



# Marvellous Grounds

Queer of Colour Histories of Toronto

Edited by Jin Haritaworn, Ghaida Moussa, and Syrus Marcus Ware



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Between the Lines  
Toronto

# MARVELLOUS GROUNDS

“*Marvellous Grounds* is a beautiful gathering of QTBIPOC artists, organizers, activists, and cultural workers that achieve the Morrisonian [Toni Morrison’s] task of creating a map outside of the mandates of conquest, specifically its homonormative archival practices. Speaking across time and space, the Marvellous Grounds collective lovingly curates visual art, prose, intimate conversations and tender caresses taking place on Toronto’s street corners that have the potential to heal both the ancestors and the generations yet to come. Creating marvelous ground in Toronto, this stunning collection resists inclusion into normative and homonationalist queer Canadian archives. It also refuses to help repair this archive. Instead, *Marvellous Grounds* beautifully disfigures the colonial project of archiving as it yearns and reaches for what the co-editors call “the something yet-to-be-done.” *Marvellous Grounds* is a healing praxis that QTBIPOC communities can bask in as they soak up the sweet balm it tenders. This collection is a gift.”

—**Tiffany King**, Department of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Georgia State University

“As the lead singer of the radical duo LAL and co-organizer of the DIY QT2S/BIPOC space, Unit 2, I am so happy to see this important book that highlights some of the amazing work and stories by QTBIPOC/friends in Toronto. More than half of the contributors have shared space or gathered at Unit 2, so this book resonates in my body and soul. *Marvellous Grounds* is a necessary piece of writing that documents and helps keep our stories alive, in a way that is for us by us. This book will share important perspectives with a new generation of QTBIPOCs and friends, while honouring the stories, people, and places that fought and fight for justice and freedom, in this amazing but complicated meeting place, Toronto.”

—**Rosina Kazi**, LAL / UNIT 2

“The authors, artists, and activists gathered in this extraordinary book invoke an insurgent and untameable queer and trans history, one which confronts both co-option and self-congratulation. Boldly making space for the silenced, criminalized, and displaced voices of queer and trans Black, Indigenous and people of colour (QTBIPOC), *Marvellous Grounds* disrupts queer nostalgia, complacency, and white fragility, and testifies to QTBIPOC resilience, resistance, and healing. Whether you come to this book in search of a radically transformative decolonial theory and praxis, or to reclaim a displaced queer/trans lineage, these stories are guaranteed to move, challenge, and inspire.”

—**Julia Chinyere Oparah**, provost, dean of the faculty, and professor of ethnic studies, Mills College and author of *Birthing Justice*, *Battling Over Birth*, *Activist Scholarship*, and *Global Lockdown*

“*Marvellous Grounds* is an incredibly important critical intervention into the ongoing creation and theorization of queer counter archives and their frequent whitewashing. The artists/activists/academics

whose work is collected here offer a multilayered, sharp, original, and touching take on queer Toronto past and present that will be relevant to scholars and practitioners far beyond the local context.”

—**Fatima El-Tayeb**, professor of literature and ethnic studies, University of California, San Diego

“Upending white supremacist, neoliberal narratives of ‘gay progress,’ *Marvellous Grounds* shows us Toronto’s QTBIPOC communities surviving and thriving in the midst of violent forces of erasure. The essays, dialogues, and creative interventions gathered here offer an invitation to remember and learn from rich and resplendent stories—of organizing and activism, of dance parties, reading groups, performances, and everyday life. This is the history we want and the history we need.”

—**Craig Willse**, author of *The Value of Homelessness: Managing Surplus Life in the United States*

“*Marvellous Grounds* describes a Toronto that makes sense and feels right. It doesn’t suffer from impossible racial homogeneity or glib hollow triumph. This gentle, trusting, personal collection lingers over homelessness, racial profiling, protest, worship, and the struggle of queers of colour starting families, and so is a Toronto origin story that feels real.”

