beings” (reprinted in Feinberg, 1996, pp. 171–175). The rights included in the IBGR are as follows: the rights to define gender identity, to freely express gender identity, and to secure and retain employment and receive just compensation; the right of access to gendered spaces and participation in gendered activity; the rights to control and change one’s own body, to receive competent medical and professional care, to enjoy freedom from psychiatric diagnosis or treatment, and to express oneself sexually; the right to form committed, loving relationships and enter into marital contracts; and the right to conceive, bear, or adopt children, as well as the right to nurture and have custody of children and to exercise parental capacity. Most controversial of these rights was that of freedom from psychiatric diagnosis or treatment.

undermining the sex and gender binaries and cultural control of gender variants. The creation of a nonoperative category of transsexuals, for example, was part of an effort to depathologize trans bodies and to make surgical alterations an option, not a requirement, for a transsexual identity.

Yet, for trans people who desire sex-reassignment surgery so they can feel comfortable in their bodies, this drive to remove diagnostic categories conflicts with their own goals and self-understandings. Transsexual people seeking hormonal and surgical alterations to their bodies are often limited by discursive and institutional frameworks that require them to participate in and subscribe to medical discourses of disease and disorder. To the extent that current cultural understandings of binary sex and gender and a coherence of sex, gender, and genitals centrally animate medical discourses about transsexuality and gender dysphoria, transsexual people seeking medical treatment and their advocates are limited in their contestations of these hegemonic assumptions. To gain access to technologies of body modifications legally, trans people must seek the counsel of therapists and medical doctors who can approve or deny such access. Additionally, in order to get insurance or state funding for a surgery, it must be ratified as medically necessary. Without psychomedical definitions of gender dysphoria and gender identity disorder, many transsexual people face arguably insurmountable difficulty in obtaining already restricted access to hormone therapy and surgeries. Therefore, these definitions of disorder are perhaps still strategically necessary: These medical models and psychiatric diagnoses have helped many appeals in the courts gain success (e.g., giving prisoners access to hormones, allowing sex-reassignment surgeries as a medical expense in tax deductions, and affirming the adoptions and marriages of trans people).

Psychomedical definitions of gender dysphoria and gender identity disorder have also served as a site for rights mobilization among some transsexual activists. Calling on medical diagnosis and treatment protocols, some activists have attempted to make rights claims based on a disability law model that would offer equal rights protections and reasonable accommodation laws. Rather than relying on civil rights or identity-based claims to equal rights, these activists have sought to employ a medical model as authority for claims to local and federal protections.

The brief existence of the National Intersex and Transsexual Civil Rights Association (NITCRA) nicely exemplifies this type of medically based appeal for legal protections. In July 2004, an e-mail explaining that a

new Yahoo! Group had been created to serve a recently founded organization, NITCRA, was sent out via a national electronic mailing list for transgender people. I followed the link and joined the group. Over the course of several days, hundreds of messages flooded this electronic mailing list, including a description of this new group and its mission. The organization was intended, according to the founder, to facilitate mobilization based on the claim that transsexual and intersex people are natural allies who could secure their civil rights together based on their shared medical legitimacy. The woman who created the organization wrote that it was not a separatist group. Although the founder of NITCRA did not want to be seen as separatist, she wrote in her e-mailed mission statement that the goal of the organization was to “finally get past the roadblocks transgender-oriented groups set up to silence us.” In another message, she wrote that the key to winning would be

presenting it as discrimination against folks with a legit medical condition with a fixed and recognized set of standards of care. In other words, presenting it as simple fairness for intersexuals and transsexuals on the basis of the conditions being prenatal.

Early responses to her call for a new organization included such comments as, “We are at a place in time when we cannot waste our resources. Things need to be focused tightly for maximum returns. Side issues must be shelved for the present time.” The side issues referenced in this quote include the rights of nonnormatively sexed and gendered people who are neither transsexual nor intersex. Another responder wrote that she remained “convinced that only with a strong TS-only [transsexual] group can we proceed to ally ourselves with others. In a TG [transgender] umbrella, we are overcome by numbers.” She continued: “Ideally, we become strong enough on our own, dealing with our own unique issues, before seeking allies and watch carefully any terms of a ‘treaty.’”

In addition to the utility of lobbying for rights based on a medical model, an approach identified by some transsexual activists who wanted to organize outside of a transgender umbrella, others pushed for exclusion from the category *transgender* because they felt this form of collective organizing failed to recognize the specifics of their experiences. They have asserted that an inclusive umbrella is disempowering. The first reason for this rejection is the history of the term *transgender* as tied to Prince’s (1997) notion of transgenderists as heterosexual males who cross-dressed full time without surgeries. Although not the current meaning of this term, it was applied in homophobic

and anti-transsexual ways in an effort by full-time cross-dressers to gain respectability through denouncing others. For example, Prince called transsexual surgeries a tragic mistake and stated that people “toying with the idea of surgery...should forget about it” (in Meyerowitz, 2002, p. 181).

Second, other reasons for rejecting inclusion in the category *transgender* include the critiques of binary sex and gender offered by trans theorists and authors and the belief that these critiques deny transsexuals’ experiences of transformation and movement from one side of the sex and gender binary to the other. Although the concept of transgender does not by definition reject the notion that people can change their sex, much transgender theorizing has attempted to destabilize the notion of switching sex or gender within a binary system, calling for greater fluidity, multiplicity, ambiguity, and a queering of the boundaries between male-female and masculine-feminine. For example, Feinberg (1998) asserted, “The human anatomical spectrum can’t be understood, let alone appreciated, as long as female or male are considered to be all that exists” (p. 7). Interrogating the ideology of binary sex and gender, many transgender authors and activists have articulated frameworks for both thinking and living outside of this Western model. One such offering is Steven Whittle’s (1996) suggestion that transgender creates what he calls gender fuck, “a full-frontal theoretical and practical attack on the dimorphism of gender- and sex-roles” (p. 202). These critiques of binary sex and gender have been read as disempowering by some transsexuals who believe that such critiques deny their experiences.

One vocal critic of the category *transgender* and transsexual inclusion within it, male-to-female transsexual Margaret Deirdre O’Hartigan, has objected to the term *transgender* as another label—equivalent to other labels, such as *freak*—that others would, as she said, “pin upon our bodies” (in Califia, 1997, p. 261). O’Hartigan argued,

Every application of the term *transgender* to me is an attempt to mask what I’ve done and as such coopts my life, denies my experience, violates my very soul. I changed my sex....I took cold steel to myself and proved that anatomy is not destiny. (in Califia, 1997, p. 261)

Thus, for O’Hartigan, and others, genital surgeries that resex the body and maintain a coherence of sex, gender, and genitals mark a movement from one side of the sex and gender binary to the other (see Bolin, 1988). Transgender theorizing outside of binary sex-gender and attempts to undermine the coherence of binary sex, gender, and genitals, and sexualities can be seen as

disempowering in that such assertions deny the grounds for transformation.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, one activist argued that she thought the term *transgender* was brilliant when she first heard it, calling it “a concept that finally brings us together instead of separating us” and stating that she believed the term *transgender* had made a growing political and social movement possible. Yet she was also very angry about the movement’s direction and her place within the movement. Stating that she thought transgender would be “a finite thing,” she was troubled by what she described as “nonchemistry, non-surgery people seizing the revolution and grabbing it as their own, in some ways pushing the transsexual people out of it, which is unusual and makes me less willing to fight.” She stated that the definition of transgender was shifting in ways that did not resonate with her own experiences, explaining: “Now a trans identity is between the ears. No longer is it about my breasts, my genitals, the size of my ass.” She argued that this shift meant that the “definition has exploded” and that it negated her belief in “this as a process, a process of transition—of starting here and ending here.” For her, this shift away from specific notions of transition to mark a trans identity and toward an explosion of self-identifications underneath the umbrella was slowing the processes of social change “tremendously” because “nontrans society barely understands transsexuals, much less a girl in a tie with a crew cut who now feels male and yet is not willing to manifest it other than [with] a tie and a crew cut.”

