

# TENDER AND TRANSFORMATIVE CARE

## Reflections on the liberational potential of t4t friendships

NICO MISKOW FRIBORG

### Keywords

Trans autoethnography, t4t friendship, trans care, coalitional organizing

### Summary

Throughout my research on and engagements in trans for trans (t4t) organizing, the careful, consistent, everyday practices of trans care which are necessary to render trans life livable, such as continuously checking in with trans friends; accompaniment for doctor's appointments; and sporadic decompressing after experiences of violence, continue to resurface as central. At the core of these practices, which I conceptualize as *mundane trans care*, are interpersonal, intra- and intercommunal relationships. My interest in these relationships is fueled by the devastating experience of losing a close trans friend and kin, and because I believe they are crucial to mundane trans care and to coalitional trans organizing more broadly.

Inspired by Edda Gaviola's (2015) reflections on "the political friendship between women" and V. Jo Hsu's (2022) "t4t love-politics", and by thinking through writings on trans care that tend to both the upsides, pleasures, and messiness of t4t (Malatino 2020, 2022; Marvin 2022), this article is curious about the potential of t4t friendships for the cultivation of tender and transformative care in t4t organizing. Anchored in the collage of materials in my ongoing collaborative (auto)ethnographic research on t4t organizing, I ask: How is care cultivated in t4t friendships? How can t4t friendships be generative of collective trans liberation? And how can we make the careful construction of vulnerability, accompliceship, and tender, transformative care in t4t friendships spill into t4t organizing?

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I artikeln utgår jag från vad jag kallar en t4t metodik (*t4t methodology*) och undersöker en t4t vänskap som bildade grunden för att praktisera kollaborativ autoetnografi. I analysen visar jag hur detta möjliggjorde kollektiv kunskapsgenerering om de strukturer som formar transpersoners liv och koalitionsbyggande trans organisering. Artikeln undersöker några av de centrala aspekterna av vad jag begreppsliiggör som vardaglig trans omsorg (*mundane trans care*) inom t4t vänskap, nämligen kollektiva analyser, närvaro, följeslagande, sårbarhet, ömhet och byggandet av *accompliceship* och motstånd över skillnader. Jag menar att dessa praktiker kan kollektiviseras och spridas till bredare trans organisering när vi uppmärksammar och förstärker dem varhelst de äger rum, så att de kan blomstra och spridas bortom statens blick. Artikeln pekar framför allt på vikten av att lyfta fram de relationer vi bygger genom koalitionsbyggande trans organisering.

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### Reflections on the liberational potential of t4t friendships

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As I am running through the long online chat history with my late friend and trans kin, Fernanda Milán, searching for a specific conversation on our friendship, I am surprised at how many “thank you” and “I appreciate...” we exchanged. “Thank you for your support, my love,” “thank you for listening,” “thank you for your time and words, friend,” “thank you for asking how I am,” “thank you for being in my life, I really appreciate it,” “thank you for caring so much for me,” “thank you for being my friend.” The phrases contain some of the crucial elements of what

I have come to learn and appreciate about friendships between trans people, and particularly the one I had/have with Fernanda: The intentionality with which we built and nourished our friendship; the way a friendship is grounded in actions and presence; and how it is upheld through mutuality, care and tenderness. The importance of *trans* friendships, and of trans for trans love.

Throughout my research on and engagements in trans for trans (t4t) organizing, the carefully crafted, continuous, everyday practices of trans care that render trans life livable, which I conceptualize as *mundane trans care*, and the interpersonal, intra- and intercommunal relationships at their core, continue to resurface. My interest in these relationships is driven by the devastating experience of losing Fernanda and by the understanding that they are crucial to mundane trans care and to coalitional trans organizing more broadly. Anchored in my ongoing collaborative (auto)ethnographic PhD project on t4t organizing in Denmark, this article is curious about the potential of t4t friendships for the cultivation of tender, transformative care in t4t organizing.

Inspired by Margarita Pisano and Edda Gaviola's (2015) reflections on "the political friendship between women" and V. Jo Hsu's (2022) "t4t love-politics," and by thinking through writings on trans care that tend to both the upsides, pleasures, and messiness of t4t (Malatino 2020, 2022; Marvin 2022), I ask: How do we cultivate care for one another in t4t friendships? How can t4t friendships be generative of trans liberation? And how can we make the careful construction of vulnerability, accompliceship, and tender, transformative care in t4t friendships spill into t4t organizing?

The article is structured in five sections. I start by unfolding the t4t methodology that is the anchor of my research practices. Next, I dwell on how I engaged autoethnography as a healing and collaborative practice, particularly in adapting to living with and being through grief. After a brief introduction to the concept *mundane trans care*, I zoom in on the interpersonal, intra- and intercommunal relationships at the core of mundane trans care. I then reflect on their liberational potential. Lastly, I explore how we can intentionally let these practices spill into t4t organizing so that it might be pollinated with vulnerability, mutuality, accompliceship and tender, transformative care.

