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Geometries of Control:  
Dynamics of Power, Oppression and Resistance

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# Community-based action research and memory justice: insights from the struggle of immigrant trans and *travesti* sex workers against HIV/AIDS in France

*Clark Pignedoli, Louve Zimmermann, Mar Andrade Viu and Acceptess-T*<sup>1, 2</sup>

*“We have to act quickly, because most of the people...the groups I used to belong to, have already passed away. Only four or five of us are still here. You need to make the most of me while I’m still around”.*

CLAUDIA, 65 YEARS OLD, CO-FOUNDER OF ACCEPTESS-T,  
PORTUGUESE, ARRIVED IN FRANCE IN 1978

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1. We thank the research teams of Acceptess-T and SESSTIM for their supervision and mentorship, particularly Giovanna Rincon, Laszlo Blanquart, and Gabriel Girard. We also thank the entire research team, as well as Marina Silva Duarte, Maxime Foerster and Morgane Vanehuin, for their valuable reflections and for the socio-historical work we shared. Our deepest gratitude goes to the participants of the *¡Presente!* project for their generosity and inspiration. We are also grateful to Jude Sweeney and Raymond Van Huizen for their work on English-language quality. Finally, we thank ANRS MIE for funding the MeS-T-HIV project.

2. Clark Pignedoli is a postdoctoral researcher at Aix-Marseille Université, Inserm, IRD, SESSTIM, ISSPAM, Marseille, France, sciences sociales de la santé; Louve Zimmermann is a project manager in trans health at Acceptess-T as well as a community historian of trans health; Mar Andrade Viu holds a Master’s degree in Gender Studies from Paris 8 University and works as a community archivist at the organization Acceptess-T.

## Introduction

Very few scholars in France have explored the social and historical dynamics of transfeminine and *travesti* (TT)<sup>3</sup> migrant and immigrant<sup>4</sup> communities. French *études trans* (trans studies), first conducted in the 2000s (Espineira and Bourcier, 2016), have largely overlooked these dimensions. More specifically, the current historiography of trans movements in the French context was primarily developed by French trans researchers who focused on the evolution of French trans activism and the medicalization of trans identities (Espineira, 2015), two topics that have also left the most visible archives (Foerster, 2021). This choice was rooted in their desire to advance the fight for the depathologization and the recognition of gender transition; this process is largely inaccessible to undocumented persons and non-French citizens.

The few academic works that have addressed to some extent TT migrant and immigrant communities in the French context share a methodological approach influenced by the fight against HIV/AIDS. They include articles by Viviane Namaste (2015) and Laurent Gaissad (2010), as well as a doctoral dissertation by Marina Silva Duarte (MSD hereafter) (2018). Other information can be found in more general sources on ‘male prostitution’ such as articles by Welzer-Lang, Barbosa and Mathieu (1994) and Handman & Mossuz-Lavau (2005), and in mostly forgotten activity reports produced by community organizations dating back to the 1980s and early 1990s (Chafi and Gaissad, 1992). The most recent French research on TT migrant and immigrant communities includes the MeS-T-HIV project—from which the present article is based on—

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3. We use and italicized the term *travesti* precisely because of its ambiguity in English-speaking contexts. The word exists in French, Spanish (Castilian) and Portuguese, but its pronunciation and meaning differ. In contemporary French, *travesti* refers to the experience of individuals assigned male at birth who deliberately present *en femme* (as women) in specific contexts and then return to a masculine identity. However, it was also commonly used by trans women in the 1960s, for example, to describe their gender identity. In Latin America, particularly in Brazil and Argentina, *travesti* designates individuals who embody a gender experience that traverses conventional boundaries between masculinity and femininity. The word reflects not only a personal embodiment but also the socio-historical constructions of gender within specific cultural contexts (Darouiche, 2024; Duarte, Paz and Pelúcio 2024).

4. In this article, we employ the terms “migrant and immigrant” to highlight a notion of population mobility rather than fixity, consistent with a transnational perspective on migration (Schiller, Bash and Blanc-Szanton, 1992).

doctoral thesis by Otto Briant-Terlet,<sup>5</sup> and the recovery and re-examination of relevant archival materials by community archivists. The most notable example is Morgane Vanehuin, herself a trans woman, who discovered, reported, and shared archival documents from the organization AIDES. Vanehuin is working on re-categorizing the organization's archives, and her preliminary analyses of early prevention reports from the late 1980s, show that at that time AIDES also engaged with TT in its outreach efforts specifically targeting male sex workers. This example of miscategorization raises the question of whether certain identities/bodies/communities have been erased from HIV/AIDS archiving (Vanehuin, 2024).

MeS-T-HIV (2024-2026) is a community-based action research project on health mediation<sup>6</sup> among TT people; launched in Paris in 2024, it is funded by a grant from the ANRS-MIE.<sup>7</sup> The project is co-led by the grassroots trans community-health organization Acceptess-T, which is located in Paris, and the multidisciplinary research unit SESSTIM, which is based in Marseille. Acceptess-T was created as part/in the context of the fight against HIV/AIDS; it provides medical, social, and legal support to the most precarious trans individuals, and advocates for their social and political rights. The majority of its members are migrant and immigrant TT from Latin America, most of whom are sex workers, and many are undocumented (Pignedoli *et al.*, 2024). Historically, SESSTIM has conducted research in collaboration with, and focusing on, people living with HIV as well as sexual and gender minorities.