4 Responding to these types of critiques, Leslie Feinberg (1998) stated:

I have heard the argument that transgender people oppress transsexual people because we are trying to tear down the categories of male and female. But isn’t this the same reactionary argument used against transmen and transwomen by those who argue that any challenge to assigned birth sex threaten the categories of man and woman? (p. 58)

Feinberg argued that the aim of transgender is not to dismantle “the categories of man and woman,” but to open “the world of possibilities in addition” (p. 58). This characterization of transgender resonates with those of other authors and activists who have called for questioning binary sex-gender. Kate Bornstein (1994), for example, wrote: “Some people think I want a world without gender” (p. 58), but what she called for was greater fluidity in gender expression, an acknowledgment of the performative nature of all gender expression (trans and nontrans), and room to play with gender. For trans activists, then, the goal is not to critique existing sex and gender categories per se, nor to abandon the concept of gender. Rather, a primary goal of trans activism in the United States is to rework understandings of sexed bodies, gender identities, and sexuality such that there is space in the U.S. social imaginary for identities and embodiments not limited by a binary sex-gender system and the presumed coherence of sex, gender, and genitals.

For this activist, people who have made “the ultimate transition,” not “the new people who are very ambiguous,” are the most in need of services. Although she acknowledged that “the new trans people” say that “they will be covered when we are covered,” she felt that the change would be slow. She stated that “ambiguous people” had “seized our revolution” and were slowing down the processes of change for the people who have very clear gender identities and are the “most distressed.” Although this activist stated that she was not a transsexual separatist, she was deeply offended by what she continued to refer to as “these new people” and what she saw as a takeover of the term *transgender* and the meanings it had for her.

The transsexual activists who were angered by efforts to organize within the category *transgender* felt that such efforts redirected their attempts at political and social change toward a less inclusive agenda. Calling for transsexual organizations that would lobby only for the rights of those who meet the diagnostic criteria and have access to the medical technologies of sex changing, these activists actively sought to undermine an inclusive agenda for all sex- and gender-variant people. Differing visions of the goals and methods for this movement are framed in part through beliefs about who should benefit from the movement. Trans activists need to be attentive to the significant site of contention created by separatist politics and cross-purpose organizing emerging within the category *transgender*. Although held by only a very small minority among trans activists, the contentious politics of inclusion and exclusion expressed by activists who rejected the unity of the category *transgender* remain significant for assessing what is at stake for trans activism and the trans movement.

### Defining the Boundaries: Intersex Activism and the Trans Movement

Further debate about the meaning of the term *transgender* and the politics of inclusion and exclusion from this category is also occurring among intersex activists who similarly argue for exclusion from the transgender umbrella, although for different reasons. With the category of *transgender* often defined as inclusive of all people who transgress current conceptualizations of binary sex and gender in the United States, this umbrella is frequently said to include people with intersex conditions. Many organizations have begun to expand their acronyms and mission statements to be inclusive of people with intersex conditions by calling themselves LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) and stating that they are advocating for intersex rights within a queer social

movement. Yet, although many intersex activists view these efforts at inclusion as well-intentioned, the paralleling of intersex and trans experiences is subject to controversy.

The example of NITCRA, besides illuminating issues of transsexual separatism, also nicely highlights contestations over intersex inclusion. The organization was intended, according to the founder, to facilitate mobilization based on the claim that transsexual and intersex people are natural allies who could secure their civil rights together based on their shared medical legitimacy. Yet, the organization’s electronic mailing list consisted entirely of self-identified transsexual activists (and a few transgender activists arguing against these efforts) who were constructing a shared medical legitimacy with intersex people without any input from the people for (and with) whom they claimed to be organizing. This so-called inclusion of intersex people exemplifies some of the troubling trends identified by intersex activists, who cited inclusion without input and the use of intersex conditions to create a natural or medical legitimacy for transsexual rights.

Interested in these critiques of inclusion and this site of internal contestation, I interviewed the executive directors of two national intersex advocacy organizations, both of whom agreed to be interviewed after I reassured them that their interviews would be used to explain why intersex activism was not part of a trans movement. Both expressed deep concerns about the collapsing and conflation of transgender and intersex. They did not want to include intersex under a trans umbrella and they were troubled by the institutional efforts of organizations to be more inclusive by adding intersex people to their missions. These activists acknowledged the good intentions behind this gesture of inclusion, but they also were critical of these moves and stated that they preferred not to be brought into the acronym (and the movement[s]) in this way.

Furthermore, both activists were concerned about the conflation of intersex conditions with transsexuality, what they considered a very troubling trend. I experienced an example of this type of conflation at Fantasia Fair, when Dr. Milton Diamond (2004) told the audience that he believed transsexuality is a form of intersexuality, a position one activist labeled the conflation issue. My interest here is not in debating the medical truth of this claim, but rather in discussing the appeal of this conflation for trans people and the controversy over it among intersex activists. In my interviews with them, several transgender activists discussed the relationship between intersex and trans. For example, one activist, who identified with the term *bigendered*, explained:



Just like when we deal in sexual preference we have homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual; just like some people have male sex, some have female sex, and some are intersex; some people have a male gender identity and some have a female gender identity and some people are bigendered. I think that some people are intergendered in their brains just like some people are intersexed in their bodies. Bigendered people like to move back and forth, we like to shift in different contexts. We are not driven so clearly like others to have just a male or female gender identity. I think that there is a gender identity that is intersex—we are born this way.

Similar to this claim of being born that way, another activist stated that when he first heard about theories like Diamond's (2004), he felt relieved because they explained his own experiences so well. He told me,

Part of what the deal is with trans people is that there is a, I want to say the right biological term, but I guess it is sort of a registering of the chromosomes that we cannot perceive our birth sex. I heard it one time and I latched on to it because that is what I have always felt.

As he explained to me why this theory appealed to him so much, I could see the comfort he felt in the coherence of having always been biologically “not a girl,” as he called it.

This theory holds tremendous appeal for many trans people—and not just because of the comfort of constructing a more coherent sense of self. If, as some argue, transsexuality is a type of intersex condition, then it becomes primarily a medical condition that can be explained by biology rather than psychology. If defined as a medical condition, transsexuality could be considered a biological fact, something people are born with rather than something they choose. As one transgender activist explained to me: “Scientists are proving more and more that transgender people are made in the womb, it is not a choice.... If it is not a choice, then people cannot discriminate against you.” The existence of discrimination based on other natal differences, such as skin color or ability, suggests that this claim is not necessarily true, but its appeal remains—discrimination against inborn or uncontrollable traits is wrong and thus equal rights and protection under the law should be granted.