### **(Re)searching for collective trans liberation: A t4t methodology**

My research is grounded in what I term a *t4t methodology*, which springs from my involvement in trans coalitions and my interest in cultivating research practices that emerge from and contribute to trans coalition-building, collective trans liberation, and trans livability.

The t4t methodology I practice aims to turn the trans relational, organizing and care practice of *t4t* (Malatino 2022) into a methodological framework, where the researcher is firmly located *in* the organizing and organizes and thinks alongside other organizers, hereby doing research *by, for, and, importantly, with* trans coalitions. This means that the materials I draw on and the analyses I present in the article are a result of the ways I have followed, had conversations about, *and* formed part of trans organizing. Since I began my PhD research in September 2019, these practices have encompassed deep embeddedness in day-to-day trans organizing through my main organizing platform until summer 2022, TransAktion, which was a grassroots-based t4t coalition that grappled with a critical approach to funding and professionalization. I engaged collaborative approaches to ethnography (Jourian and Nicolazzo 2017) and autoethnography (Dahl 2010; Stewart 2017; Nicolazzo 2019; Jones and Harris 2019; Crawford 2021). I conducted oral history interviews with more than 25 trans organizers who were/are engaged in trans organizing between the 1980s and today and co-facilitated workshops, collaborative memory work and collective analyses online and throughout Denmark with a total of more than 50 participants. Lastly, I uncovered *counter-archival* materials (Haritaworn, Moussa and Ware 2018) through a method of *following* (Alm et al. 2021: 6) the traces and paper trails of organizers. All methods have been approved by Sikt, the Norwegian center for research data.

In my approach to a t4t methodology I interweave varied, non-hierarchized forms of trans knowledge. I understand trans knowledge to be embodied and deeply rooted in practices of and rigorous theorizing on how to resist, survive and liberate us, and always grounded in relationality and practices of trans care (see also Gill-Peterson 2021; Raha and Van der Drift 2024). The trans knowledge I engage is created and circulated by individual trans people, collectively in the organizing, as well as in/against the university. I am inspired by, conspire and engage in conversation with other organizers and scholars who also understand the upending of transantagonism and anti-trans violence as inextricably linked to the upending of the colonial gender system and the white, capitalist, ableist, cis heteropatriarchy (The River and Fire Collective 2021: 94; see also Spade 2015; Stanley 2021; Malatino 2022; Raha and Van der Drift 2024), particularly those involved in transfeminist, anarchist, queer, anticolonial, crip, Mad and abolitionist practices and theorizing.

An important aspect of my practice of a t4t methodology has been to pay attention to and foreground the shifting needs of trans coalitions. Doing so has required that I keep the research scope and outputs flexible and that I

redistribute resources from the university, such as by “stealing” time to spend organizing (Moten and Harney 2004: 101, 103).

### **Between anonymity and erasure**

In all interviews and workshops, we discussed anonymization and consent before I turned on the recorder, including the possibility to withdraw from the project at any time and retract knowledge shared. The collaborators overwhelmingly wanted to *not* be anonymized. Following our conversations, I understand their decision in relation to the ongoing erasure of trans existence, labor, and knowledge, and as a desire to have their knowledge, analyses and labor recognized and made visible. Many trans coalition organizers experienced that their engagements and efforts in certain struggles have been left out of both official archives and word of mouth accounts. For me to anonymize them in my writing would be a continuation of this invisibilization.

The risks of not anonymizing are not lost on me or my collaborators who in our daily struggles and organizing are confronted with the local and international intensification of *transantagonism* (Stanley 2021) fueled by the rise of neofascism and anti-gender movements (Pearce et al. 2020; Alm and Engebretsen 2022; Tudor 2023). Moreover, my approach to archiving is shaped by an understanding that archives can be “extractive, a dirty thing, which can erase, keep out, and misrepresent subjects, ideas, and events” (Diallo and Miskow Friberg 2024: 1) and that they can be used to control and regulate subjects, including by a punitive state. In my writing, I therefore balance a respect for the decisions of my collaborators with an attentiveness to what kind of knowledge I share and foreground. This includes reflecting on which insights are for the academy and which are for trans coalitions and spaces only, as well as to carefully consider how and through which stories trans people become known, particularly by not letting trans women and transfeminine people who are black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) be known mainly through suffering and trauma (see also Tuck and Yang 2014).

Fernanda and I continuously and transparently discussed this, and we had a clear agreement that I would write about her organizing under her full name without anonymization, including sharing our chat conversations on all aspects of organizing. She continuously voiced a strong wish to be recognized for her struggles and contributions, and for her wisdom to be circulated and amplified. And I would not do anything but honor and respect those wishes.