—**Elisha Lim**, M.A., M.F.A., graphic novelist, *100 Crushes*

“*Marvellous Grounds* is a compelling and transformative site of queer of colour creation and ongoing creativity, collectively confronting and refusing dominant white queer archives. Together, the essays build queer counter-archives as their own form, where writing and genealogies of thought emerge in collective organizing, art practices, abolitionist work, disability justice, poetics, healing justice, performance, anti-racism, and spirituality. In this long-awaited anthology, the authors make possible the kinds of depth and life that come from an effort to pause, and take hold of what emerges in our struggles to find new ways of being with one’s self and amongst others.”

—**Lee Ann S. Wang**, School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, University of Washington  
Bothell

“*Marvellous Grounds* is a foundational book for gender, queer, postcolonial, and critical race scholarship. Archiving and reflecting on four decades of queer and trans Black, Indigenous and people of colour (QTBIPOC) historiography, collective organizing, cartographies of violence and building communities of care and healing in the city of Toronto, this inspiring book is a must-read for activists, artists, and academics alike who radically question who the subject of queer history is and more importantly dare to ask “What kind of ancestor do I want to be?”

—**Onur Suzan Nobrega**, Institute of Sociology, Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany.

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## **Part One**

# Counter-Archives

# 1 Organizing on the Corner

## Trans Women of Colour and Sex Worker Activism in Toronto in the 1980s and 1990s

*Syrus Marcus Ware interview with Monica Forrester  
and Chanelle Gallant*<sup>1</sup>

*Monica Forrester is a long-time activist and organizer in Toronto. In 2004, she founded Trans Pride Toronto to develop supportive resources and programming for trans people in the downtown area. Over the past twenty years, she has also developed sex worker outreach programs for the 519 Church Street Community Centre, Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project, and other organizations in the city of Toronto. What follows is a conversation between Syrus Marcus Ware, Monica Forrester, and Chanelle Gallant, a long-term sex worker and organizer in Toronto who contributes to this conversation by sharing the important intersectional lessons that she learned from Monica and other trans women of colour.*

**Monica Forrester:** My work focuses on visibility and awareness for trans people. I was doing activism before I knew what activism was. When I was young, like eighteen, I was educating trans women on the corner about safer sex. The corner was the only community that existed at that time, the only place where we could share information. And that's where I learned about organizing, where I got the determination to make change and the inspiration to be an activist almost thirty years later.

When you approached me to do this interview, I started thinking about the history of archiving, and I thought, "I wish I took pictures!" We were in such a different place back then. Survival was key. Nobody thought about archiving things because no one really thought we'd live past thirty. Our lives were so undetermined. No one really thought: "Oh, we should archive this for later years." The only thing I really thought about was the deaths—how trans people were dying prematurely because of injustice, violence, and stigma.

I sit back and think about the deaths I've seen in those days. I've seen so many people dying at twenty-one, twenty-two. At that time, to make it to thirty was super big. It seemed like a long life for them because of the lives they lived out there since they were twenty. I'm forty-five now, but these things are still going on. Not at as high a rate, but we still see people dying. And then I think, I'm forty-five, shit, I still got another forty years.

I came to formal organizing and activism around 1999 because the murders of trans women had skyrocketed. In 1997, two trans people and one cisgendered Aboriginal woman were murdered on the corner in Toronto. Mirha-Soleil Ross, a long-time radio programmer and activist who helped start the Counting Past 2 transgender film festival<sup>2</sup> in Toronto, myself and a few other people got together to



demand a space safe for trans people *now*. The direction at the time was going good. This informal coalition included trans people of colour like me, Mirha, and others. Then it kind of went sour when they started adding more white people, people with more academic skills, people with more policy experience, people that really didn't know the real issues. It made a lot of us without that formal training feel pushed out, and we got pushed out. Perhaps in a different way, these issues remain relevant and trans-specific activism is still very much needed.

**Chanelle Gallant:** Hearing you talk really reminds me of how hard it is for us sometimes to recognize our work as activism and as worthy of recording. I am a white cisgender organizer and I've lived and done activism in Toronto for about twenty years. My first activism was around the raid on what was called the *Pussy Palace*, a bathhouse here in Toronto, in the year 2000. This led to a three-year court case, a three-year human rights complaint, and mandated policy changes against the Toronto police. So, out of that human rights settlement came the policy that required cops to ask trans people what their preferred gender was for the officer they would be searched by, which was later copied by the New York City police. That was my first introduction to activism. Racialized and Indigenous trans women were teaching me about intersectionality, even though we didn't use that language at the time.