Meyerowitz's (2002) historical analysis of transsexuals' appeals to a biological approach highlights that the terms *intersex* (or *hermaphrodite*) and *transsexual* have a long history and that this conflict is only the most recent negotiation over definitions and distinction, inclusion and exclusion. She evidenced earlier examples of trans people attempting to seek access to restricted medical

services through appeals to an intersex identity or via claims to have been born biologically not male or not female. Christina Jorgensen's surgery, as well as the media attention she received afterward, offers one example of why trans people might desire a biological or medical root to their nonnormative sex or gender. The U.S. media repeatedly asserted that an intersex person had a legitimate claim to female status but a surgically and hormonally altered “transvestite,” such as Jorgensen, was “no girl at all, only an altered man” (Meyerowitz, p. 72).

I asked the intersex activists if they thought there was any truth to the claim that transsexuality is a form of intersex condition. One responded that she felt this claim did not make any sense. She stated:

I have heard people talk about how transsexuality could be intersex but it is happening in the brain. It sounds to me like “Oh, I have a headache except it is in my stomach.” But, if it is in your stomach, then it is a stomachache, not a headache.

She was not willing to rule out the possibility of similar biological roots to intersex conditions and transsexuality, but she believed that nothing was to be gained by connecting these conditions. When I asked her why she felt this way, her response suggested a belief that intersex conditions are purely medical and intersex activism would be bogged down by transgender political agendas.

The second intersex activist stated that she was upset about what she saw as trans people using intersex to validate themselves. Although she stated that “one day research might show that transsexual or transgender is a subset of intersex,” she concluded, “Right now, that research is not out there.” In the absence of any evidence to suggest that trans identities and intersex conditions are connected, she believed there was something immoral about trans people using the term *intersex* to validate their identities. She stated that this usage

really ignores the shame and the secrecy and the stigma of growing up with a queer body and having mutilating surgeries done without our consent in childhood and being lied to and having secrets kept from us about our medical condition.

One trans activist agreed with this view, presenting part of his vision of success as transgender people becoming better allies to the intersex movement. He stated, “Transgender people who use the language of intersex to talk about themselves should examine their language and see if they are co-opting other people's experiences and other people's pain.” I included this discussion about the exclusion of intersex people from the category *transgender* in this research because there is a painful, controversial, and, at times, volatile debate within and between the trans and

intersex movements right now, one often elided by the collective use of the term *transgender*.

I repeatedly encountered this debate over intersex inclusion in the category *transgender* during my fieldwork and I provide a final brief ethnographic example of the contentious politics of intersex inclusion. In November 2004, at the Taskforce's Creating Change Conference in St. Louis, Bran Fenner (of FIERCE! [Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment!]) was wrapping up a session on transgender youth and the prison industrial complex. During the session, Fenner had talked about FIERCE!'s work and he concluded by inviting representatives from other groups in the audience to talk about their organizations' projects. Alex Lee from the TGI Justice Project, a group whose stated mission is to work to end the abuse of trans, gender-variant, and intersex people in California prisons, was the last person to speak on behalf of an organization.

Following Lee's brief description of the TGI Justice Project's work, Emi Koyama, the director of Intersex Initiative, raised her hand and began to speak. She explained that she had spoken with Lee in the past about the inclusion of intersex people in his organization's work and said she was unhappy that he had ignored her request to removed intersex from his project. Obviously upset with this public critique, Lee stated that he had read and responded to several e-mails and that his inaction was not a matter of ignoring Koyama—but rather that they disagreed about whom the project should serve. Lee stated that TGI Justice Project receives requests from intersex prisoners asking for help addressing the difficulties they face during incarceration. When Koyama began to respond to this statement, Fenner interrupted, saying that he felt conversations like this were really important but that he wanted to end the official session. As he began to wrap up, pointing out the sign-up sheet and the session evaluation forms, Koyama stood, knocking her chair to the ground, grabbing her belongings, and leaving the room crying. The workshop took place in a large ballroom, with participants grouped in a small circle on the far side of the room, so Koyama's exit was prolonged. For many of the session participants,<sup>5</sup> this incident marked a painful

<sup>5</sup> After Koyama left, I spent half an hour in the room listening to and participating in discussions among the activists who remained. Many, especially those connected to the conference's host organization and the groups represented in the discussion, were very concerned about how to repair the damage they felt had been done in the previous moments and continued to debate the best strategy for negotiating both the conflict that had broken out in the room, as well as the larger conflict over intersex inclusion.

moment in negotiating the boundaries of the trans and intersex movements.

I have presented the desires for exclusion expressed by the two intersex movement leaders I interviewed; in contrast, in the aforementioned example, Alex Lee pointed out that the inclusion of intersex people in his organizing efforts is a direct response to the requests of intersex prisoners who seek that inclusion. Clearly, activists share no consensus about the boundaries of intersex and trans activism and continue to negotiate to whom the umbrella category *transgender* offers shelter. This site of category (re)production and negotiation, like the aforementioned example of transsexual separatists and the following discussion of debates among genderqueer activists and gender rights advocates, is significant for understanding the policy change goals and cultural shifts that the trans movement seeks to make. How the category *transgender* is defined is central to the visions of social changes being forwarded. Before discussing these visions of success in more detail, I turn first to two final and overlapping examples of contentious politics within the category *transgender*.

### Genderqueer Activists, Gender Rights Advocacy, and GenderPAC

About 15% of the activists I interviewed identified as genderqueer. In explaining what this term meant to them, they made statements including the following:

I identify as genderqueer. It means I am neither one nor the other, both and, paradoxical identity. I am looking for a group that is willing to embrace people who haven't been able to find a name for themselves.

I love genderqueer or gender variant or gender-free or even freely gendered—anything like that that just busts the paradigm right out, is what I am looking for.

One activist claiming the identity genderqueer stated a preference for “male pronouns and *ze* or *hir*” and explained:

Genderqueer means to me that I embody aspects of all genders. There are so many genders out there that I don't want to limit myself to just one. I don't want to limit my potential, limit who I can be.

For these activists, embracing a genderqueer identity disavowed the current binary sex and gender system; the assumed coherence of sex, gender, and genitals; and attempts at passing that had long been advised by the health care professionals who had (and continue to) manage sex- and gender-variant people in the United States.

Yet identification with the term *genderqueer* was not unproblematic for all activists who liked the concept of queering gender and identifying with those queered spaces. Five activists expressed reservations about using this term because of what they saw as its overidentification with a young (mostly White) college crowd. One activist, for example, reported that among her friends, who were overwhelmingly trans women of color, no one would even know what she was talking about if she started identifying as genderqueer because, she stated, the term had little meaning outside of “young college crowds.” Similarly, an older African American person said he could identify with the term *genderqueer* but he felt that the academic roots of the term did not fit him well. Another activist of color stated that he had briefly identified with the term *genderqueer* but he did not feel comfortable with it because, he told me, “it is something I still consider academic or a White term.” He stated that this trend was changing so that “a lot of people of color are identifying as genderqueer,” but he still did not use the term. One activist stated that although he liked genderqueer as a concept, in practice what he saw was young, White college students playing with gender and he was concerned that this lack of seriousness was detrimental to the movement because these “privileged young people lack the willingness to see the issues that trans people face on the ground every day like being harassed or even killed.”

