Celebrating Trans Feminist Activisms
A COLLECTIVE DOCUMENT FOLLOWING THE MARCH 15, 2019 CONVERSATION AT MOUNT ROYAL UNIVERSITY PRIDE CENTRE

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The goal of this conversation, and this document, is to celebrate what trans feminist activisms have made possible in our lives, and to refuse to cooperate with discourses that pit feminists against trans women. The goal is not to fuel or focus on the discord that is so frequently imposed between trans activists and other feminists. However, it is also critical to acknowledge the harm that occurs when cis feminists refuse to acknowledge and respect the dignity, validity, and reality of trans lives.

For that reason, trans activism is about making Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) uncomfortable. Unlearning harmful and oppressive ideas is uncomfortable.

If your feminism includes degrading, dehumanizing, and invalidating someone else, it is not aligned with justice. One of the gifts of trans feminist activism is that it invites all feminisms to do better. And that invitation is often uncomfortable.
An Invitation to Celebrate

The activism of the trans community, particularly trans women of colour, has been a driving force in many social justice movements.

Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were at the heart of the Stonewall riots and continued their work after Stonewall by, among other things, founding Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) House, the first LGBTQ+ youth shelter in the States, and the first organization run by trans women of colour.

STAR House is not the only example of trans folks, especially trans women creating safe spaces for queer, gender non-conforming, and transgender communities. Within drag communities, sex worker communities, homeless communities, and in so many other spaces, trans women have stepped into roles of support and community care, and these actions are a form of activism.

Trans liberation, autonomy, and equity also means that gender non-conforming cis folks can experience greater liberation, autonomy, and equity. It means that gender roles can be challenged, whether you’re trans or not. And gender roles need to be challenged, because they limit possibilities for people by assigning interests, acceptable behaviours, and even access to social supports, friendship, and emotional connection on the basis of flawed assumptions.

TRANS FEMINIST ACTIVISMS ARE:

“Advocating for our own needs and the needs of others.”

“Finding ways to make everyone feel included.”

“Unity through community.”

“Defending body autonomy. Ensuring that no-one is forced to have medical interventions they don’t want, and no-one is prevented from accessing medical care they need.”

Living as a trans person – “I’m a trans activist because I have to advocate for myself.”

Trans feminist activism is survival.

Telling your story and experience. Helping people understand that there is no single way to be trans.

Trans feminist activisms make the world better for everyone, including cis folks. Trans activism has helped the medical system depathologize everyone through advocating for greater acceptance of gender non-conformity regardless of gender identity.
One thread through our conversation was the importance of community and collective action within trans activisms. As one participant said, “Unity through community! (Rhyming is also trans activism.)” Trans activism means advocating for our own needs, and the needs of others. And it also means recognizing that the trans community includes all of the ‘others.’

Some trans folks are also women.
Some trans folks are also disabled.
Some trans folks are also neurodivergent.
Some trans folks are also fat.
Black.
Brown.
Indigenous.
Immigrants.
Some trans folks experience addiction.
Some are unhoused.
Some are in the sex work industry, with varying relationships to that work.

At each of these intersections, each of these social locations that have been excluded from care, from dignity, and from justice, being transgender changes the experience of additional marginalization, just like these additional marginalizations change the experience of being transgender. Trans liberation means that we don’t leave each other behind. That’s good for the trans community and it’s also good for cisgender people at each of these social locations.

As participants noted multiple times, it is often trans folks who are doing the hard work, speaking up, getting out into the streets to advocate for justice for ourselves and for others.

Trans activisms are, at their best, linked to many other justice-oriented activisms, including, but not limited to:

**Black activisms.** Not only are trans folks involved in contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter, they have been a core part of organizing historically. Black trans sex workers were at the heart of the Stonewall riots and so many other
critical moments in justice work. One example is Miss Major, who was a leader during the Stonewall riots, served as the first Executive Director of the Transgender Gender Variant Intersex Justice Project, which assists transgender folks who are incarcerated. Both Black communities and transgender communities experience disproportional rates of incarceration, and this intersectional work is critical.