## Collaborative trans autoethnography as healing

When I was told you had died from a heart attack, my instinctive reaction was to scream into the phone that this world of white supremacy and cis heteropatriarchy had killed you. And now, half a year later, I still don't have other answers. I don't think it's very clear to me yet why you died. What is clear to me, is that one way or another I must continue our struggles, and the ways we were weaving together feminisms, trans care, and tenderness. I care so much for you, and I try to continue to learn from you every day. I'm sending an enormous hug and a big kiss to you wherever you are 💜. (My own translation of a social media entry written by me in Spanish)

While working through the devastating experience of losing my close friend and trans kin, Fernanda, I have experimented with ways that writing and autoethnography can be healing. I first met Fernanda in the early 2010s when she was organizing against her own deportation from Denmark and for the asylum, survival and lives of other trans refugees. However, it was not until 2018 when we started organizing together in TransAktion, that we really got to know each other. Our friendship developed rapidly and intensely through organizing meetings, daily conversations, and through visits and weekend trips. We came to consider each other family. A few months after Fernanda passed prematurely due to a heart attack in 2022, I delved into a grieving and research practice that some people close to me worried could become obsessive. Perhaps I did become obsessed with unearthing, documenting and learning from and with Fernanda's life and organizing. Obsessed with understanding what led to her premature death and how to prevent deaths like hers in the future. An obsession with and commitment to life and to building infrastructures that support trans livability.

At the time of her passing, Fernanda and I were deep into a collaboration between TransAktion and my PhD project in which we organized panels and trans activist workshops of collective memory work; traced her campaign for asylum in Denmark; had long talks about trans coalitional work; and conducted structured conversations and interviews about Fernanda's organizing for a dissertation chapter and an additional co-authored article. Fernanda's sudden passing completely changed the nature of our collaborative research and writing on her organizing. I could no longer check in or contemplate in real time with Fernanda. I now had to rely on my interpretation of the consent she gave and the trust we built, and search for her wisdom and reflections in my memory, in her lingering presence and in all the traces she left behind. I began listening to

our recorded conversations; reading our chat history; going through her social media posts; excavating articles about her campaign for asylum; and watching videos of panels and interviews. Doing so, I created a space where I could spend time with her, extend our relationship beyond her death, thoroughly engage with and honor her experiences and wisdom, and have an outlet for my grief.

As it has for other trans researchers (Stewart 2017: 301; Pearce 2018: 13; LeMaster and Johnson 2020: 5), autoethnography provided me with a dedicated space and structured, yet creative, manner to go about these questions, thoughts, and emotions, so that I could connect them to wider societal structures, such as the colonial gender system, border regimes, *trans necropolitics* (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013), the white supremacist cis heteropatriarchy and transmisogyny. Simultaneously, autoethnography offered me an outlet for the built-up rage I have towards these structures for the ways they work to end us. Because autoethnography is grounded in critical, self-reflective research particularly within gender, queer, trans, Mad, and crip studies (Dahl 2010; Stewart 2017; Pearce 2018; Nicolazzo 2019; Jones and Harris 2019; LeMaster and Johnson 2020; Crawford 2021) it can be a crucial antidote to, and way of unlearning and healing from, the harmful, extractivist, objectifying, positivist research practices I was exposed to as an anthropology student (Diallo and Miskow Friborg 2021). I have found that when practiced collaboratively, autoethnography is grounded in deep relations and an “embodied, shared knowing” (Diallo and Yohanness 2024; see also Acharya and Muasya 2023: 30, 32) with coalition-building potential as we hold space for care, bear witness to and learn to better understand each other in the aftermath of violence.

In the collective memory work and collaborative autoethnography that Fernanda and I practiced, our friendship formed a foundation from where we collectively made sense of our experiences and in doing so generated knowledge on the structures that shape trans lives and coalitional trans organizing. The collaborative autoethnography was both a meaningful extension of how I understand my research as anchored in theorizing and organizing alongside trans coalitions and a way to deepen our friendship. As I was unearthing, analyzing and connecting Fernanda’s knowledge and organizing, my appreciation and awe of her person, contributions, wisdom and friendship grew. Sitting alone in front of my computer, headphones in, listening to Fernanda’s voice, jotting down notes and shedding tears, I felt disconnected from the collective spaces we formed part of together, and it confirmed how important our friendship and collaboration had been to me and to the work and organizing I engage in. It is my appreciation and longing for our friendship that gave way to the reflections on the importance of t4t friendships that I unfold in this article.