At the September 2004 conference FTM: A Gender Odyssey, held in Seattle, Washington, organizers hosted a community discussion on the language of sex and gender. About 25 people attended, and they were overwhelmingly young and White. Defining, debating, and claiming the term *genderqueer* became the central topic for this hour-long discussion. When asked by a facilitator to define the term *genderqueer*, the first person who spoke asserted, “Genderqueer means millions of different things to a million different people. Genderqueer goes along with a variety of bodies and desires.” Another participant stated that the term *genderqueer* is important because “MTF, FTM just doesn’t define me if I want to be male in these ways or take T [testosterone] but I also want to wear lipstick and low-cut shirts and push-up bras.” The debate quickly moved from definitions of the term *genderqueer* to critiques of the category *transgender* and concerns about the place of genderqueer youth within a trans movement. Activists were concerned with what they saw as a trend toward people with queered gender identities, such as their own, being viewed as “not trans enough.” In short, they were concerned about what they saw as the exclusion of genderqueer people from the trans umbrella.

The term *genderqueer* owes its popularity, especially on college campuses and among young White people, in part to Riki Wilchins, executive director of GenderPAC. The organization currently focuses a great deal on mobilizing college students in support of what GenderPAC calls gender rights, and Riki Wilchins is very popular in academic crowds. Her message, as well as the organization’s mission statement, reflects a belief in the exclusivity of trans rights and the need for a gender rights movement, an organizing stance that was echoed in the words of some genderqueer youth in Seattle who felt excluded because they were not trans enough for this movement.

Activists I worked with overwhelmingly believed that the work of GenderPAC is not centrally—and, perhaps, not even peripherally—useful to the contemporary trans movement. Yet, they argued, this had not always been the case. It was Wilchins (with Denise Norris) who cofounded the in-your-face, direct-action organization Transsexual Menace in 1994. In 1995, at the Be-All<sup>6</sup> in Columbus, Ohio, Wilchins “gave an impassioned speech about the need for a transgender political organization to press for political change” (Denny, 2001, p. 13). One activist stated that this speech “brought the crowd to their feet” and that “people wanted to give money.” She stated, “I told Riki that I would get people to support her” if she changed the organization’s name; consequently, she said, “we came up with the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition.” Wilchins (1997) described this event, stating that GenderPAC was “informally launched” that weekend with “gifts from a half dozen donors intent on supporting the growing trend towards national gender activism” (p. 204).

Although Wilchins (1997) has characterized this moment as a time when people sought to support “the growing trend towards national *gender* activism” (p. 204), the initial work of GenderPAC as a national organization focused on the rights of transgender people. This distinction may seem minor, but for the activists I worked with it was very significant. Organizing for gender rights through the specific concerns faced by transgender people versus organizing for gender rights more broadly, without specific attention to the concerns of transgender people, became the issue that divided GenderPAC in 2000 and motivated the widespread dislike of this organization that I encountered among trans activists in 2004–2005. The differences between trans activists’ constructions of

6 The Be-All is an annual weeklong conference for trans people that began in 1982 and was held in a different city every year for nearly 20 years. The event continues to be held annually in Chicago and is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

inclusion and exclusion and the anti-identity or post-identity activism of GenderPAC came to a head in 2000 when GenderPAC changed its mission and hired new staff. Trans activists and organizations throughout the United States argued that the political implications of these changes were detrimental for the trans movement.

Although Wilchins (1997) was advocating in her writings for gender rights and a gender liberation movement, the early history of GenderPAC reflects a specific focus on the gender rights concerns of transgender people. Wilchins (2004) agreed that GenderPAC, prior to 2000, was functioning as the “political head of the transgender community” (p. 147) and working at the national level to advocate for transgender rights. Explaining this discrepancy, she wrote, “While I talked about gender rights, because we lacked the money and resources to create programs, in reality we could only respond to events, and of course all the events we were asked to respond to involved transsexuals” (2004, p. 143). Valentine (2000, 2004, 2007), who conducted his fieldwork in the late 1990s and worked closely with Wilchins, write that GenderPAC’s dominance on the national level, coupled with the way it had become “the de facto voice for transgender politics” was “infuriating for many other transgender-identified activists because of GenderPAC’s unwillingness to focus specifically on transgender-identified people” (p. 97).

According to Wilchins (2004), the changes in GenderPAC began with the hiring in 1999 of managing director Gina Reiss, who pushed Wilchins to stop focusing on transsexuals and to begin truly working for gender rights, including those of “gays, lesbians, feminists, minorities, straight Americans, or youth” (p. 145). Many overlapping and conflicting historical narratives have circulated about what happened during this time, but most of these stories involve the resignation of a substantial number of the directors from the organization’s board, the creation of a new mission statement, and a changed focus for GenderPAC’s work away from the specific concerns of transgender people toward gender rights more broadly.

GenderPAC’s efforts to be more inclusive by broadening its organizational scope were unwelcome changes that raised feelings of betrayal and anger among many activists. GenderPAC officially characterized the change as a move from focusing on identities to focusing on issues, but trans activists described it as an abandoning and erasure of trans people. They argued that, unlike what GenderPAC was doing, a gender rights movement needed to continue to speak about the specific concerns of trans people. About this time period, Wilchins wrote:

I believed that a gender rights movement that left trans people behind was a failure. But a movement

that aspired to help transgender people without mounting a sustained attack on the way the gender system oppresses each of us—especially children—was a failure too. (p. 149)

The activists I worked with supported this statement, but they still had specific concerns about GenderPAC’s transformation, such as the erasure of the word *transgender* from the organization’s website and literature, where it had been replaced with such phrases as *gender roles*, *gender orientation*, and *gender stereotypes*. Many transgender activists, especially those who reported that they helped create and sustain GenderPAC, stated that they were outraged by this erasure. Becoming more inclusive by adding to their work for trans rights would have been acceptable, I was told, but erasing trans people from the agenda to be more inclusive was unacceptable.

Activists repeatedly stated that the issue was not a disagreement over the significance of gender rights or the problems with gender-based stereotypes and oppression that angered them. For example, Donna Cartwright (2001) wrote that she agreed with Wilchins that “the gender system is a prison that restricts everyone in our culture to a very narrow range of expression” (p. 57). What Cartwright, and others, were upset about was not the idea of gender rights but how they saw GenderPAC approaching that struggle—the organization’s specific methods, tactics, and visions in the fight for gender rights. For example, the effort to make GenderPAC’s mission statement and work more universal—what Wilchins (2004) described as “welcoming people as members instead of as allies” (p. 152)—trans activists, such as Cartwright, described as “de-emphasiz[ing] and ultimately marginaliz[ing] those from whom its struggle was born—transgender and other gender-transgressive people” (p. 57).

The result of GenderPAC’s efforts to make its message more broad and welcoming to all people as members of the fight for gender rights was an organization that rarely talked about the specific issues of transgender people. Activists argued that, in making its message more universal and welcoming to all people, GenderPAC had become an organization that rarely talked about the specific issues that transgender people face. Many activists concluded that GenderPAC was a place where trans people were not welcome, and they thought that GenderPAC’s work was neither relevant to nor allied with a trans movement. One activist, for example, described GenderPAC as “problematic,” stating: “They just evoke the tragic tranny when it serves their purposes, now and then,” but are not actually working to help trans people. Similarly, another activist stated that GenderPAC had “distanced themselves from transgender people except when it is

convenient for them to use misfortunes that have happened to transgender people to their own ends or when they want to ask for our money.” These feelings were also echoed by an activist who stated:

When GenderPAC removed *transgender* from all of their stuff, they sent a message that it wasn't important to continue educating people on transgender issues. Having a non-transgender-specific movement means that you aren't going to do anything to advocate for and empower that community. This borders on immoral. There are amazing transgender people who commit suicide because they cannot stand being outcasts anymore. We need to empower them. We need to tell them that there is hope.