Monica, I saw you in *Red Lips, Cages for Black Girls*,<sup>3</sup> Kyisha Williams' film about the impact of the prison industrial complex on Black women. I saw you and thought, "I want to know that girl. That girl is going to be my friend if I have anything to say about it." And then, shortly after, you started working at Maggie's!<sup>4</sup> One of our first projects was the Aboriginal Sex Worker Education and Outreach Project. Since then, Monica and I have worked together through an organization that we started calling STRUT, and we brought together the first national gathering of racialized, Indigenous, and street-based sex workers and allies. The reason we wanted to do this kind of work was because we both really wanted to see and support more people, specifically those who had experiences of criminalization, in leadership roles around sex work activism. Because it was confidential, we actually did all of our outreach and fundraising for it quite quietly and without much fanfare.

**MF:** Maggie's was the only driven sex work agency for sex workers. For a brief little moment there we thought: "Oh my god, this is the only place that sex worker-led activism on sex work goes on." We wanted there to be more options for supporting sex worker-led activism, so we started STRUT. Initially, STRUT was a three-day conference. The first day was the Indigenous-only pre-convening, and it was all Indigenous people who either had experience in the sex trade or were allies. The second two days were for everyone. We wanted to build relationships and networks. One of the biggest goals, ultimately, was shifting the sex work activist agenda—what we're fighting for and how we do it. Even though Maggie's was doing a lot of great work across Canada and the States, we were not connecting with as many places. We wanted to see what people were doing on the East and West coasts. We wanted to get new ideas, to connect with the successful work they were doing with programming and outreach.

**Syrus Marcus Ware:** What is unique to the activism that you and other sex workers, including trans sex workers and sex workers of colour, are doing in Toronto? Is there something that's different about organizing here than say, in the Yukon, BC, or Montreal?

**MF:** Because Toronto is so diverse, and because it is such a trans hub, we can't just organize on one particular single issue—we need to connect issues of transphobia with issues of anti-Black racism, for example. I think that there's a lot of work left to do. I read rants on Facebook about Black Lives Matter, and I just want to yell at people because they really just don't get it sometimes. What is hard to understand about ensuring that we as Black people get to live our lives? Trans people are at the forefront of Black Lives Matter organizing, as well as other activisms around interconnected issues like homelessness and the stigmatization of sex work. I think connecting Black Lives Matter and other trans-focused organizations is important because the issues of transphobia and anti-Blackness do overlap for Black trans people. I'm pulled in all kinds of different directions as a Black trans activist.

In my experience, a lot of people come to Toronto because of lost community or to find community because of stigma, due to being trans or a sex worker or whatever. They are isolated, so they build new community over here. I worked with organizers in BC, where a lot of the sex workers are Indigenous or of colour. I found how they embrace their community and culture within their sex work inspiring. The organizers in BC were empowered by community, and they educated their community about their bodies, their work, and all these different parts of who they were. It was beautiful. Whereas here in Toronto we're a little more political, but perhaps less focused on personal development. We don't talk about our own needs a lot, which is hard sometimes because we need that individual support, too.

There's always such a limited capacity within organizations to support individuals. I work at Maggie's, but I am only part-time. I'm aware of how understaffed we are. And yet a lot of the other, non-sex worker specific agencies haven't really picked up on sex workers' needs. So where do we go to get our needs met? For example, if I need to provide a referral to another organization for a sex worker client, where do I send them? What organizations are knowledgeable about our issues? I mean, there is the 519 Church Street Community Centre and other great places where I'd like to send them for support, but looking at the 519's programming now, there's nothing for sex workers there anymore, although there used to be. Their trans programming has shifted away from supporting trans sex workers—it's as if we've totally forgotten what the program existed for. Past 519 program co-ordinators, like the late Kyle Scanlon,<sup>5</sup> had a different understanding of what the 519's Trans Program mission or vision was. There has been a shift in institutional mandates.