### Conceptualizing mundane trans care

The quote opening the previous section is part of a post I wrote to Fernanda six months after her passing. In struggling with the questions around her death, my instinctive analysis was, and continues to be, that it was the accumulated violence she experienced throughout her life that killed her. Losing Fernanda filled me with grief and rage. The grief and rage were no doubt tied to her death: to her loss of what she hoped was about to become a more livable life, my loss of a close friend and family member, and our trans coalitions losing such a wise, caring, and driven organizer. But more than anything, my rage was about the injustices, pain and violence that led to her death. As I sit with these reflections, I think of the way poet Cam Awkward-Rich writes about the suspicion “of the idea that death itself is unjust” in their essay on elegies, Trans Day of Remembrance and the death of particularly black trans women:

What is unjust is everything that preceded the end. What is unjust is the terms of living. There is something deeply unsettling, that is, to the insistence that someone ought to be alive in a world that did little to support that life. (in Malatino 2020: 4)

I think a way for me to honor Fernanda, then, is to dwell on the injustices of her living conditions. To obsess and insist on asking questions such as: which forms of violence contributed to her death? Which forms of care were needed but inaccessible to her? And how can we as trans coalition organizers continue to amplify Fernanda’s wisdom and cultivate and circulate care in ways that might have kept her alive?

The conversations I had throughout the PhD project, the materials I unearthed, and the t4t organizing I form(ed) part of are full of examples of the manifold ways in which trans people care for one another. The ways these practices continue to resurface has made it clear to me how crucial and widespread they are, and how the sporadic care practices, that are bound up on interpersonal, inter- and intracommunal relationships between trans people, intertwine with more collectively organized forms of care in and through t4t spaces and coalitions. To make sense of these carefully crafted, tedious, everyday practices of caring for one another and keeping each other alive, I offer the concept *mundane trans care*. *Mundane* has a double meaning here. First, as everyday practices *necessary* to trans survival. And second, because the violent systems amidst which trans people keep each other alive are invisibilized, normalized and made mundane, so are the care practices required to survive them (Miskow Friborg forthcoming 2026). Mundane trans care encompasses the sporadic practices of spreading



word of mouth and the trans knowledge needed to survive; accompaniment to the gender identity clinic or the migration office; and regularly keeping tabs on one another. Mundane trans care is also the more organized practices of creating intentional, collective trans spaces; setting up a t4t counselling or facilitating trans support groups (Miskow Friborg forthcoming 2026).

My conceptualization of mundane trans care is inspired by queer, trans and crip reworkings of mutual aid (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2019; Spade 2020), by recent theorizations on t4t and trans care (Malatino 2020, 2022; Honkasalo 2020; Edelman 2020; Raha 2021; Raha and Van der Drift 2024) and by *Liga de Salud Trans* who approaches trans care as a continuum of actions, experiences and relationships where care moves from the individual to the collective and is “an action or a logic [...] that is directed towards others and towards ourselves to make a life in well-being possible” (Rocha, Ruiz and Salamanca 2022: 29). These theorizations of trans care unsettle feminist care ethics and literature on care labor which center white, euro-centric notions of family, kinship, domesticity and intimacy which rely on the colonial gender system. Importantly, the analyses shared by my collaborators make visible how the state fails to, or more accurately succeeds in withholding, care for trans people.

For people not entrenched in trans care practices in a Danish context, it might be difficult to imagine they are necessary to trans survival, livability and thriving. The persistent narratives of Danish exceptionalism that circulate internationally paint false pictures of a benevolent welfare state and of Denmark as an LGBT rights frontrunner country (Nebeling Petersen 2016; Miskow Friborg 2023). However, these fantasies crumble when we theorize the state through the lens of decades of trans organizing. I argue that the care practices and analyses of trans coalition organizers make visible the state’s gendered and racialized maldistribution of life chances (Spade 2015). That is, how some lives are promoted and supported by the Danish state, while others are neglected, rendered disposable and unlivable. Previously I have traced the state’s configurations of transness as “degenerate”, “asocial”, pathological and unlivable from the eugenicist 1929/1935 castration law to the current day national treatment protocol that regulates access to body-modification technologies (Miskow Friborg 2023: 69). The state’s maldistribution of care and configuration of transness as unlivable is reproduced within NGOs, mainstream LGB(T) organizations, and some trans coalitions, where the “care” offered and withheld becomes contingent on hierarchies of worthiness, on narrow understandings of transness and trans struggles, and on gendering, racialization, financial situation, and migration status (Miskow Friborg 2023: 75, forthcoming 2026).

Contrary to such *one-dimensional* (Ferguson 2019) and conditional forms of “care”, I engage mundane trans care as a continuum of practices, experiences, relationships, and coalitional organizing that are politicizing and collective at their core, and that enable and offer blueprints for surviving, enduring, making life livable and, importantly, for thriving (Miskow Friborg forthcoming 2026).