For this activist, GenderPAC's move toward advocating for gender rights broadly and distancing itself from a more exclusive focus on the specific concerns of transgender people sent a message that education and advocacy for transgender people was no longer important. GenderPAC's attempts to be more inclusive through a new organizational agenda angered many activists, as is evidenced by the aforementioned quotes. Viewing the changes at GenderPAC as an erasing of transgender not just from the organization's literature and website, but also from its organizational agenda, many saw Wilchins setting the organizational priorities such that GenderPAC would no longer work to serve the needs of those who see themselves as the most oppressed by the gender system and gender stereotypes. When Wilchins characterized GenderPAC as being about “issues, not identities”—and, therefore, about gender rights, not transgender rights—she set off a vehement reaction in the transgender community.

Angry statements and critiques by trans activists of GenderPAC and its leader filled nearly 200 pages of my interview transcripts and field notes, suggesting the depth of the feelings the changes at GenderPAC sparked. To be clear, these activists were not simply angry about the history of this organization; rather, the concerns they expressed were more centrally about GenderPAC's claim to be organizing based on issues rather than identities. For example, one activist stated that his vision of success for a trans movement was “exactly what Riki Wilchins talks about” and stated that he agrees with the vision of “opening up the social imaginary to gender variance all over the place”—but he disagreed with Wilchins in terms of the political strategies and methods for achieving that goal. He stated:

I don't think that the way to get to that place is to not talk about transsexual and transgender people as particular victims of that gender regime. I think

you have to speak to the particular problems that sometimes the most outcast people face, even if it is not palatable to people. If you create a social justice platform based on the least palatable people in society, then it has got to work for everybody.

Agreeing with critiques of identity politics and the need for gender freedom, but disagreeing with the methods for gaining this freedom, was common among the activists I interviewed. Wilchins envisioned a movement about issues, not identities, but, as another activist stated, “You cannot have a movement without people” and the issues people are facing. In the case of a gender rights movement, activists argued that trans people are particular victims of gender-based oppression; they stressed that speaking to the particular issues of trans people is a necessary tactic for gaining gender freedom.

One activist stated, “I think everything [Wilchins] says is totally true....But, it is often easy for people to throw out identity all together, corresponding to the increasing amounts of privilege they have.” He agreed with critiques of organizing around single identities, but explained that he took from this critique a different sense of what that means in practice. “It's not that people shouldn't have identities or organize around identities,” he said, “because those are often the ways in which they are oppressed, but that it should be complicated and looked at intersectionally” (see Crenshaw, 2003; Mosse, 1999; Rew & Campbell, 1999; Sokefeld, 1999). He argued that this failure to directly include people and their specific needs in the fight for rights was due to organizing around issues instead of identities.

Before turning to a specific discussion of how constructions of the category *transgender*, and the politics of inclusion and exclusion within it, structure the visions of policy and social changes advocated by activists, I will finish this section by quoting some comments from trans activists working within GenderPAC. At the 2004 International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE) conference, two transgender members of the GenderPAC board, Rachel Goldberg and Michelle Miles, presented a panel titled From Transsexual Menace to Gender Rights Activist, in which they offered critiques of identity politics and discussed the need for a broad-based struggle for gender rights. Goldberg began, stating:

I dislike identity politics and I dislike being here [at the IFGE Conference] because we all call ourselves transgender and we focus on us and our rights, but while oppression is our issue, it is also other people's issue....This is the same thing Whites did (and do) to people of color and what men did (and do) to women....For transgender people trying to survive

in a nonconformist world it is oppression but identity politics keeps us from recognizing that these are all issues [homophobia, racism, gender oppression, etc.] that we need to address.

Goldberg's dislike of labels of any kind and her preference not to use them for herself—"because this leads to the identity politics that I dislike so much," she said—was based on her belief that when one identity group is granted rights, another group is left out and stepped on. This analysis of identity politics is central to the thinking behind GenderPAC's focusing on gender rights and gender oppression rather than on the specific struggles of transgender people.

Unlike Goldberg, Michelle Miles felt comfortable with labels, stating, "I do identify as transgender," and she talked about how important identification as transgender and the transgender community had been for her when she was first starting transition. She said, "I lived in terror and then I found community at Fantasia Fair. But, eventually I needed a change." For Miles, that change came in 2001 when she became involved with GenderPAC. She stated:

I went to the first conference on gender held by GenderPAC and it was a huge audience, mostly young people, and all those banners [for major corporations]—so mainstream, and it felt powerful and it lifted my loneliness. When you are in that audience, it looks very different than it does here [at IFGE].

Discussing GenderPAC's national conference, Goldberg and Miles described the audience as "full of college students expressing their gender in ways you can't even imagine" but not necessarily identifying with the term *transgender* or any identity labels. They estimated that "maybe less than 10% of the people there are what would be called 'traditionally transgender people'" and they described the event as high energy because of the young people. Miles also commented on the corporate sponsors that the GenderPAC conference draws. For her, the corporate logos hung on large banners throughout the conference rooms were a powerful marker of being mainstream.

This description of GenderPAC's conference audience and the people the organization mobilized fit with my observations. In 2001 and 2002, when I attended GenderPAC's national conferences and lobby days, the audiences were young, overwhelmingly White, raised middle-class, and born female-bodied. Wilchins (2004) wrote: "Gender rights are too fundamental to belong to any one group and too important to leave anyone behind. Gender rights are human rights, and they are for all of us" (p.150). After reading about GenderPAC's work for—supposedly—everyone, the

political realities of what I saw were far from ideal. Edelman (2001) observed that unlike the images of movements activists and scholars often present, real social movements "rarely attract more than a minority of the constituencies they claim to represent" (pp. 310–311). This observation resonated with my experiences of GenderPAC's events. Aims for broad-scale inclusion, in addition to being experienced by activists as exclusion, also seemed to have fostered audiences that were not very diverse.

I included this analysis of the tensions between gender rights and transgender rights because it was both a historic moment and a continued source of conflict of great significance to the majority of the activists I worked with, as well as a telling example of internal contestations over the politics of inclusion and exclusion playing out in a contemporary trans social movement in the United States. Central to the aforementioned debate over gender rights and transgender rights is the politics of organizing around identities—specifically, trans identities—and the methods and visions of social change activists are forwarding within this movement.

### Envisioning Success: Assimilation, Social Change, and the Category *Transgender*

Visions of success are not only tied to an image of a better future but also linked intimately with how a movement is imagined in the present. The framing of goals, forwarding of theories, selection of campaigns and tactics, mobilization of various constituencies, and creation of allies and ties of solidarity are all decisions made in part based on activists' broader visions of change. Visions of success offer insights into activists' motivations for, and understandings of, their activism. What success would look like, then, is not only a question about the future, but also, more specifically, a question about the present, about how the movement is currently imagined, including whom the movement is for (and not for) and what changes the movement pushes (and which ones it does not prioritize).