**Indigenous activisms.** Trans and Indigenous activists are often aligned in working to challenge colonialism’s strong focus on the gender binary. As Chelsea Vowel writes in *Indigenous Writes*, “Overcoming colonially imposed views of sex, sexuality, gender, and identity is no small matter, particularly since Indigenous people are still experiencing colonialism in a very real way... A focus on trans and Two-Spirit people as central to decolonization is incredibly important.”

**Disability activisms.** Sins Invalid, a disability justice performance project, writes in their vision statement that, “Sins Invalid recognizes that we will be liberated as whole beings—as disabled, as queer, as brown, as black, as gender non-conforming, as trans, as women, as men, as non-binary gendered— we are far greater whole than partitioned. We recognize that our allies emerge from many communities and that demographic identity alone does not determine one’s commitment to liberation.”

**Sex worker activisms.** Sex workers face significant stigma, and are made vulnerable by unjust laws and a lack of social support. So do trans folks. According to the report *Meaningful Work: Transgender experiences in the sex trade* (2015), “For many transgender people, the sex trade can offer greater autonomy and financial stability... with few barriers to entry. However, economic insecurity and material deprivation can increase one’s vulnerability to harm and decrease the ability to make self-determined choices.” In response to this reality, trans sex workers have been advocating for harm reduction and decriminalization, and engaging in mutual aid to support each other for generations.

**Reproductive justice activisms.** Trans activisms have a major focus on defending body autonomy. As one conversation participant said, “Nobody should be forced to have medical interventions that they don’t want, and nobody should be prevented from accessing medical care that they want or need.” This goal is fundamentally aligned with reproductive justice, and advocating for trans inclusion in reproductive justice opens up more space for everyone to access affirming and supportive care.
Police and prison justice work. Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, in their essay 'Building an abolitionist trans and queer movement with everything we've got', write, “The violence that transgender people - significantly low-income transgender people of color - face in prisons, jails, and detention centers and the cycles of poverty and criminalization that leads so many of us to imprisonment is a key place to work for broad-based social and political transformation. There is no way that transgender people can ever be "safe" in prisons as long as prisons exist and, as scholar Fred Moten has written, as long as we live in a society that could even have prisons. Building a trans and queer abolitionist movement means building power among people facing multiple systems of oppression in order to imagine a world beyond mass devastation, violence, and inequity that occurs within and between communities.”

Despite this long history of collaboration and community care, trans activism and feminist activism are often framed in opposition to each other. This oppositional framing became a media and campus focus in March 2019. In response, a small group of individuals in Calgary, Alberta hosted a conversation that celebrates the ways in which trans activism and feminist activism are not only in alignment with each other, but also meaningfully enhance each other.

This collective document brings together what we shared in that conversation about our own appreciation for, and experience of, trans feminist activisms, as well as our hopes for the future.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION!

We would love to hear your stories of celebrating, witnessing, and being moved by trans feminist activisms. In our experience, these stories of celebration are often overshadowed by stories of struggle and conflict, and we want to respond to that problem by making space for celebration.

You can send your story, or your response to this document, to Tiffany Sostar at tiffanysostar@proton.me.
Celebrating Trans Creativity

We create our gender by doing it.

Trans feminist activism includes telling our stories. This is a radical act of creativity and creation; the culture around us is so hostile to trans lives and experiences that when we tell the story of our gender, of our survival, of our persistence... we are telling a story that is in direct contradiction to the stories told about us.

Many of the stories told to us, about us, are of trans tragedy. Either the tragedy in our own lives – struggle, poverty, death; or the tragedy of trans existence in other people’s lives – deception, intrusion, destabilization.

But trans creativity means that we tell the many stories of our lives. And we tell these stories just by existing. We share our experiences, and for those folks who are lucky enough to hear our stories, our creative response to the world can open up whole new ways of thinking about gender, about culture, about self.

Trans stories are stories of complexity and nuances; human stories.

PART OF TRANS ACTIVISM IS JUST LIVING AS A TRANS PERSON.

We do everything that cisgender folks do, including parenting, gardening, making music, making art, making friends, navigating careers and hobbies and relationships.

We navigate medical systems and legal systems and dating apps and workplaces that were never designed for us, and we create space for our own futures. And in those acts of creativity, we make space for other people, too.