In the following, as I unfold practices of mundane trans care in t4t friendships, I aim to hold space for the messiness of t4t (Malatino 2020, 2022; Marvin 2022; Raha and Van der Drift 2024) and acknowledge that although we engage in practices to keep each other alive, care for and uplift one another, we are also entrenched in the structures that we seek to intervene in and upend and therefore sometimes also hurt each other.

### **The liberational potential of political friendships between trans people**

Grieving Fernanda’s passing gave way to some deep reflections on friendship which had me reading Edda Gaviola’s (2015) contemplations on “the political friendship between women,” a text written in Spanish, printed on beautiful, granulated paper in zine-size, that Gaviola wrote after the death of her dear friend and accomplice Margarita Pisano. Gaviola describes what she terms a political friendship as:

a process that begins in the encounter and in the urgent need to change the meaning of life and history going through the respectful construction of trust, mutual wants and longings that are taking shape on the path of discovery of the other, of oneself and of a genealogy of women. (Gaviola 2015: 10)

While Gaviola’s reflections are based in friendships between women, and a genealogy of women and/in Latin American feminisms (2015: 7-8), I want to use her definition as a starting point for thinking of the politicizing and liberational potential of t4t friendships that are anchored in coalitional trans organizing, quests for trans-enabling spaces, knowledge and relationships, and mutual longings for and practices of collective trans liberation.

Like Gaviola and Pisano, my friendship with Fernanda, and with many other trans people, grew from deep commitments to trans coalitional organizing and the practices of mundane trans care we engaged in collectively. In their writing on trans care and t4t, Malatino highlights how part of what binds us together as trans people is “the affective and practical disinvestment of the people and institutions we’ve needed – or been forced to – rely on for care” (2020: 2-3). Anchored in my analyses of the radicalizing potential of mundane

trans care (Miskow Friborg forthcoming 2026) I think there is something inherently politicizing about t4t friendships in that we are also connected by a critical analysis of, and often urgent need to intervene in, the transantagonist structures that create these disinvestments and the care practices we engage in to survive them.

In the section that follows, I unfold how when we collectively share and develop these critical analyses there is potential for politicization and for deepening the friendship as we continue to learn about ourselves, each other and the forms of organizing we collectively engage in.

### **Collective analyses as generating-poles for world-making**

A crucial aspect of mundane trans care and/in t4t friendships that comes up in the materials generated for my PhD project is how sharing space with other trans people gives way to coming into, exploring and affirming transness, to bearing witness to one another and to holding space for difficult emotions and experiences of neglect and violence. In one oral history interview conducted within the PhD project, Yoon, a trans man who initiated and ran a key t4t online site called transfaq.info in the 2010's, described to me how important collective, politicized living spaces and *basisgrupper* [consciousness raising or affinity groups] have been in his transition and throughout other big life changes such as becoming a parent. It was in collectives and affinity groups that he built intimate relationships with other trans people which provided opportunities "to meet up and talk about more personal issues," something which seemed impossible in the often normative and narrowly framed trans spaces existing at the time.

Because sharing space with other trans people makes it possible for a wider range of emotions to be expressed, held, cared for and witnessed, it allows us to connect our experiences to a collective of people and notice that they are part of a societal pattern of transantagonist structures (Malatino 2022: 48). Further, when we bear witness to each other, we learn about commonalities and differences in our experiences, which creates a potential for doing the difficult work of relating and building solidarity (Malatino 2022: 125-127). In our oral history interview Michel, a black, afro-Columbian performance artist and organizer fighting for the rights of refugees and LGBT people, touched on her longings for a trans space and shared how she has:

come to understand that separatism is important [...] but unity is also important. [...] but it's difficult. [...] Because it's such a profound topic relating to solidarity and to respect for differences.

She went on to unfold that:

The way we create solidarity is like this, like we're doing now, sitting here, drinking a coffee, talking about "this happened to me" and "this is my experience," and "look, this is my life." That changes you.

Michel's analysis underlines how important the relationships we cultivate with one another in the organizing are for building solidarity, and therefore ultimately for the potential to organize across differences and in ways that are *multi-dimensional* (Ferguson 2019). The following excerpt from a chat conversation between Fernanda and I is an example of how we provided care for each other's processes of healing through writing, as well as of how the long-term bearing witness to and caring for each other's experiences provide avenues for critical collective analyses and (un)learning which are relevant to and informed our organizing with the wider trans coalitions:

Fernanda: I found a way to write that [text] about the revenge sisters.

But I changed it completely.

Even so, do you think that if I write a memoir, it would be of interest to people in Denmark? Or in Guatemala or the UK? I could start there, right?

Nico: wow, yeah.

Definitely!

Fernanda: Do you think that we could sell it?

Nico: There are even times when I think, "wow, so many parts of my dissertation will be about Fernanda."

✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨

Haha.

So, I believe that your life and activism is extremely interesting, and we can learn so much from you.

Fernanda: Saving that bitch was all over the place.