Recognizing the significance of visions of social change, I asked each of the trans activists I interviewed to talk about what success for this movement would look like. Responses to this question varied widely, but each person spoke not only to the mix of theoretical, ideological, personal, and material beliefs and desires that motivate trans activism in the United States but also to activists' understandings of the movement they are in. Nearly all of the activists included in their response some examples of specific indexes of success for the trans movement and the goals that they saw their activism working toward, including concerns about employment and housing; access to

education and to health care; an end to police brutality, public violence, murder, and suicide; the creation of resources for trans youth; and the support of gay and lesbian allies in the struggle for trans rights. Activists stated that they hoped to effect an end to the diagnosis of gender identity disorder and see trans people as elected officials, trans people who are able to find employment outside of the sex industry, trans youth being supported by their families, and trans people who are safe from violence and the fear of it.

Some activists expressed mainstreaming agendas through their desire to have trans be an accepted category (i.e., “no longer an issue” or “stop being a problem”), an unremarkable category (i.e., “no difference”), or for the assimilation for trans people (i.e., “to assimilate into society”). For some activists, such as those who stated “Success for me would be where this is no longer an issue” or “Success is when it stops being a problem. I want it to stop being an issue,” this vision is not necessarily a call for assimilation but rather a call for cultural change such that people (e.g., health care providers) would no longer have legal or social permission to discriminate against trans people. For other activists, such as those calling for trans people to blend in or to assimilate, their vision of success was tied to assimilation efforts for trans people.

This distinction between activists who hoped that being trans could become a nonissue and those who had more explicitly assimilationist agendas was often hard to make based on the responses of activists. It was hard to know, for example, what the stakes were in activists’ statements and how to read words such as these: “I think that success would look like gender being treated the way left-handed people are now...basically, where these distinctions become meaningless in terms of law, public policy, and social interaction.” Or, similarly, visions of success framed as the following:

Ultimately, I think it would look like gender identity not being an issue that people spend very much time on. So, it would kind of blend in to the greater reality—we have men, we have women, and if someone wants to change between the two or kind of blend the lines, it is not anything people would spend much time thinking about.

Calls for the category *transgender* to become meaningless or not something people spend very much time on read as part of a mainstreaming agenda in which differences in gender are not necessarily acknowledged, accepted, or celebrated. In such a world, gender would become a meaningless category of difference.

One activist who expressed a mainstreaming agenda began her articulation of what success would look like

with goals such as legal and legislative changes: “getting our place at the table” and “penetrat[ing] to the interior of a political system.” She continued, stating that trans people are

no different than anyone else. We are productive citizens, we are good family people, we are leaders in professions and religious denominations and in social groups and civil organizations, and we are just like everyone else except that we are in the wrong bodies.<sup>7</sup>

Her vision of success was, in part, about the mainstreaming of trans people such that society would recognize trans people as being no different from nontrans people. Furthermore, in the final sentence of her response, she revealed a commitment to a specific vision about whom a trans movement is fighting for: people who are in the wrong bodies. Rather than describing a trans umbrella for people who are sex and gender variant, blending, changing, and nonconforming in a wide variety of ways, this response reads as a more specific identity-based vision of social change with movement efforts geared toward people who experience their sex and gender identities as a manifestation of being in the wrong body. This characterization of transgender rights, more narrowly pitched as the rights of transsexual people, exemplifies the critiques of many trans and genderqueer activists who expressed concern about their place in this movement.

Another activist stated that part of success would be educating “society that we are just like everybody else—we don’t want any special rights, we just want to have equal rights.” In this case, the call for equal rights, not special rights, does not necessarily reflect a vision of assimilation, but the desire to educate others that “we are just like everybody else” does suggest that this activist envisioned a trans movement’s moment of success as an erasure of the need for the category *transgender* and the political organizing based on these differences. Similarly, another activist told me that she wanted to be “treated exactly the same as everyone else,” and that her vision of success involved “having nothing to be an activist about.” She said, “I want all LGBT people to be treated exactly the same as everyone else and for there to be full participation by LGBT people and no discrimination.” Yet, these notions of being like everybody else and being treated exactly the

<sup>7</sup> MacKenzie (1994) referred to the narrative of being in the wrong body as a “transsexual ideology” (p. 2) and argued that this ideology “reinforces cultural assumptions about what men and women are suppose to be” through advocating “the surgical ‘transformation’ of transsexuals who are commonly defined as being in the ‘wrong body’” (p. 2).

same assume a set of cultural experiences not shared by all trans people.

Much more common than visions of success involving assimilation and mainstreaming were concerns about a trans movement that mimics the priorities activists saw the gay and lesbian movements focusing on, issues that disproportionately affect people who are more privileged at the expense of working for and with the people who are in the greatest need. For example, Dean Spade (2004) asked, “What kind of analysis do we need to make sure that we don’t replicate the mistakes of the gay and lesbian rights movement?” (p. 32). Furthermore, one activist responded to my questions about what success would look like by stating, “Disaster would be everyone becoming assimilationist: ‘We are just like you except for this one thing.’ This is so problematic.”

Urvashi Vaid (1995), a former director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, argued that “integration into the status quo, or mainstreaming [is] the guiding principle [and] most widely shared ideal” (p. 3) of the U.S. LGBT movement. The gay and lesbian movements have adopted a civil rights, identity politics model (Highleyman, 2002) and Vaid argued that this strategy will not “deliver genuine freedom or full equality” because the goal of winning “mainstream tolerance...differs from the goal of winning liberation or changing social institutions in lasting, long-term ways” (p. 3). Mattilda, aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore (2004), has argued against assimilationist strategies, calling assimilation violence—“not just the violence of cultural erasure, but the violence of stepping on anyone more vulnerable than you in order to get ahead” (p. 3). Mattilda further argued that assimilation “robs queer identity of anything meaningful, relevant, or challenging—and calls this progress” (p. 3) and that “the radical potential of queer identity lies in remaining *outside*—in challenging and seeking to dismantle the sickening culture that surrounds us” (p. 5).

Within the U.S. trans movement, some activists agree with this critique and state that they are interested in creating a trans movement that aims for liberation and long-term changes. Dean Spade (2004), for example, has furthered Mattilda’s (2004) analysis of assimilation as violence, writing that what he calls the LGBfakeT Movement, with its goal of mainstream tolerance, has become “a struggle for the rights of a few race-and-money-privileged people to be able to access their birthright piece of the capitalist pie” (p. 36). In thinking about this critique of assimilationist desires as rooted in “the violence of stepping on anyone more vulnerable than you in order to get ahead” (Mattilda, p. 3) and “a struggle for the rights of a few race-and-money-privileged people” (Spade, p. 36),

I return again to the trans activists who articulated visions of success in which trans people are just like everyone else—unremarkable and assimilated. Initially, I had pulled all quotes about success from the interviews and begun the analysis without names or identifying markers. Yet, critiques of mainstreaming and assimilation suggested that attention to the identities of those who envisioned assimilation as success was necessary. Returning to the transcripts, Spade’s claim about a few race-and-money-privileged people was largely confirmed. Of the 8 activists I interviewed who expressed mainstreaming visions, all identified as White; were 40–60 years old; were overwhelmingly middle-class (only one was not a full-time professional employee); and were born male-bodied (7 identified on the MTF spectrum and one identified as FTM). Although 3 other activists who also fit this demographic did not express mainstreamed visions of success, this desire to assimilate and have trans become an unmarked category appears to be related, at least in part, to a social privilege not shared by most of the activists I interviewed.