The MeS-T-HIV grant enabled Acceptess-T to secure the financial and human resources needed to begin documenting and preserving the history of their community using a bottom-up approach. This community-based archiving project is grounded in the active participation of older migrant and immigrant TT. It was conceived to develop participants' so-

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5. Otto Briant-Terlet is a PhD candidate in public health. His doctoral dissertation primarily seeks to reconstruct the trajectory of mobilizations and public policies addressing HIV/AIDS and trans issues in France from the late 1970s through the late 2010s.

6. Health mediation refers to community members' actions to help peers who are disconnected from care to gain a better understanding of the health system and healthcare, with a view to increased access. This concept has many associated terms, such as "peer navigation" and "community health work".

7. French National Agency for Research on HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Emerging Infectious Diseases.

cialization and archival skills, to create a meaningful, affective, and caring physical space for trans people that is rooted in memory, and to construct a political tool for documenting the lives of a community that continues to experience multiple forms of violence. In other words, this archive was conceived as an instrument of transformative justice: a means to generate grassroots forms of reparations, to celebrate the lives of its protagonists, and to confront and heal past wounds. It was also conceived as a vehicle to support campaigns seeking material reparations from the French state for gross human rights violations, inspired by similar processes initiated in Latin America. Building on the experience of creating this archive—situated at the crossroads between the need for memory and the demand for justice—this article contributes to ongoing debates on “memory justice” (MJ) from the standpoint of migrant and immigrant TT communities and their struggles against HIV/AIDS. It illustrates how MJ can be articulated through community-based action research and community health initiatives. Community-based action research is an approach that actively involves community members in all stages of the research process, fostering the co-construction of knowledge and scientifically rigorous and socially meaningful interventions. It provides a framework to test and implement innovative actions that directly benefit the community in question (Gelineau *et al.*, 2022). Community-based health approaches and practices are grounded in the lived experiences, cultural values, and engagement of the communities they serve, and they are based on a holistic vision of health (Otis, Bernier and Lévy, 2015).

### **Methods and epistemological grounding**

We employed a qualitative research design, drawing on the case study of the MeS-T-HIV project where one of the actions to be tested and implemented was the launch of a community archive within Acceptess-T. The data used come from the MeS-T-HIV project, ethnographic field notes collected by the authors, written records of team meetings, steering committee meetings, encounters with external partners, and a witness

seminar (Nicholls, 2022)<sup>8</sup> with migrant and immigrant TT participating in the creation of the archive. We employed a general inductive approach to analyze qualitative data. In this approach, themes and concepts emerge from the data itself rather than being imposed by pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Thomas, 2006).

This study is grounded in an epistemological framework informed by research reflexivity, critical trans gerontology and community-based health approaches. In the context of community-based action research, reflexivity involves continuous dialogue about power relations, epistemological assumptions, and the co-construction of meaning between researchers and community members (Peralta and Murphy, 2016; Bailly, 2025). Although we, the authors, are trans, we occupy professional roles and social positions that do not expose us to the same conditions of precarity and marginalization as migrant and immigrant TT sex worker communities. This reflexive awareness of our positionality informed all stages of the research and was systematically integrated into all decision-making processes (Pignedoli, 2025; Zimmermann and Pignedoli, 2025). The field of critical gerontology is based on the belief that the experience of aging is shaped by an individual's life trajectory and their social embeddedness. It therefore approaches ageing as a process that can involve resistance, agency, and varied lived realities rather than exclusively a matter of vital decline (Toze, 2019). From this perspective, the individual act of remembering becomes especially valuable when it is rearticulated through the development of a collective history or the formation of a shared identity. Engaging in this process can help individuals cultivate a sense of pride, dignity, and recognition of contributions that may have previously gone unacknowledged. Building on critical gerontology and transfeminism, critical trans gerontology shifts research on ageing trans people away from narrow clinical and policy perspectives towards a broader exploration of the importance of life course perspectives and local contexts; it also takes a critical stance toward biomedicalization.

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8. A witness seminar is a study tool used in the social sciences where people who took part in or witnessed past events come together to share their memories and collectively reconstruct what happened.

## The scattered memories of the HIV/AIDS crisis among migrant trans and *travesti* communities in France

### *Social marginalization and erasure from historical narratives*

For TT sex workers in France, in the 1980s, being exposed to HIV came to represent a “community of common destiny” (Pollak, 1988). Indeed, this population continues to be one of the groups most at risk of infection (Castro *et al.*, 2022). It is impossible to precisely quantify how many TT sex workers have died in France over the years from AIDS-related complications, as public institutions have failed for decades to assess AIDS-related deaths among this population. TT and TT sex workers have been subjected to epidemiological misclassification, often subsumed under categories such as “male prostitutes” (Vanehuin, 2024) or “men who have sex with men” (del Río-González *et al.*, 2021), which obscure their specific experiences and healthcare needs. TT sex workers were ignored in official prevention guidelines until 2008 (Yeni, 2008, pp. 76–77). The category “transgender individuals” was only added in 2012 to the mandatory reporting of new HIV infections (Cazein *et al.*, 2021).