It's gonna be painful to read.

But I think I have a system.

Making chapters with topics.

As in greys [Anatomy] and like you do.

Like Pain, resilience, loss ... etc. ...

Nico: And even more painful to write. It's exhausting. But in my experience, and with what you've told me before, I think for you too, it can also be very healing. A way to describe nuances, analyses, strengths, other narratives, caring for oneself

in the past and in the now, learning how to have compassion for myself. Release rage that has been held inside and so on.

Fernanda: Exactly, it's like a catharsis and a discovery that can perhaps be very valuable for the present and the future.

Nico: 

(My own translation from Spanish).

Apart from our collective analysis of how writing can be healing, what I take note of in our conversation is how Fernanda's declaration "Saving that bitch was all over the place" was both a reference to her/our analysis of how her campaign for asylum in Denmark was co-opted and rewritten through narratives and attitudes of white saviorism (Miskow Friborg forthcoming 2026) and a comment on how she would not want *me* to write about her organizing in my dissertation. The exchange thus also provided an opportunity to build on our long-term dialogues on white saviorism and co-optation of trans organizing and history particularly within what Fernanda termed LGB(T) organizations.

In her reflections on the potentials of collective analyses in political friendships between women, Pisano notes that sharing ideas and continuously questioning the oppressive structures we seek to upend, and the organizing we engage in to do so, "become a generating-pole for another civilization" (Pisano 2009 in Gaviola 2015: 21). The depth of our friendship and the conversations on trans organizing and liberation that Fernanda and I had over time similarly allowed for a complexity in our collective analyses and our continuous questioning of the approaches we witnessed and applied in trans coalitional organizing. Further, they enabled collective imagining and practices of the t4t care, organizing and ultimately worlds that we needed and worked towards creating. Through the collaborative autoethnography we collectivized and extended (some of) our conversations and/on mundane trans care practices to the workshops we co-facilitated thereby circulating trans knowledge within trans coalitions and opening the analyses for more aspects.

### **Vulnerability and tenderness**

Bearing witness to each other, engaging in collective analyses and learning about our commonalities and differences both hinge upon and generate the vulnerability and tenderness necessary to sustain mutual support and accompliceship, meaning being complicit in struggles toward collective trans liberation. The lack of the same keeps many trans people from accessing care. In our conversations and practices of mundane trans care in and around trans coalitions,

Fernanda and I often discussed what had kept us from asking for or receiving the care we needed, and we questioned *which* forms of care were offered and *whose* needs they responded to. Fernanda described not being listened to or cared for in t4t spaces and I shared how I felt that violent forms of care leak into some trans coalitions from psychiatric institutions and the state's pathologization thereby shaping perceptions of transness, deservingness, sanity and of what kind of care one can ask for or is assumed to need.

Through deep, tender conversations and being there for one another, Fernanda and I developed a trust that allowed us to be vulnerable and radically honest with ourselves and each other. And to ask one another for support and company when it felt like we had nowhere else to turn. Respecting the trust, we built, and being mindful that I can no longer explicitly ask for Fernanda's consent to share, the following is a string of purposefully vague and blurry examples of such moments and exchanges between the two of us:

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T in distress: "I had an episode last night. I ended up sleeping in the streets." Loving t4t response: "What happened? Tell me about it." T in distress: "I don't know if I can. I don't understand what happened. I'm so embarrassed. [tries to describe and attempts to not hide anything]." Loving t4t response: "You don't have to feel ashamed. You can always tell me." T in distress tells a bit more. Loving t4t friend, now crying: "I love you so much. I don't want you to suffer like this. When you hurt, I hurt."

...

X: "Sometimes I think of my gender as an angel. Like on the nonbinary spectrum. I think I might be an angel." Z: "I love that!" X: "I'm not sure how to explain it. I've been trying to write about it. It's not really something I've told many people."

...

1: "I can give you the shots if you manage to get a hold of hormones from your friend." 2: "That would be beautiful! It would also be a way to make sure we meet up in person at least every 12 weeks."

...

T1: "I'm so scared!" T2: "That is so fucked up you haven't been offered a vaccine yet. I can call the clinic and ask about access." T1: "You don't have to, I can ask [my partner] again." T2: "But [your partner] won't do it. [Your partner] still hasn't done it. It's really not a problem. I'll do it right now." T1: "Thank you, my love."

o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o

Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and ask for support requires an active effort to understand one another and the ways in which our pain, struggles and desires are interrelated and interdependent, yet different. Vulnerability then is also about grasping its differential logics: the ways in which we are made vulnerable and harmed under “the colonial/modern gender system” (Lugones 2007) and white cis heteropatriarchy in different ways. Hsu suggests that when we understand the overlapping concerns and inevitable interdependency, we can pursue a “mutual vulnerability,” “an openness to being bound up with one another, and to being wounded and affected by one another” (2022: 103).