We try to fill the gaps left by these program shifts in other agencies. For example, I do a monthly program for trans women of colour—but it's too short, the time flies by. We can't really do much together during the program because it's only two hours. By the time we eat, talk, and check in, it's already over. So we're really not even getting to the deeper issues and needs of trans women because it's only one day a month for two hours. I worry that we are just throwing money at the program but not really getting involved in a capacity that is changing anyone's lives.

And then where do we go? We do a lot of our convening and togetherness in the streets: in spaces that are dangerous, in spaces that are targeted, in spaces that are visible. For example, we have a lot of trans people of colour who are continuously targeted and carded by the police because they look street involved. So, I do a lot of education to make sure that they're aware of their rights in order to challenge

this targeted policing. I'm not knocking the programs—there's a lot of great programs. I access them, I do outreach in them, but there's really not enough going on in them.

**CG:** And that's what we wanted to deal with in STRUT. We need services, but we need organizing too. We want to be part of a movement, not just a sector that has slashed or abandoned these essential programs. I really don't want to see that continue to happen to sex work organizing. Frankly, the selling out in the gay and lesbian movement is my worst case scenario for what could happen if we abandon the early principles that came out of organizing on the fucking corner and don't make sure that we honour and carry them forward. That's where the principles of sex work activism come from. I want to retain that and share that with others. Also, I feel like I would be remiss not to talk about the enormous impact of Mirha-Soleil Ross on the Toronto community.

**MF:** She had a vision. As an activist she started a bunch of programs and did research about trans women and access to shelters. She had a radio program and a 'zine where she would showcase sex workers. Her work was so groundbreaking and innovative for that time.

**SMW:** I actually wanted to talk about her great video project, *Madame Lauraine's Transsexual Touch*,<sup>6</sup> which is an educational sexual health narrative film for trans women of colour sex workers. You star in this video! It's such an important resource.

**MF:** The Ministry of Health gave us a bunch of money and said: "Don't put our name on it, but here's a grant." We wanted the video to shape the movement. We did a lot of networking in preparation for this project. We knew it was important to connect with Montreal and Vancouver, the more populated areas where there were a lot of trans sex workers, so we went to Vancouver to talk to sex workers out there. There were a lot of stars in that video! One of the actors was a well-known trans woman for many decades. To learn about her history from the 1960s and 1970s was really extraordinary. The film was also about taking the onus off of sex workers to practise safely, but saying to the john: "Hey, you're just as responsible for safe sex as we are." It was fun to work on this project.

**SMW:** There were some really funny parts in that movie. There's a scene with Mirha where she's having sex and all of a sudden she puts on glasses and gives all this health data. It just seemed too good to be true. There really was *nothing* out there and to this day there still really isn't a lot out there that is so user friendly.

**MF:** I was part of the *Happy Transsexual Hooker*<sup>7</sup> sexual health resource project, too. It was a little booklet that focused on harm reduction for trans women of colour and talked about HIV and STI transmission and intravenous drug use. There were two characters, one of whom was HIV positive. And they talked about HIV/AIDS—how you don't have to look HIV positive to be HIV positive—and harm reduction and tried to empower people to have safer sex and take care of themselves while doing intravenous drugs. It was meant to shed light on the experience of living with HIV, especially because a lot of people think you have to be sick to be HIV positive. It was great because the whole story came from the community—we created it with community, and we tried to get it in different languages. So the project was something that they owned, that they could relate to, that made them feel like "I was part of making this project happen."

I was a part of the Fred Victor Shelter organizing community at the time because the street-involved community became a strength for me. This connection was part of what inspired me to be part of a big project with the City of Toronto called the *Trans Shelter Access Project*, which focused on making a trans-only space in shelters. So we went to fifty, sixty shelters, asking the shelter organizing committees and the front-of-line workers about accessibility and inclusion. We held focus groups with trans people and asked them what they needed and what they wanted, and in turn, this helped to build a sense of community and strength. There was a big issue in New York City because trans women were being housed in men's shelters—shelters where there were two thousand men, and so much sexual abuse going on. We went to a conference there and found people figuring out solutions to trans shelter access. We talked to people there about how we could adapt their ways of working to make things more accessible for trans people here in Toronto.