In the previous section of this article, I quoted one activist speaking about GenderPAC who argued that “it is often easy for people to throw out identity all together, corresponding to the increasing amounts of privilege they have.” Desires for transgender to be a nonissue, for transgender people to be no different from anyone else and to be assimilated seem also to reflect this greater ease of abandoning identity categories, an ease corresponding to greater amounts of social privilege. For example, one White activist, speaking about her vision of success, stated that she did not want to be judged based on her gender identity. She claimed that for her, success would be when her gender was no more of an issue than “the color of my skin.” For this activist, the color of her skin was an unmarked category, already not an issue—a privilege not shared by most people. One activist of color, on the other hand, was very clear when she stated: “None of us want to be blended into mainstream society. I think it is really being able to celebrate who we are and be able to be accepted and seen in society as equals.” For her, mainstreaming was not a goal of this movement, and she instead articulated a vision of acceptance that allowed celebrating identity while being treated as equals.

The relative social privilege often involved in assimilationist desires is also reflected in separatist calls for policy change and legal reform based on claims to biological or natural difference and disorder, as well as in a gender rights model that pushes for organizing a movement based on issues, not on identities. As I mentioned briefly already, separatist calls for organizing based on



medical legitimacy are exclusionary not only of sex- and gender-variant people who do not identify as transsexual or desire body modifications or hormonal therapies but also of people who do identify as transsexual and desire body-changing technologies but are unable to gain access to them. Existing policies (such as those related to changing driver's licenses or birth certificates) exemplify the problems with medically pitched policies and laws because only a small number of people under the trans umbrella have access to (and a desire for) body-changing technologies. Furthermore, calls for organizing based on issues suggest that it is possible to organize without the specifics of identities and the ways that people are oppressed because of those specific identities. As one activist aptly noted, the ease with which identity can be abandoned in favor of issue-based organizing corresponds to increased levels of social privilege. These areas of contention, both over inclusion and exclusion and about calls for assimilation politics, reflect how different activists imagine the movement and the changes they are seeking to effect.

One activist's antiassimilationist vision of success is worth noting here because his comments begin to move into the broader visions of social change that activists are articulating. He stated that when he hears activists talk about wanting to "become just like everybody else," he always asks them if that means that they want to "have the same levels of poverty and poor health care, for example, that everybody else has." He believed that this vision of assimilation was shortsighted, at best, and often overly invested in social privilege, a status not available to many trans people. He stated that a trans movement needed to do better than that, fighting instead to help "create a more just and equitable society."

Social movements are motivated by myriad overlapping theoretical, ideological, and material beliefs and desires, and tensions over assimilationist strategies are part of larger struggles about which social changes are needed and what success for the movement would be. Dean Spade (2004) has argued against a vision of success based on narrow, rights-based organizing; instead, he articulated a vision of a trans movement that made efforts to "reach out and find new coalitions, merging our analysis in new ways with people who are already prioritizing the rights of low income people, people of color, people with disabilities, HIV-positive people, old people, and youth" (p. 36). He framed his vision of a trans movement in the United States as part of a broad, international movement for social justice, stating, "It's our responsibility to embrace a broad view of social justice and to join in a fight against capitalism, racism, and imperialism, and fight to win" (p. 37).

Spade is not alone in this vision; more than half of the activists I interviewed similarly framed their vision of success with broad views of social justice, stating that the goal of their activism was not only to improve the lives of trans people (although everyone agreed that this goal was part of the vision) but also to create social changes that would benefit everyone. Constructing the organizing options available as either identity politics or a broader agenda against oppression—as either identities or issues—is a falsely circumscribed set of options. Many trans activists, through their constructions of the category *transgender*, their activist projects and principles, and their visions of success, evidence the gaps that exist between discourses about identity politics—which they characterized as hurtful, exclusionary, and incapable of creating systemic changes—and the organizing practices of trans activists. The two central and often overlapping ways that activists framed their visions of far-reaching changes were based on, first, changing understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, and personhood in U.S. American culture and second, linking movements for oppressed peoples nationally and internationally in a struggle for social justice. In what follows, I will briefly detail these two overlapping areas in which social change can be broadly envisioned.

In about a quarter of the interviews, trans activists articulated visions of success that involved a reimagining of the current binary sex and gender system in the United States and the understandings of personhood that flow from this binary. One activist, for example, stated that success would "not mean the abolition of gender because gender is not something you abolish any more than race or religion." Rather, she argued that success would be about the abolition of the sex and gender binary and a recognition that both sex and gender are socially constructed. She stated that this abolition would include the recognition that personal and societal understandings of sexed bodies and gender identities are constructions that feel powerful and compelling because people have invested in them, not because they are natural or fixed. She stated that her goal as an activist is not to "help a small number of people to fit more comfortably into the boxes; it is to break open the boxes." For her, part of the goal of a transgender movement is to free people from the need to pass as nontransgender, heteronormative women and men, offering instead options of embodiment that do not rely on a binary mapping of sex, gender, and genitals.

Furthermore, she argued that this struggle is "very linked with the woman's movement and with communities of color." She explained:

Being a transgender person of color, I am very aware of how race and ethnicity are socially constructed

and how there are privileging discourses shaped around class as well as race, disability, and others. So, ultimately, I see the movement that I participate in as part of a broader movement for social justices and social change.

Her articulation of the social construction of both gender and sex, as well as the sex-gender binary, and how a denaturalization of each would reconfigure cultural notions of sexed and gendered bodies, is thus coupled with an analysis of how bodies are socially constructed more broadly in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and ability. Seeing her trans activism as part of a larger struggle for social change and social justice, this activist envisioned a shifting sense of personhood in the United States in which key cultural indexes of difference—sex, gender, race, ability—are recognized as social constructions read onto the body and not necessarily precultural or pancultural readings of the body, personhood, and difference.

Similarly, another activist stated that success would be a “reimagining of how we understand ourselves as human beings.” He argued that the real potential of this movement is to “help us to reevaluate this gender binary system that we have relied on for so long” and stated that although changing these beliefs will take long-term struggle, it is well worth it because “it will happen, and probably in very unexpected ways.” Thus, this activist’s vision of success was also grounded in creating new definitions of gender and reimagining current understandings of being human. Another activist also spoke about shifts in ideas about gender in the United States, arguing that gender is currently understood largely as something binary and innate and that a different model needs to be adopted. Rethinking gender outside of a binary, naturalized frame, he suggested that one form of success for a trans movement would be getting to a point where gender identity was a type of personal freedom that “could not be touched.” He stated: “It would be more like a freedom of religion model” in the United States. He stated that “the post-Sept. 11 anti-Moslem climate” is “a bit scary for thinking about this model of freedom,” but maintained that in his vision, “People would feel that you had a freedom to express your gender that was as broad as the freedom of religion and that it was sort of something you couldn’t touch in people.”

Current understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality in the United States are structured by a belief that bodies come sexed in one of two ways and an assumption that binary gender is a cultural elaboration of these natural differences. In this system, genitals, sex, and gender must match: For example, a person born with a vagina is

a female and will have the gender identity woman. This ideology of sex-gender binary not only divides all people into one of two intelligible categories but also structures the possibilities for sexual desire through a heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1999). In this matrix, gender identities always correlate to sexed bodies and sexual practices and desires are then mapped onto this binary of possibilities, structuring a hetero-homo understanding of all sexualities.