The history of their exposure to and management of HIV appears to carry a necropolitical dimension (Mbembe, 2003), as it has been shaped by public health institutions’ social organization of erasure and denial of their existence (Cazeiro, Silva and Souza, 2021). Consequently, TT and TT sex workers have historically been excluded from official accounts of HIV and related activism in France, placing their communities at serious risk of erasure from broader historical narratives of the epidemic crisis, especially narratives focusing on its early years. Since the 1980s, the fight against HIV/AIDS has primarily been told from a cisnormative<sup>9</sup> and homonormative<sup>10</sup> perspective, focusing on the experiences and memories of cisgender, white French gay men (EthnoAides, 2024; Briant-Terlet, 2025). Some authors speak of the “homosexualization” of the cause (Filleule and Broqua, 2002), which has contributed to the invisibilization of

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9. “Cisnormative” refers to the assumption that being cisgender (i.e. non-trans) is the norm, which marginalizes or invalidates trans and non-binary identities.

10. “Homonormative” refers to the assumption that all LGB individuals are cisgender.

other socially marginalized bodies and their experiences, such as those of racialized migrant people (Izambert, 2014; Briant-Terlet, 2025).

Since at least the 1960s, France has been a transit and settlement location for migrant and immigrant TT, primarily from Latin American and North African countries. Many TT individuals choose major urban centers such as Paris and Marseille as places to live, to work—mostly in the sex work milieu—and to build a community (Gaissad, 2010; Namaste, 2015; Duarte, 2018). These migration trajectories are characterized by their “circularity” (i.e., migrants maintain emotional and economic ties with their countries of origin) as well as by their multinational nature (Paul and Yeoh, 2021) (i.e., they live in multiple countries before settling temporarily or permanently in France (Pignedoli *et al.*, 2024)). This circularity and mobility suggest that these individuals’ histories, shaped by sociocultural backgrounds and personal trajectories, “travel” with them.

The limited sources available document the extreme precarity faced by these communities, marked by urgent survival needs and heightened vulnerability to social exclusion, police persecution, and violence in sex work environments (Serre *et al.*, 1994; Handman and Mossuz-Lavau, 2005). These repressive dynamics have been fueled by intersecting systems of classism, racism and transphobia, which, combined with a lack of access to rights and legal protections, have kept many TT migrants and immigrants in conditions of social and administrative invisibility and exclusion. Social invisibilization was reinforced by media-driven stigmatization: throughout the 1980s and 1990s, TT individuals were frequently depicted in French media as vectors of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Espineira, 2013; Duarte, 2018). Press coverage from this period is marked by a racialized double standard: while issues such as access to legal gender recognition, employment, and family life began to receive attention in relation to communities of French-born trans people, migrant TT communities were depicted solely as threats to public order whose persecution was portrayed as justified (Zimmermann and Pignedoli, 2025). Karine Espineira’s analysis of the Bois de Boulogne – a large public park on the western edge of Paris, widely known as a location for TT sex work since the 1980s – highlights how this park became central to the mythification and sensationalized portrayal of migrant and immigrant TT. Between approximately 1988 and 1992, the park emerged as a focal point in media discourse, particularly through sensationalist

coverage in popular outlets such as *Paris Match* and on prime-time television (Espineira, 2013). Espineira argues that these representations constructed a powerful and damaging stereotype: the “prostitute as a vector of AIDS”, depicted as irresponsible, deceptive, and violent (*Ibidem*). The rapid conflation of the Bois de Boulogne, transgender identity, and HIV/AIDS in the public imagination helped solidify these harmful associations well before HIV/AIDS prevention organizations had an established presence on the ground. Notably, the media showed little to no interest in the material living conditions of these sex workers, who were, for the most part, migrants (Serre *et al.*, 1994). Immigration law reforms in the 1990s further exacerbated the situation of migrant and immigrant TT by restricting the conditions under which they could legally reside and work in France (Fassin, Morice and Quiminal, 1997). Likewise, reforms to sex work legislation in the 2000s had a detrimental impact on their living conditions and reinforced existing patterns of marginalization (Mathieu, 2015).

### *Grassroots Resistance and Living Archives*

Despite the above-mentioned hostile context, since the 1980s, communities of migrant and immigrant TT have mobilized—both informally and formally—in the fight against HIV/AIDS (Duarte, 2018). Established in 1988, the *Agence française de lutte contre le sida* (AFLS) played a pivotal role in advancing HIV prevention by funding field-based research focused on community-specific interventions. Emphasizing participatory, community-driven research methods, AFLS supported collaboration between grassroots organizations, healthcare providers, researchers, affected populations, and activists (Welzer-Lang, Barbosa and Mathieu 1994; Mathieu 2015; Girard 2016; Coppel, Amaouche and Bragiotti, 2020). These initiatives helped to legitimize the inclusion of migrant and immigrant TT individuals, as well as sex workers, as key populations in HIV/AIDS prevention efforts. This approach also gave rise to new grassroots trans mobilizations: in 1992, PASTT was established in Paris as a pilot HIV prevention and action-research initiative targeting migrant TT sex workers. Led by Camille Cabral and Sonia Castelletti and supported by the organization AIDES (see above), PASTT marked an important

step in organizing community-based actions at the institutional level. In 1997, PASTT evolved to become the first trans community organization in France, born directly out of the HIV/AIDS crisis and the activism of migrant and immigrant TT individuals. In 2010, some former PASTT staff went on to found Acceptess-T (see above): Giovanna Rincón, Chris Valle, and Claudia Anjos Cruz, among others.<sup>11</sup>

Despite over 30 years of migrant and immigrant TT sex worker community-based actions, there is a striking lack of written documentation on the origins of these mobilizations and on the living conditions of these communities during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Very few archival materials have been preserved or deposited in public and private archives (Zimmermann and Pignedoli, 2025). Oral history and the “community count” (i.e., of friends who died from AIDS) passed down within migrant TT organizations from older TT who survived the epidemic to younger TT individuals, indicate that AIDS had a devastating effect on their affection networks and their communities (Namaste, 2015; Antonucci, 2021; Foerster, 2021), as illustrated by Claudia’s quotation at the beginning of this article. Although this is still a living memory for these older TT individuals and this “community count” circulates informally within migrant TT organizations, it is at risk of disappearing as this generation ages (Namaste, 2015; Antonucci, 2021).