It was during that time that more trans-specific stuff was being produced, more trans inclusion stuff. But then it just became normalized, right? Even though nothing really changed in many ways when it comes to marginalized people, services became more widespread. One of my next initiatives is to see where we're at and do more consultations with the community around how accessible our services really are for people. Why are trans people still under-housed? Why are trans people still dealing with all these other things in their lives, like HIV transmission? Why are all these things still happening?

**CG:** There was this moment in 2001. . . . Do you remember the *Sexin' Change* conference? It was a trans conference at Ryerson. Viviane Namaste did a keynote and discussed how trans politics were increasingly focusing on identity and queer theory and less on lived realities, like survival issues, poverty, prisons, sex work, and health care, and why those issues were all still completely unresolved. What she was calling out in 2001 is still going on. A lot of trans politics got taken over by white trans guys. But there's also been more of a push back against it since the 2010s. In the 2000s, so many folks were just like, "What? Poverty and sex work, whatever!" and then like, "Trans women of colour, who?" But then, I feel like in the last five years, there's been more of a public push back against this whitewashing and male-washing of actual trans lives.

**SMW:** What is it that we need now? Where do you see us going in the next little bit?

**MF:** Well, we definitely need more than one day a month for trans women's programming! I applied for some funding recently for a trans women of colour space. We need more going that focuses on the lives of people of colour and trans people of colour. A lot of these agencies that have funding for trans people are just a place to get tokens and eat. We're not really talking about issues. They're not Black-centred or sex work-centred. There's been a shift. There's so much accessibility now. But we need more systemic change and more connecting.

Maybe we need to sit down on a monthly basis and connect and ask: How can we support each other? How can we move forward to really make change? We all have lives, but I'm always up there trying in some capacity. When I'm on the corner doing my outreach, it feels so good to be out there listening to people and looking at the women there, the young trans women, and it's also bringing me back to a place. It's good to engage and listen to the things that are going on in their lives—the good times, and the bad

times, and the struggles. It's definitely a community that I'm very much a part of and that I'll probably always be a part of. My life as a marginalized sex worker has its moments. I've paid for it in different ways. I think about my health, you know, not being able to eat properly, being housed properly, having proper shoes—these things have affected my feet. I've got diabetes; I think that was from not eating properly due to many factors. Maybe I'm mad at my body for what it was, but I am not fighting with it anymore. Now I'm not trying to be a certain weight or to sleep a certain way. Poverty might have played a role too. There are so many different elements. These are things that are touching me now. I definitely attribute a lot of my health issues and a lot of things that are going on with me today to my past. But when you're living in that moment, you're not thinking about how those things are going to affect you ten, twenty years later. And I am grateful; I'm managing, and I wouldn't change a thing, 'cause I've lived a pretty beautiful life. But I see value in empowering my community to have more self-love for each other and for themselves, their bodies, who they are and stuff like that.

When I think about mapping our lives, I wish we could Google areas where trans people used to live in earlier times. Like where I used to live, in this abandoned house on Charles Street and Church Street in the Village, now it's a condo. Or when we lived in an underground garage that was boarded up by Bleecker Street. There's another condo there now. A lot of trans people used to live under there. We would drop in through a little hole and people used to live in one of the rooms and have fires to keep them warm. And these were realities in the 1980s and early 1990s. I can document and visualize those things in my mind. We didn't have cameras or anything to take pictures. Like I said, we never thought we would live to see this time. We all worked in the Church-Wellesley Village until they slowly pushed us out.

Bleecker Street was a very prominent sex work stroll for years. I used to go there when there was no money on the other corners. Being pushed out from the better-paying streets made us have to work this cheaper stroll. It was back-to-back work. So, you'd make the same amount of money you would selling at another stroll, but you'd do more clients. Just like in Vancouver, you'd work downtown, you'd get a really good day, but if you went to Hastings, you'd do a few of them, and you'd get nothing.

They did eventually create another sex work area close by at Homewood Street and Maitland Street, a neighbourhood just east of the Church-Wellesley Village. They put a traffic light there to limit the stroll. Most of the resistance to us being there was from gay men, who were blaming the trans women who were around for the condoms found on the ground. And so I had to say: "Listen, I live in the gay community. There's always gay men having sex when I look out my window. Why do you get to have sex and we don't?" They had a website, these residents who wanted us out, on which they posted pictures of us. They were also attacking trans women and gay women working in front of the condominiums there, using flashlights and stuff to scare us off.