Transgender activists, such as those quoted above, refuse this foreclosure of possibilities and envision social changes that would rework these understandings of bodies and identities. The activists quoted here, as well as the others who expressed similar visions of success, argued that the goal of the movement is not to abolish sex and gender but to remove them from a naturalized binary and bring cultural awareness to the social construction of sexed bodies, gender identities, and the understandings of personhood current conceptualizations structure. They envision denaturalized and unmoored understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality that recognize the infinite variability of bodies, identities, desires, and practices. Furthermore, this shifting sense of personhood in the United States was elaborated by one activist to include other key cultural indexes of difference, such as sex, gender, race, and ability. She argued for a broader vision of social justice and social change in which each of these indexes of difference would become recognized as social constructions that are read onto the body, not precultural or pancultural understandings of body, personhood, and difference. In my continued analysis of broader visions of change, such as those presented here, I now turn to activists’ articulations of the trans movement in solidarity with other movements against oppression as part of a larger movement for social justice.

More than 30 of the trans activists I interviewed detailed visions of success in which trans activism was part of a larger social change movement against oppression. For example, a youth activist in Philadelphia stated that his vision of success was “all people having self-determination over their lives and bodies.” I asked him if he could elaborate, and he said that, for him, success would mean a “separation between church and state...abortion rights, economic justice, and finding ways people can really be self-determinate about their work, like fairly negotiated trade, and the decriminalization of sex work and drug use and the end of racism.” This activist saw his specific work on trans health issues as linked to a global struggle for self-determination and the myriad issues and movements this larger picture encompassed. He framed his efforts to create trans-friendly and appropriate access to health care as

one small project within the larger struggle for “all people having self-determination over their lives and bodies.”

Similarly, a New York City–based youth activist framed his vision of success for a trans movement around far-reaching social changes such as universal health care and “the end of the prison industrial complex and alternatives to incarceration, affordable housing, the redistribution of funds, everyone getting their needs met. The decriminalization of humans—immigration, sex work, the drug laws.” For him, as well as for about one third of the activists I interviewed, being a successful trans activist was framed not in terms of changing the world for trans people per se but rather as part of a vision of social justice and social change that would enable everyone to get their needs met. Each of these visions of success for a trans movement, necessitating social changes in areas that may seem unrelated—such as drug policy, immigration law, job training, the prison industrial complex, abortion rights, affordable housing, and antipoverty work—rely on a vision of a trans movement in which justice does not trickle down. Fighting for the rights of the most socially palatable people or pushing for mainstream tolerance does not account for intersectional identities (such as being trans, poor, a youth, and a person of color) and the overlapping issues of oppression these intersections create. Thus, these trans activist argued, for a trans movement to be successful it cannot simply fight for or win trans rights but must also seek to create a more just and equitable society.

Another New York City–based activist, calling for trans activism to be part of a global anti-imperialist movement, also articulated a vision of success in terms of broad commitments to social justice, linking causes, and creating fundamental social changes. He stated that success would look like the “overthrow of imperialism,” that a “mass movement” is needed, and that “we need to meet people where they are at politically.” He argued for a “united front” and said that if that meant working with middle-class White people or “having to struggle with real transphobia,” he was ready to do that. He said that his commitment was so strong that he would remain involved even when it seemed to be at his own expense; he believed that “if we are going to build, then we have to push each other and struggle.” This activist saw his work within a trans movement as part of an anti-imperialist struggle and was willing to work both with people within a trans movement who might not understand why an anti-imperialist struggle was needed, as well as with people within anti-imperialist movements who might not have a trans- and queer-friendly analysis of sex, gender, and sexuality. For him, a trans movement in the United States involved more than creating change for trans people: It required

people pushing each other and struggling to change the world.

## Conclusion

The aforementioned visions of social change and success for a trans movement, framed through a rethinking of U.S. American notions of sex, gender, and sexuality in some cases and, in others, through a commitment to linking movements for social justice in a broader struggle, illuminate activists’ organizing principles and projects, as well as their understandings of the category *transgender*. Visions of social change that not only are attentive to the specificities of being trans identified (and the intersectional racial, ethnic, class, ability-based, or age-based identities of trans people) but also work within broader struggles for social change and social justice frame the category *transgender* as a politically useful concept for mobilizing activism based on the shared experiences of being nonnormatively sexed and gendered in the United States. A growing trans movement in the United States is making important legal, legislative, policy, and social gains for gender-nonconforming people, but the movement is not without ideological differences, internal contestations, and deep ambiguities about inclusion, exclusion, and the processes of creating social change. As one activist stated: “This umbrella model perpetuates the idea that we can understand each other by virtue of being placed under this umbrella.” She went on to say that this understanding was not occurring, and that even her own use of the word *we* was part of the problem.

Burdick (1998) argued that ethnographies of social movements can help activists “refine debates and self-critiques” (p. 182), as well as bridge ideological differences within the movement and reach out to “people in targeted constituencies who continue to remain indifferent to the movement” (p. 182). Such analysis can help highlight contradictory tendencies and contentious politics within movements and might ultimately be of use to movement participants (Burdick, 1995). Drawing on this idea, as well as Edelman’s (2001) claim that ethnography can help reveal the ideological differences and internal tensions within movements, and avoiding the problematic trend of “representing ‘movements’ as more cohesive than they really are” (p. 310), I have detailed ways that activists, in their organizing within (and outside of) the category *transgender*, are (re)producing the category *transgender*. I have examined the politics of inclusion and exclusion through an analysis of transsexual separatists who reject the category *transgender* and object to inclusion in collective organizing in favor of working for rights more exclusively through claims to medical and psychiatric disorders; intersex activists who are pushing for exclusion

from the category *transgender* and argue against any conflation of what they see as two very different sex- and gender-variant groups of people; genderqueer activists who wonder whether they are trans enough and feel excluded because of the ways they queer gender and challenge the commitments to binary sex and gender of other trans activists; and through critiques of GenderPAC, concerns about the utility of gender rights organizing, and activists' anger over what was seen as the exclusion of transgender people from GenderPAC's new and supposedly more inclusive organizational agenda. Each of these areas of contestation and identity negotiation draw out debates about key issues for the trans movement, such as the politics of assimilation and visions of social change, highlighting differences that are often elided in public consciousness by the category *transgender*.

After evidencing these areas of contestation, I turned to the visions of social change that trans activists are articulating, first with an analysis of assimilationist desires and the relative social privileges these desires reflect and then through activists' broader visions of social change. Broad visions of social change centered on changing U.S. American understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, and personhood and based on commitments to building bridges between social justice movements in a unified struggle against oppression reflect a hopeful conceptualization of the category *transgender* and the possibilities for organizing within it. I have argued that the specific goals and visions of policy reform and social change forwarded by trans activists are conceptualized in and through differing visions of the category *transgender* and the organizing potentials of this category. Social movements help create new meanings and new collective identities, and they "embody a new understanding of politics and social life itself" (Escobar, 1992, p. 396). The trans movement nicely exemplifies the creation of new social and political understandings and meanings, challenging and changing the boundaries of the U.S. social imaginary in terms of the possibilities for sexed bodies, gender identities, sexualities, and personhood. The stakes involved in debates about identity and politics, assimilation, and inclusion and exclusion are therefore significant keys to understanding the specific goals, visions, and possibilities for change under a trans umbrella.

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