Aging migrant and immigrant TT constitute an economically vulnerable population that have often survived thanks to informal economies, living in conditions of social isolation and exclusion because of family ruptures, migration, and hostile socio-political contexts. These communities have endured the criminalization of homosexuality, the policing of cross-dressing and sex work, state terrorism, the pathologization and psychiatrization of “transsexualism”, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, serophobia, police violence, and other types of violence (Vernier, 2005; Pourette, 2005a; 2005b; Foerster, 2018; Antonucci, 2021). TT are more likely to experience incarceration, homelessness, and unemployment, all of which often push them toward sex work (Pourette, 2005a; Negroni, 2011; De Montvalon, 2013; Antonucci, 2021; Reyes Serna, 2022; Pignedoli *et al.*, 2024). Migrant and immigrant TT individuals experience biograph-

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11. It is also important to highlight Pasaje Latino, a project initiated by Arcat in 2002 (now known as Punto Latino), which has provided community-based support to many Latin American TT sex workers.

ical ruptures and economic barriers that render them ineligible for social benefits such as pensions (Reyes Serna, 2022). All these elements, as well as housing insecurity and the imperative of survival, make it extremely challenging for this population to preserve personal materials – such as photographs, letters, documents, clothing, and other memorial objects – that could serve as valuable archival sources for future reference.

### **Memory and the construction of justice: a conceptual work in progress**

The notion of MJ has yet to be systematized as an autonomous concept. Few texts address it as a distinct category (Anderson and Daya, 2022), and those that do are predominantly grounded in judicial and legal frameworks (Booth, 2001). In this article, we adopt the notion of MJ to highlight both the material dimension of reparations for human rights violations and the active role of communities in shaping them. Rooted in MJ, we also consider memory work as a form of collective agency that seeks to recognize, protect, and restore the truth about past injustices, while connecting symbolic reparation with processes of knowledge production, community health, and social transformation. Nevertheless, in conceptualizing this notion, we situate our work within the literature on *memorial justice*, even though the latter often refers to more institutionalized and state-led practices of commemoration. Drawing on a genealogical perspective, and taking Argentina and France as key reference points, we trace the broader meaning of MJ and show how it emerged within processes of transitional justice (TJ) and social reparations in the aftermath of massive human rights violations.

#### *Argentina: memory at the core of justice*

TJ is a repertoire of political and legal instruments designed to support and safeguard the transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic political systems, with the aim of fostering social reconciliation. One example of TJ is in Argentina, where beginning in the mid-1980s, a range of protocols, forums, and public events were established to address

the violations committed by the last military dictatorship (1976-1983). These initiatives sought, among other goals, to implement symbolic and/or material reparations for victims and their families (Naftali, 2016; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2025). They also served a preventive function, aiming to deter future repetition of the violence and atrocities experienced (Druliolle, 2009; Garibian, 2014).

The Argentine military dictatorship had implemented a doctrine of state terrorism aimed at the systematic elimination of political opponents through enforced disappearances, torture, murder, and censorship.<sup>12</sup> Before relinquishing power, the ruling high command destroyed incriminating archives and put a legal framework in place to shield themselves from prosecution (Compagnon, 2022). As a result, militarization and authoritarianism profoundly shaped both the accessibility and preservation of archival materials (Wilson, 2016; Compagnon, 2022). In this context, the shift toward democratic institutions brought the issue of memory to the forefront (Stewart, 2020; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2025). The triad of *Memoria, Verdad y Justicia* (Memory, Truth, and Justice) processes came to symbolize the means taken to account for the crimes of the dictatorship and define the associated reparative practices, both legal and memorial (Stewart, 2020). The order of the three terms in the triad conveys the idea that memory is a necessary precondition for any form of justice, both functionally and emotionally. The “right to truth” (understood as the effort to bring the reality of historical events to light) was closely linked to the broader notion “right to know” (Garibian, 2014; Naftali, 2016), a right long denied to the Argentine public, as exemplified by the contested issue of access to archives/memory. During Argentina’s democratic transition in the mid-1980s, judicial bodies, civil society organizations, and grassroots and community-based archives played a crucial role in the documentation and reconstruction of the country’s 20<sup>th</sup>-century history (Naftali, 2016; Compagnon, 2022). Testimonies and materials gathered using a bottom-up approach gained new legitimacy as formal documentation and legal evidence. These citizen-driven archives helped fill the void left by the military *junta*’ and collaborators’ systematic destruction of official records (Wilson, 2016; Compagnon, 2022).

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12. Over 30,000 individuals were forcibly disappeared by the regime (*desaparecidos*).