Our lives are creative, generative, restorative.
WHY TRANS CREATIVITY MATTERS FOR CISGENDER COMMUNITIES

Because of trans activism, cisgender folks are invited to confront gender in a way that is new to them. By breaking down boundaries and categories and making it possible to question gender rules and gender norms, trans activism helps everyone.

Cis folks can break gender rules because of trans activism.

You don’t have to be transgender to be gender non-conforming. There are many cisgender individuals, whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth, but whose gender expression defies or resists cultural gender norms. Gender expression and gender identity are separate issues.

By recognizing that gender non-conformity does not necessarily indicate a transgender identity, and by pushing the medical profession to also recognize this fact, transgender activists and advocates have opened up space for gender non-conforming cisgender folks to have more freedom and flexibility in their gender expression, and for them to be understood to be resisting or defying gender norms without also being pathologized or pushed into identifying as transgender.

When we are free to be ourselves, so is everyone else.
Celebrating Trans Community

Despite consistent efforts to diminish, devalue, and dehumanize us, trans community persists.

Despite the fact that our histories have been hidden, erased, and even actively destroyed, trans folks find each other, tell each other our stories, curate and communicate our histories and our legacies of persistence.

Trans activism is about collaboration, community care, and collective action.

We care for each other, and we find each other. We join together.

When we advocate for our own needs, we are also advocating for the needs of others. And, often, when we might not speak up for ourselves, we will speak up for each other.

One of the strong themes in the conversation was that trans feminist activist include a focus on making space for everyone and finding ways to make everyone feel included.

WHO IS IN THE TRANS COMMUNITY?

The trans community includes everyone who identifies as not being cisgender, and as part of the community. Gatekeeping does not serve us. This might include:

- Trans kids
- Trans youth
- Trans adults
- Trans elders
- Trans women
- Trans men
- Non-binary folks (who may or may not identify as transgender)
- Black trans folks, including the many different nations and groups in Africa and the wide diversity of the African diaspora
- Indigenous folks outside the colonial gender binary (who may or may not identify as transgender)
- South Asian and East Asian trans folks (who may identify with traditional non-colonial gender identities)
- Trans folks who medically transition
- Trans folks who socially transition
- Intersex folks who identify as transgender
- Trans folks who are visible
- Trans folks who are not visible, including those who are not “out” and those who “pass”
- Anyone who does not identify as cisgender (meaning their gender aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth)
Celebrating Trans Advocacy

“I'M A TRANS ACTIVIST BECAUSE I HAVE TO ADVOCATE FOR MYSELF.”

We recognize that, too often, trans folks are pushed into advocacy regardless of what we might want for ourselves.

Sometimes our advocacy is chosen, and we absolutely celebrate those trans feminist activists who want to be out there, pushing for change.

But we also celebrate those trans feminist activists who are doing it because we have to. Being trans sometimes means that we have to advocate for ourselves because far too often, nobody else will.

Because of this, celebrating trans advocacy means being intentional about holding space for multiple stories of what it means to be an advocate, and honouring the complexity of feelings that we might have about our own role as an advocate.

Are there material differences between trans activists and trans people?

If we are visibly trans, or known to be trans, we often become default activists because we draw the attention, and the questions, of people who are sometimes hostile and sometimes curious.

It is difficult to take a neutral stance when we are visibly trans or known to be trans, because even if we decline to answer questions, this is seen as a position that reflects on the trans community as a whole.

Our actions and behaviour are seen as a reflection on the trans community as a whole, and if we have a bad day (especially if someone records our bad day and posts it to the internet), this becomes weaponized against the whole community.

Our lives are politicized – made into political statements and positions regardless of our own individual desires – and because of this, many of us are inadvertent advocates; activists because that’s the only way to survive.

We are often forced to be biological, medical, and sociological experts, because if we aren’t, then we won’t get the healthcare that we need, and we won’t be seen as
valid within our identities. We are often put on the spot by strangers, coworkers, family members, and even professionals who are supposed to be helping us, bombarded with questions about the meaning, history, and scientific reality of gender. (And even when we share some of this knowledge, we are often dismissed! “Science says there are only two genders/sexes” is a myth that just refuses to die.)

**Celebrating Trans Persistence**

As trans individuals, and trans community, and trans feminist activists, we are navigating a huge number of pressures in our lives.