And then Toronto City Councillor Kristyn Wong Tam said: "That's illegal, you all can't do this." So she was actually supportive, and then she did a canvas through the whole area. But the residents still blamed the sex workers for anything wrong with their neighbourhood because they wanted us out. It's weird, even now if you go to a sex work area you'll see that they have either shut down all the twenty-four-hour coffee

shops or they'd limit the hours that the cafes could be open. They don't want sex workers hanging in those places.

I have more stories. Lots. When *Street Outreach Services* (SOS) formed, which was one of the first agencies focused on sex workers, there were a lot of front-line workers that were really supportive of trans people, because I think they were just moved by our situation. They loved the trans women that they were meeting through connecting with sex workers. At the time people were like: "We got these things for them. We've got these things." They did a lot of things just under the table.

**CG:** I want to speak to the white and cis readers and say your job is to support what Monica just said. Actually, I think you have to. You must really, in concrete ways, support the leadership of poor and working-class trans women of colour around the work that they're doing, whether they're innovating the work or resourcing the work. Literally, just ask: What do you need to support your work? Do you need bodies? Do you need connections? Do you need money? Do you need resources—what? Training? To be brought to the table on things? And then the other piece I see is really having those conversations and building up the capacity of other white cis folks to do that work as well, so that it is not left for trans people of colour to do.

**MF:** Yeah, because how much are people actually recognizing this reality and listening to us? We're at a time in history where the transsexual and genderqueer community is freer; we can be who we want to be now. There's still stigma, but we can have our own identities. We have shifted enough people to be seen in a different way.

I think people are ignorant of the life experience of people of colour and trans people of colour. It bothers me that people are not getting it, or that trans people of colour are not given validation. I can just talk from my own experience, being a trans woman.

I'm really committed to the work that I do, and sometimes I just hate when people question what I'm doing, or if I'm doing enough. If anyone knows me, they can see that I'm helping. Would you save that scepticism for someone else? Or they think that the work that I'm doing is not hard work. It is hard work, mentally and physically. It's a lot to be able to get through the day sometimes and to see things that you can't change. As a person of colour, I've experienced that I have to prove over and over again that I'm valuable, that I deserve to be validated and recognized. I get a lot of high praise from people that I'm around, but when you shine too bright people don't like that. I'm also expected to move away from my street community. I get people who say: "Why do you hang with those types of people?" I reply: "These are people that have sheltered me, educated me, given me family."

**CG:** It's so infuriating because you and other folks who are part of your community have just created so much that so many of us continue to benefit from. You're recognized as a community builder, and if somebody doesn't know who you are, there's a problem. What are you doing with your life that you haven't figured out who Monica Forrester is?

**SMW:** I started my transition early and it was back in the day, in 2000. By 1999, I already knew trans people, mostly trans people of colour—trans women of colour, Indigenous trans women, trans men of colour. It was because of the organizing that you all were doing. I would say hundreds upon thousands of

people's lives would be different if you hadn't done the work that you've done—the space to come out and find a sense of home and, as you said, love themselves and love their bodies and love who they are.

**MF:** Well, I even came out at a time where you needed to sleep with women or with cis-people, look a certain way, dress a certain way, all in order to be accepted as a trans woman. You had to be hetero, whatever that looked like. I kind of broke all those kind of boundaries. I never differentiated gender and sexuality. I'm more queer-identified now, and back then having to sleep with just one sex to be validated as a woman was just hard. I'm glad, because today we can identify sexually and in terms of gender. It's so different now, which is a great thing. But we're still in a place where trans women aren't being validated for their great work, which is very patriarchal, and about colour and creed. I know a lot of trans women from different areas, and I work with a lot of Black trans women and trans women of colour. Understanding their analysis is important.

People need to understand that sex work is not only about survival, but also about building community. Sex work and the corner was where we found our partners, where we were validated for who we were as people who have beautiful bodies and as people who love those bodies. People need to understand that. Trans sex workers in Toronto have created communities and built networks across this country. We developed resources that have put crucial information into the hands of trans sex workers and their allies—resources that will allow us all to survive and thrive!