The legacy of the dictatorship sparked widespread public awareness of the political dimensions of memory (Simonetto and Butierrez, 2022; Insausti and Ben, 2023). Civil society organizations assumed the responsibility of remembering victims of state and dictatorial violence and of reclaiming the truth about what had taken place (Naftali, 2016). The institutionalization of memory policies allowed for the construction of an official/national narrative of past crimes (Insausti and Ben, 2023).

### *Trans and Travesti Exclusion as Memory Injustice*

Despite the development of TJ tools in Argentina in its move towards democracy in the 1980s, their applicability was and still is limited; this is especially true for TT individuals and their communities. As documented through interviews and materials from the Argentinian *Archivo de la Memoria Trans* (AMT – Trans Memory Archive), memory has not been mobilized as a paradigm of human rights and justice for these populations, despite the specific forms of violence they endured during the dictatorship (Antoniucci, 2019). TT were subjected to a dual regime of oppression: they were political opponents and were targets of the cisheteronormative system on which the dictatorship was ideologically and politically grounded, that is to say, they were deliberately targeted through intersecting forms of oppression related to their gender non-conformity, class position, and racialization (Oberlin, 2019). The premeditated nature of this second axis of repression has been recently confirmed through newly uncovered archival materials by political activists (Insausti and Ben, 2023). In this sense, scholars have referred to the existence of a necropolitical mechanism/strategy enacted by the dictatorship, aimed at the systematic and ongoing elimination of TT lives (Mbembe 2003; Valencia and Zhuravleva, 2019; Rodríguez Madera, 2020). Persecution and systematic violence were not integrated or addressed within the TJ implemented during Argentina's democratization (Oberlin, 2019). The cisheteronormative imprint of the justice system contributed to the exclusion of TT individuals from official memory (*Ibidem*). Although hundreds of military officers and former regime collaborators have been prosecuted since 2006, the first court ruling recognizing state violence against TT

during the last dictatorship was only issued in April 2022 (Insausti and Ben, 2023; Nuñez Lodwick, 2024).

If we consider TJ in terms of recognition, it reshapes the temporality of events by establishing a symbolic boundary – an often fictitious “end” – to state violence. However, in the case of Argentina, this temporal framing risks exonerating this democratic state from accountability for structural and institutional violence that continued or manifested itself in new forms after the fall of the military dictatorship. Moreover, TT communities assert that their persecution under the military dictatorship represented both a continuation and an intensification of repressive measures already present under previous democratic governments and that, in their experience, state violence did not begin with the dictatorship or end with its downfall (Insausti and Ben, 2023; Nuñez Lodwick, 2024). In Argentina, TT individuals and communities face extremely precarious living conditions marked by social exclusion and systemic marginalization. Between 2000 and 2005 alone, of the 420 persons in this population who died, primarily from HIV/AIDS-related complications and violent murders, nearly 70% were under 40 years of age (Berkins and Fernández, 2005). Nearly 95% of working-age TT are excluded from the labor market and the school dropout rate among this population is critically high. For many, sex work constitutes the only possible available source of income (Antoniucci, 2019). At a regional level, TT life expectancy in Latin America is dramatically low, ranging between 35.5 and 41.25 years, which is less than half the regional average of approximately 75 years (Borgogno, 2013). Sheilla L. Rodríguez Madera (2022) coined the term “necropraxis” to describe the multiple direct and indirect forms of everyday violence, often small-scale and normalized, through which necropower operates. These are forms of repression designed to kill TT individuals slowly, through what she calls “small doses of death”.

TJ in Argentina focuses on violence committed explicitly during the dictatorship and thus fails to consider the continuum of violence that TT still face, in the context of the dictatorship or not; this places TT memory in direct opposition to TJ, proposing an alternative justice timeline for TT population.

Although France has a long history of using memory for political purposes—primarily to reinforce a national narrative under monarchies, empires, and republics alike (Michel, 2010)—practices more closely resembling MJ began to emerge in the late 1990s with the rise of the *devoir de mémoire* (“duty of memory/remembrance”) imperative which became institutionalized through significant legislative actions by different members of parliament and the creation of institutions such as the *Direction des Patrimoines, de la Mémoire et des Archives* (Department of Heritage, Memory, and Archives) in 1999, particularly in connection with the recognition of the Holocaust, slavery, and the transatlantic slave trade (Ledoux, 2016). More recently, in 2022, socialist senator Hussein Bourgi introduced a legislative initiative (Bill No. 864 (2021–2022)) which aimed to recognize and officially express regret for the criminalization of homosexuality endured by homosexual individuals as a result of discriminatory laws enforced between 1942 and 1982, and to offer reparation to those convicted. The proposed measures included symbolic financial compensation, the reimbursement of fines paid, and the creation of an independent national commission for recognition and redress.<sup>13</sup> Between 1942 and 1982, approximately 10,000 people were convicted under laws enforcing a higher age of consent for same-sex relations, and 40,000 under charges including “public indecency” for “homosexual behavior” (Gauthier and Schlagdenhauffen, 2019). While the Senate adopted the bill in 2023, it was stripped of its indemnification component and the creation of the independent commission, thereby severely limiting the notion of reparations (Big Tata, 2024). The parliamentary debate leading to its adoption revealed divergent understandings of what constitutes meaningful reparative justice, with symbolic recognition prevailing over material compensation.