Despite this, we persist.

We tell our stories, we share our experiences.

Even when our histories are stolen from us, erased and denied, we find each other across time.

**Honouring Trans Grief**

REAL GRIEF FOR A LOSS CAN’T BE ABSTRACTED OR INTELLECTUALIZED

Although we cannot celebrate the grief that was such a strong thread through parts of this conversation, we must honour it.

For some of us, grief is activism.

Trans Day of Remembrance is a critical piece of trans activism, and as one participant said, our grief can push us to use our voice more.
Celebrating Trans Anger

“IT SHOULD NOT BE MY RESPONSIBILITY TO TONE MYSELF DOWN. IT SHOULD BE THEIR RESPONSIBILITY TO RECOGNIZE THE VALIDITY OF MY LIFE AND MY EMOTIONS!”

Anger is a difficult topic within trans feminist activisms, and highlights the range of approaches that different trans activists take in their work.

These are some of the questions that came up during our conversation, and that engage (and sometimes divide) the community of trans feminist activists.

➢ Is anger a good thing or a bad thing in trans feminist activisms?
➢ Are we allowed to be angry?
➢ How much anger is too much anger?
➢ Whose anger is considered valid, and whose anger is considered violence?

IS ANGER A GOOD THING OR A BAD THING IN TRANS FEMINIST ACTIVISMS?

Regardless of our own feelings about anger, we recognize that the anger of the trans community, and especially the anger of trans women, is used to invalidate our experiences and frame us as everything from irrational and ridiculous to threatening and dangerous.

When we make choices about our own expressions of anger, these choices occur within social contexts that are often hostile to any expression of anger. One participant shared that, “too much anger can end up being counter to our goals,” and this reflects the fact that our anger is used to invalidate our experiences and our actions. This does not reflect the validity or value of our anger itself.

This contextual reality may influence how we express our anger, and our public or shared expressions of anger may or may not reflect our experience of anger.

Because of this complex and contentious reality, and because of the fact that gendered norms around the expression of anger impact the trans community in complex ways, there is no simple “right answer” to the question of anger’s value in trans feminist activisms.
Trans men and trans masculine folks may find the expression of anger a valuable and freeing refusal of patriarchal expectations of non-emotionality, and a way to reclaim emotional space that is often denied to individuals who are assigned female at birth.

At the same time, trans women and trans feminine folks may receive significant backlash for any expression of visible anger, because the social acceptance of anger in public spaces is often reserved for men. Trans women expressing anger may experience misgendering and dismissal because of the way anger is gendered under patriarchy. This means that no matter how valuable or freeing they may find the expression of anger, its interpretation in public spaces may be hostile or violent.

**When anger is helpful**

For some of us, anger is a critical part of our trans feminist activism, and our anger is one of the tools that keeps us in touch with our own strong values and commitments to justice.

Staying connected to our anger and expressing it to other people may be one way that we work to, as one participant put it, “tear down patriarchal expectations of non-emotionality.” Because our expressions of anger are often used to dismiss our experiences or points of view, by refusing to give up our anger we can challenge the idea that anger is somehow inappropriate or unacceptable in public spaces. When we are confronted with the idea that “they would listen if you weren’t so angry,” sometimes anger allows us to respond, “they should listen because my anger is justified!”

This anger can fuel our work and can remind of us why it matters. For some of us, anger makes our activism possible.

**When anger is unhelpful**

For some of us, too much anger is unhelpful. (The line that defines “too much” is deeply personal and reflects our contexts and histories.)

This may be the case for a wide range of reasons that may include our family histories regarding anger, our social context, our personal preferences, and the expectations and norms of the people we are in relationship with. When we feel angry, we feel less objective, less analytical, less able to engage in conversation or to express ourselves well. We may find that anger gets in the way of us expressing ourselves in ways that can be heard and received, and it sometimes even gets in the way of our functioning.
There is so much in this world to be angry about, and for some of us, this can be
overwhelming. There are times when turning away from anger in order to use
other emotions and other approaches can help us feel more safe, more grounded,
more able to respond.

Making anger possible
For some of us, having support makes anger possible.

We recognize that there is a
long history of generative and
justice-oriented anger in trans
feminist activisms.