Pursuing such mutuality is difficult as it requires us to trust each other, be vulnerable and honest about the state of the world and how we are differently positioned in it. Practicing vulnerability and radical but tender honesty in my friendship with Fernanda where I felt safe to do so, has assisted me in extending these practices to the collaborative autoethnography, to other relationships and to coalitional organizing. When we practice tenderness, radical honesty, vulnerability, deep connections and interdependency in t4t friendships, we center the affective connections that build community and political transformation, and thus slowly bring these practices into our coalitional organizing.

### **Presence and accompaniment**

Trust, tenderness and vulnerability in t4t friendships are built through presence and accompaniment. I love the way that Argentinian trans writer and journalist Lea Uría writes how “Friendship appears in the novel as an offering, as a form of love that does not claim a name because it is action, because it is presence, because it is us in others without fear of losing ourselves” (2019: 9). Gaviola (2015:12-13) also describes how it was through the everydayness and presence of their friendship that she and Pisano built complicity and collective (un)learning.

In my friendship with Fernanda, it was similarly through organizing together that we became close and began building trust, tenderness and complicity. As we decompressed tough organizing situations, accompanied each other to appointments at migration offices, laughed at the ridiculousness of the trans-antagonist bullshit we each experienced, and thankfully about so much else, and as we stayed in close touch, we made way for deeper conversations and analyses and for a mutual understanding, vulnerability and interdependency to grow. This interdependency is a stark contrast to even the best efforts to break with professionalized, top-down charity models of “care” (see Piepzna-Samarasinha 2019) reproduced in many LGB(T) organizations and some trans coalitions where support usually flows only one way.

I have witnessed and reflected on similar practices of mutual aid, accompaniment and presence in numerous t4t friendships. One queer/trans friend told me about an elaborate buddy check-in system they created in a queer/trans friend group after having lost several loved ones to suicide during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Each person in the friend group was assigned two buddies they would check in on several times a week and if they didn't hear anything back, they would check with other friends. These regular check-ins are common in t4t friendships and can be the difference between life and death, especially for trans people at the margins of the "care" offered and withheld by the state and large LGB(T) organizations.

Importantly, the presence and the tender and transformative care so carefully crafted in t4t friendships not only grow from the organizing, but they frequently also keep us there. Whenever the organizing was draining, intense or when it seemed too difficult to stay on, Fernanda and I would rely on each other for decompression, rest and tender care. Often the mere prospects of organizing and spending time together kept us in the organizing. Fernanda said numerous times to me: "if it wasn't for you, I would have left a long time ago." For me, it was similarly knowing that I could count on her raw honesty, that I would get to see her smile at a meeting and that we shared so many dreams for the organizing which kept me there.

The way we cared for one another was vital to the organizing and care work with and for the wider trans coalitions. Imagining, cultivating and practicing the forms of (un)learning, liberation, joy, care and love that we ourselves needed became generative of the paths to liberation we were shaping. And (accompanying each other in) trans coalitional work was a locus of cultivating mundane trans care, connection and collective resilience. Fernanda phrased this brief and concise on numerous occasions: "activism saved my life!"

### **"Loving each other raw" – hurt, healing and accompliceship across differences**

Staying present and in close relation to one another requires a strong commitment to working through difficult moments and conflict together. Gaviola notes how her friendship with Pisano "continued to grow stronger through critique and care" (2015: 16). And further that "respect and horizontality" in political friendships are forged "through a daily effort to deconstruct" and anchored in a genealogy of collective knowledge where no aspects of life are left out of the collective analyses (Gaviola 2015: 12).

For me, the crucial word here is the *and* between critique and care. To work through conflict and grow stronger through critique there must be care.



And to build t4t friendships where we can sustain relationships through conflict requires that we allow each other to mess up and transform our mistakes into learning and change. Further, as Michel also hinted to in our conversation, it demands that we take an interest in and respect differences, especially related to racialization, financial disparities and border regimes.

Engaging in difficult conversations and sustaining close relationships and t4t love through conflict can be draining. Especially because so many of us carry trauma and hurt and thus also frequently hurt each other (Marvin 2022). At *Trans Day of Celebration* 2023 in Copenhagen, my dear friend Cosmo M. Soltani, a trans Iranian, displaced person of war, Baba/parent, community healer/healing member and storyteller, reflected on these complexities in their poem 🌀 *Transness of all things... a T4T love poem* 🌀💖. He read:

We love each other raw  
Cut open  
With scars  
With healing work to do  
With traumas & fears  
With human messiness  
Harsh  
&  
Exciting  
(Soltani 2023)

When we share space, do “our healing work,” “love each other raw” and through conflict, we build community, accompliceship and forge paths to liberation. I use the term accompliceship from Indigenous Action Media (2014: 3) as a relational approach to accountability where accompliceship is processual, ongoing, grounded in action and built through continuously putting ourselves on the line for each other. Including when doing so is difficult, raw, messy, harsh and yet exciting.