However, the *devoir de mémoire* imperative in France is not without problems. Witnesses occupy a central place, playing a symbolic and emotional role as transmitters of history (*passseurs d'histoire*) (Wieviorka, 1998). This role often compels them to speak from a position of compas-

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13. A detailed presentation of the bill proposal is available at this link: <https://www.senat.fr/leg/pp121-864.html>

sion-seeking suffering (Lefranc, 2014), or within a trauma-pathologizing framework (Fassin and Rechtman, 2024). This discursive apparatus surrounding witnesses' testimonies reinforces the social-order function of the *devoir de mémoire* in two main ways: by discouraging the articulation of material demands or political anger that might disrupt the existing social order, and by rendering the actual perpetrators of the violence invisible, behind a proclaimed goal of "reconciliation" via recognition (Gensburger and Lefranc, 2017). Yet, as many scholars and activists argue, recognition alone is not sufficient. For Big Tata, an international francophone network of LGBTQIA+ libraries and archive centers, financial reparations must also mean allocating resources to community-based initiatives, such as LGBTQIA+ archives and collective memory projects, which play a vital role in preserving and transmitting marginalized histories. Big Tata has denounced the "homosexualization of repression" and has highlighted how public discussions of memorial laws have consistently failed to include trans people and sex workers, whose experiences of criminalization and state violence fall outside the dominant narrative (Big Tata, 2024). For example, the collective points out that the temporal scope of Bourgi's bill—limited to 1945-1982—obscures the continued judicial and police repression experienced by TT and sex workers after the law's timeframe, revealing the persistent blind spots in current French institutional memory politics (Big Tata, 2024).

Echoing Big Tata's argument, the present article, as part of the wider MeS-T-HIV project (see above), highlights the importance of community archives and memory practices as key spaces where justice can be imagined beyond the limits of state-led and judicial frameworks. The central aim of this article is to contribute to the conceptualization of MJ, drawing on the case of migrant and immigrant TT sex worker communities' struggles against HIV in France. We advance the hypothesis that MJ may emerge outside formal legal arenas through a reclamation of power over individual and collective histories, via community documentation and archival practices.

## Shaping a community archive through community-based action research

The main objective of the MeS-T-HIV project is to trace the origins and development of community-based health mediation targeting migrant and immigrant TT within the field of HIV/AIDS prevention in France. In doing so, the project aims to address the relative invisibility of these practices and of the people who have shaped them, by collecting and preserving as much as possible of their fragile and endangered<sup>14</sup> individual and collective memory. Preliminary work has already created a valuable database documenting the trajectories and practices of mediators, and the groundwork for a community archive curated by Acceptess-T has already been laid. Three research staff, a sociologist (CP), a community health worker (LZ), and a community archivist (MAV), were recruited for the project.

### *Phase 1: laying the foundations of the 'Presente!' archival project*

The MeS-T-HIV project was launched in 2024. Although the community archivist position was first envisioned during the co-writing of the research project, the archival component of the project was not described in detail when seeking funding. The definition and the creation of the community archivist position were themselves two elements of the project, conceived as a separate process of community-based action research which needed to be conducted. Accordingly, in the months following the project's launch, the research team conducted a series of discussions about the archive and the archivist position (see section 4.2 below); during this period the project's sociologist and community health worker had begun their fieldwork.

The key reflections for the research team were identifying what an archive meant to us, and what the implications of creating an archive at, and of Acceptess-T would be. Acceptess-T is unique in France in terms of its history, its members, and the communities it serves. As of 2025,

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14. Here, endangered means at risk of disappearance due to the aging of pioneering community mediators and the wider community itself.

the organization employs 23 people, 18 of whom are trans. Ten of the latter have a migrant background—mostly from Latin America—and some have been, or still are, sex workers. Many have not completed formal education and live in France with residence permits. Globally, there are very few examples of trans community archives, and even fewer archival projects with which the organization could identify or from which it could draw inspiration. Within the research team, both formal meetings and informal exchanges played a central role in shaping MeS-T-HIV's launch and development. Among the questions we asked ourselves were: *How can we create an archive that endures? Where should materials be deposited and preserved; within Acceptess-T or in institutional settings? What are the legal issues involved, particularly regarding sex work and HIV status? What risks arise if biological families initiate legal action when Acceptess-T preserves and takes care of belongings of deceased daughters? How can we design a framework that is both ethical regarding contributors and that can protect the organization against prosecution? How can we prevent potential commercial use of archival materials? And, how can we ensure that the project truly speaks to, and for, the people whose lives it documents?*

Since its creation in 2010, Acceptess-T has gradually shaped and positioned itself as a familial entity in relation to the community members it supports. This sense of family emerges from the context in which both the founders of the organization and its members and beneficiaries have lived—often marked by disruptions in biological family ties, experiences of violence, social isolation, and exile. With its intention to create an archive, the organization acts as a chosen family, preserving the memories of loved ones who have passed and of older generations as they age, integrating their stories into the present. Caring for memory entails caring for the deceased individuals themselves. In this way, the project also serves to nurture social bonds, particularly those that are intergenerational in nature.<sup>15</sup>

In parallel with these epistemological reflections, our research team began to train and inform ourselves on the practical aspects of building an archive, while also initiating intracommunity consultations. CP had

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15. At the time of writing, the three people carrying the archival component of the MeS-T-HIV project are in their twenties and thirties; they work in close collaboration with older TT who frequent Acceptess-T. This intergenerational dynamic has become a central aspect of the MeS-T-HIV project.