“Trans folks are the first to
do the hard work, to speak
up, to get out into the
streets.”

Anger, among other things, is
what has allowed us to speak
up, to get out there, to do the
hard work.

Knowing that we are joining a
legacy of work sometimes
allows us to access our anger in
ways that are supportive and
active.

It also helps when we have
supportive friends and
community who affirm that our
anger is valid, and that we are
not bad or wrong for feeling or
expressing anger. This is particularly true when our community supports us in
compassionate accountability – it is easier to feel safe in our anger when we know
that if we do cross a line or express our anger in harmful ways, we will be invited
into accountability without being discarded or shunned.

Anger in multiple contexts
Recognizing how anger influences our internal
experience is different than making choices
about how we express our anger to others.

It is possible, and expected, for someone to have
multiple true stories about their own experience
of anger. It is valid for a trans person (or any
person) to feel a significant amount of anger
internally and still be uncomfortable expressing
that anger externally, or to strongly value the
expression of anger as a tool for justice while still
feeling uncomfortable with the internal
experience of anger.

We reject the idea that a person can only have
one true story of an emotion, or that feeling one
way sometimes means we can’t feel other ways
other times.

We also recognize that there are also significant
differences between how we express our anger
among trusted friends and community, and how
we express our anger in public or in hostile
contexts.

We trust trans people to make their own choices
about how and when to express anger.
The interpretation of anger

One of the themes in our conversation was the fact that some groups are seen as angry regardless of their actions, tone, and words. For these groups, safety in anger is much harder to access.

This is an injustice.

Black and Indigenous folks, anyone who is assumed to be Middle Eastern, and trans women, in particular, are often interpreted as being angry regardless of how they speak or act. Their anger is often interpreted as a threat, and so even when they are not expressing anger, they are interpreted as angry, and as threatening. This puts them at risk.

Audre Lorde’s 1981 essay, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” addresses this topic directly, and was referenced in our conversation. This essay is available on blackpast.org, and we highly recommend it.

Other communities, particularly Asian folks, many disabled folks, and some white women (when they are perceived as cisgender, straight, and normatively attractive), are assumed to be passive and their anger is considered humorous or dismissible.

Anger, and all the things it isn’t

“Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change.”

Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches

Anger is many things, but we also spoke about what it isn’t. This part of the conversation was important, because for many of us, anger is hard to access because we worry that it will immediately or inevitably become (or already is) hatred, or violence, or harm.

Anger is not hatred. Although hatred and anger might be felt together, they are not the same thing.

Anger is not violence. Violence and anger may be expressed together, but they are not the same thing. And, critically, the act of expressing anger is not inherently
violent. It may be uncomfortable for other people to hear, but it is not inherently violent.

For those of us who have not had non-violent anger modeled for us, learning what anger isn’t can be an important and empowering process. This is also true for those of us who associate anger with violence, either because of our own histories or because of the way anger is often framed in contemporary culture, and are afraid of enacting violence on others if we allow ourselves to express anger.

There are many ways to do trans feminist activism, and anger is only one part of the puzzle.

But, because trans anger is so often vilified and dismissed, we want to celebrate the many ways that people make choices about what they do with their anger.

Trans anger is important.

**WHY WE’RE ANGRY**

“Some of us are angry because our histories are being erased.”

There are so many reasons for our anger. Violence against the trans community, particularly against trans women of colour, is an epidemic that results not only in the direct murder of trans community members but also in the slow murder of poor healthcare, lack of employment, lack of social support, and despair.

We are angry because we are facing injustice.

**Understanding Our Own Anger**

What is the dominant story about your anger? Meaning, what have you learned from the world around you about how your anger will be interpreted?

Who does this story serve?

Does this story match your own story of your anger? A lot, a little, not at all?

If your own story of your anger does not match this dominant story, how did you learn to question or challenge the dominant story?

Has anyone supported you in learning to challenge dominant stories?

What does your anger mean to you?

What does it look like, sound like, feel like?

What is your relationship with your anger?

Is there anyone in your life who has helped you understand or express your anger?

Is there anyone in your life who knows what you are angry about?

What does your anger make possible in your life?

Has your anger made a difference in anyone else’s life?

Has someone else’s anger made a difference in your life?