Sadly, attempts to initiate or avoid difficult conversations often lead to loss of friendships and organizing platforms. Especially when moving such conversations to collective and coalitional levels. Fernanda shares her experiences with this in a Trans Day of Remembrance event organized by *Trans Europe and Asia* (TGEU):

I think that we as a trans community, and the lesbian and gay community also, reproduce these oppressive patterns in what we try to do. And we end up hurting

each other from the inside also. So, I think like we need to actually go to the root of the problem and start to deconstruct those oppressive patterns that we keep on projecting on each other, and also within ourselves. ... We never talk about our own doing in the circumstances that are happening. (TGEU 2021)

As Fernanda highlights here, the occlusion of difficult conversations about our own doing and the lack of self- and collective reflection keeps us from unlearning the harmful structures that we replicate on each other. In the t4t friendship between Fernanda and I, the attentiveness to, prioritization of and interest in circling back to difficult conversations where we practiced radical honesty, tender care and patience with one another, and still sometimes failed to do so adequately, enabled us to (un)learn from conflicts, deepen our trust, vulnerability and relationship and continue to construct accompliceship with one another.

### Spilling tender and transformative care into t4t organizing

So, how might we then intentionally make the tender and transformative practices of mundane trans care in t4t friendships spill into t4t organizing? How can we bring the liberational potential within the practices of engaging in critical collective analyses, tenderness, presence and accompaniment, and building solidarity, interdependency and accompliceship across differences into our organizing?

At *Nørrebro Pride 2023*, a set of community-based demonstrations, events and happenings in Copenhagen that center QTIBIPOCs, Yancé-Myah Antonio Harrison, a black Caribbean trans woman, held a speech named *Seek out love (Towards a loving community)*. Her reflections on the importance of noticing how small acts of care and love can be united and “build a path towards another world” assist us in connecting the practices of mundane trans care in t4t friendships to wider struggles for trans liberation:

When we try to see, acknowledge, honour, and feel the small acts of love, we can allow ourselves to build a path towards another world. It can help us not focus on the Goliath of the state, its borders and clinics, it's bureaucrats and bulldozers; but look to uniting the smaller acts of compassion and care, that already are spreading underground unnoticed and unsuspected by the powers that be, and turn it into a revolutionary force that can sustain the transformation we need. (Antonio Harrison 2023)

Perhaps then, a way to collectivize and let the mundane trans care practices in and through t4t friendships spill into our wider organizing is to notice

and amplify them wherever they take place, and to spread them underground so that they can stay out of sight of the state, and thus out of risk of being criminalized, stopped, co-opted and watered down. Moreover, picking up Michel's cue on the importance of doing the difficult work of relating within our organizing, points to the need to foreground relationality within trans coalitional organizing. As we notice, foreground and amplify the tender and transformative practices of mundane trans care and relationality underground in, through and around trans coalitions, we rework them through what trans scholar Aren Z. Aizura calls a "communization of care" (2017: 12) so that the care practices do not rely on our intimate circles but rather are organized around a wider coalition of people with whom we are interdependent but not necessarily intimate. People who can become accomplices, comrades and potentially friends.

Towards the end of her speech at Nørrebro Pride, Yancé-Myah (Antonio Harrison 2023) mentioned the names of three "women and queers who changed the lives of many" through their work and legacies, one of which was Fernanda. Tears rolling down my cheeks, holding hands with two trans friends, I took in and deeply felt Yancé-Myah's words as she thanked the young people of our communities for bearing witness to the people we have loved and lost. When we bear witness to the experiences and wisdom of our dead trans kin it allows for our grief to expand and for their presence to be felt strongly. Exactly as I have felt Fernanda's presence stronger throughout the writing and sharing of this text and as I felt the presence of Fernanda's trans kin in our collaborative autoethnography. Perhaps, amidst the mourning there is some hope in the discerning, remembering and circulation of t4t love and wisdom. This is what I want to stay with and what I hope you as a reader sit with as well: that from the pain of losing loved ones prematurely we can discern wisdom, practices of tender and transformative care, t4t love and friendships so that we can keep each other alive and thriving. Fernanda's light, warmth and wisdom can live on not only in those of us who loved her but for generations to come through the ways that we continue to love and care for each other, dream and hope – as Fernanda did throughout her life:

Love is everything for me. (...) Love for family and friends has been my priority lately. At the end of the day, the people who are there with you when the party is over are the ones worth keeping.

(...) I have suffered enough for romantic love. But still, I am hopeful! (Fernanda Milán in Kowalska 2014; para 1, lines 1–3, 5)

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