training on how to facilitate and support groups through an approach and practices informed by critical pedagogy (*éducation populaire*). The team met with Morgane Vanehuin (see above), who has experience in archival work, both through formal training and activism, and with María Belén Correira, co-founder of the TT community-based archive AMT, which was founded in Buenos Aires in 2012. The AMT collects, preserves, and shares photographs, documents, and testimonies that trace the lives, struggles, and resistance of TT people in Argentina. Created and led by TT activists, it seeks both to safeguard collective memory and to challenge the historical erasure of trans experiences (Antoniucci, 2021). During her visit to Acceptess-T, Correira shared the history of the Argentine archive, provided insights into its development, and participated with us in in-depth discussions on engaging and training community members in archival practices, such as digitization. LZ reached out to the Big Tata collective (see above), to inform them about the archival component of MeS-T-HIV, and to seek advice and to confirm their future availability for support. Finally, we collaborated with MSD (see above), a Brazilian researcher who worked for several years in Paris with Brazilian *travesti* communities from the first and second waves of immigration (Duarte, 2018), many of whom were connected to the organization PASTT (see above).

Moreover, during this first phase, the research team decided that the archival project would comprise one main axis: the archive as a tool of care and support against the isolation experienced by aging members of Acceptess-T. This axis aims to foster community engagement and, potentially, community organizing, by encouraging participants to approach the archive not only as a site of remembrance but also as one of collective advocacy and activism. The creation of this axis was driven by a strong sense of urgency, stemming from the aging and passing of survivors of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, compounded by the critical health conditions of others. This urgency was driven by the fear of losing their stories, and therefore their legacy, that is, the collective memory and the archives that preserve and safeguard their lives as well as their collective struggles. We named the archival project *¡Presente!* (Still here!) for the cultural and political resonance it evokes. In Latin America, *¡Presente!* is the slogan used to chant and proclaim the names of victims of forced disappearances, feminicides and transfemicides. It also carries a temporal

connotation—an archive anchored in the present—and a symbolic one, as the MeS-T-HIV project responds to the material erasure of bodies and histories. Accordingly, *¡Presente!* embodies both a temporal and a political dimension.

### *Phase 2: initiating community memory work*

As mentioned in the previous section, a key element of the project was the creation of the community archivist position, which we saw as different from that of a traditional, institutional archivist. We decided not to recruit someone with formal archival training, rather a person capable of creating and sustaining a link between the participants in the archival project and Acceptess-T, as well as facilitating participants' appropriation of the project. Initially, we hoped to recruit someone rooted in the migrant and immigrant TT community, fluent in both Spanish and French, and able to facilitate community activities while outlining an initial proposal for an archival framework within the organization. However, this profile proved difficult to find; given the hardship that shapes their life trajectories, few aging migrant and immigrant TT sex workers have all these characteristics. MAV was ultimately recruited; he possesses the required skills but is not a TT and, like CP and LZ, belongs to a younger generation of trans people. Since no members of the joint Acceptess-T/SESSTIM research team have experience in creating an archive, we created a small group of experts to supervise MAV's work. This group meets periodically to discuss the progress of the archival project.

In parallel with the establishment of and recruitment for the community archivist position, we began preparing a witness seminar (WS) on the experiences and histories of sex work in Paris, focusing on the perspectives of migrant and immigrant TT, paying particular attention to the 1980s and 1990s, as these are the decades for which the community's historical traces are starting to disappear, primarily because of the deaths of so many TT of AIDS-related illnesses and because TT from that period are now aging. Indeed, many of the latter have suffered premature aging because of HIV and/or other lifelong struggles. The WS was conceived by the authors and MSD (see above), with the supervision of Acceptess-T's leadership and several of its founding members. Some

of the latter invited, by telephone, individuals they considered might be interested in bearing testimony. Moreover, an evocative flyer in Spanish, Portuguese, and French was created as an invitation to be shared via WhatsApp, a tool widely used for communication within the Latin American TT community in France. Nine elderly TT from Acceptess-T's network agreed to take part. All were between 50 and 65 years old, and originally from countries outside of France (Argentina, Ecuador, Colombia, Portugal, Brazil, and Guyana), all arriving to France at different times. The WS was conducted in Spanish and French and was facilitated by CP, LZ, MAV, MSD, and Acceptess-T's co-directors Giovanna Rincon and Laszlo Blanquart.

To foster a participatory process that made participants' narratives tangible and visible, enlarged maps of various Parisian neighborhoods historically frequented by migrant and immigrant TT communities (such as Pigalle, the Bois de Boulogne park (see above), and the western entrances to the city) were displayed on the walls of the workshop room. Participants could mark the places they mentioned with colored post-its or stickers, each color corresponding to a different theme (e.g., sex work, housing, sociability, etc.). Archival photos collected by MSD during doctoral fieldwork, along with newspaper clippings from the 1980s and 1990s, were also made available and circulated among participants to spark memories and reflections. These press cuttings were mostly sensationalist articles about an "invasion" of immigrant and migrant TT sex workers in Paris, and subsequently their alleged role in the transmission of the HIV epidemic (the only two topics through which this community appeared in the public sphere, at that time, and always without the protagonists' control over what was reported). In addition to the memorializing aim presented to participants, the WS also pursued several goals connected to the process of community-based action research. These included the following: presenting the project of building a collective and participatory archive to the participants; introducing the project team (CP, LZ, MSD, and MAV) and identifying MAV as the community archivist so that participants could get to know him and be in contact with him; exploring the participants' interest in memory practices in order to assess the relevance of creating a TT community archive; collecting participants' views on the project, including possible commitments to become actively involved in it.

The WS did not address sex work in a narrow sense. Rather, the discussion quickly turned toward biographical narratives, shared in turn by each participant. These narratives focused on a variety of themes and conveyed not only individual life stories but also stories of places and people. These themes included the years spent in their countries of origin; the violence of state terrorism during military dictatorships; experiences of imprisonment; the trajectory of migration; their arrival and settlement in Paris and all that this entailed; the hotels or addresses where participants lived; the venues they frequented to eat and socialize; the streets, neighborhoods, hotels, and woods where they engaged in sex work; the violence perpetrated by the French state and the police; their difficulties accessing healthcare; poverty; addictions; the “golden years” of TT sex work; the HIV/AIDS epidemic; their exclusion/marginalization from HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns and interventions; the death of dozens of friends and acquaintances. Most importantly, the WS sparked curiosity, interest, and motivation for participants to become directly involved in the archival project. As a form of exploratory collective interview, the WS allowed the research team to i) identify themes to be further explored in subsequent individual interviews collected for the archive and to draft a preliminary interview guide, ii) to note the names of places and people who played a role in the community’s history, and iii) to create a TT map of the city of Paris.

The WS was audiorecorded with participants’ oral permission. In the spirit of community-based action research, this recording will serve both as archival material itself and as research material for scholarly writing. Together with the materials gradually collected in the archive, it will be used to develop a strategy and content for advocacy on rights and material reparations for TT.

### **Toward a new conceptualization of memory justice, action-research and community health**

Memory practices hold a dual force: while they may contribute to erasure, they can also create openings for alternative modes of remembrance grounded in collective care and resistance. As in the Argentine case, migrant and immigrant TT sex workers in France continue to be erased

from official memory and reparation frameworks such as the *devoir de mémoire*. The MeS-T-HIV project builds on and renews the French tradition of action research which, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was supported by targeted HIV/AIDS funding. At that time, these resources made it possible to test and sustain innovative interventions with the most marginalized communities, while also providing crucial financial support for the creation of community-based organizations (Coppell, Amaouche and Braggiotti, 2020).

Since the late 1990s, HIV/AIDS prevention policies and memory-related initiatives appear to have evolved along separate lines. Funding bodies have tended to prioritize biomedical prevention strategies. Moreover, it is difficult to secure funding for community history studies outside of an academic framework. MeS-T-HIV is the first community-based action research project in France to receive targeted funding to support the development of a community-based archival project. The project introduces various innovative dimensions.

Acceptess-T's partnership with SESSTIM was designed to strengthen the former's research capacities and to provide a framework for structuring its archival work. In this sense, the project has succeeded in achieving its objective. MeS-T-HIV has developed a circular methodology in which materials produced within the archival project directly contribute to the sociological research component, and simultaneously, materials generated for sociological research are immediately reintegrated into a community circuit, through a process of restitution that avoids delays and misinterpretations. This strengthens the archives and supports the fight against isolation among ageing TT. This circular dynamic between research and community work ensures that knowledge production and collective empowerment are closely intertwined.

As we saw above with Argentina, memory emerges as a necessary precondition for any form of justice, whether material or emotional. Community initiatives play a decisive role in uncovering experiences that institutional history cannot—or chooses not to—address, through, in the case of France, the official *devoir de mémoire* imperative. Following the tradition of HIV/AIDS activism that acted when the French state failed, or refused, to intervene in the HIV crisis, the *¡Presente!* archive embodies this counter-practice and counter-narrative. Its objective is not reconciliation but justice. In Argentina, TT activism has explicitly connected

memory and archival practices to reparation claims. A notable example is the 2017 campaign “*Reconocer es reparar*” (To Recognize is to Repay), through which activists introduced a bill demanding economic reparations for TT over the age of forty, in recognition of the persecution and rights violations endured under both the dictatorship and subsequent democratic regimes (Simonetto and Butierrez, 2022; Pizarro, 2024). In a similar vein, the Acceptess-T archive has the potential to articulate claims for historical reparations. It confronts HIV-related stigma and discrimination, racism and transphobia, by dismantling the entrenched trope of the migrant and immigrant TT sex worker as a “carrier” of disease, while also documenting the necropolitical strategies pursued by the French state against these communities. Recent research shows that many migrants acquire HIV in France, not prior to migration (Gosselin *et al.*, 2020). By documenting participants’ trajectories and everyday lives, *¡Presente!* exposes the structural factors that have put TT communities at risk of HIV/AIDS and have led to the deaths of many TT individuals. It also reclaims individual and collective narrative power for those most directly concerned. It generates counter-narratives that uncover structural inequalities, affirm denied rights, and have the potential to inspire future struggles.

*¡Presente!* shapes the meaning-making of MJ by underlying the transnational dimension of memory (Stewart, 2020). This dimension is closely linked to the migration trajectories of Latin American TT communities to France, among other countries. It is also closely linked to broader processes of globalization (Simonetto and Butierrez, 2022). For example, the high degree of mobility within TT communities generates a circularity of biographical experience (Pignedoli *et al.*, 2024); individuals who arrive in France often bring with them histories of exile, repression, or hostile social environments (Insausti and Ben, 2023). Past, pre-migration life experiences travel together with migrants, influencing their present lives and shaping the ways in which memory is produced and expressed. The circulation of memory across borders underscores the importance of recognizing diverse histories within global human rights frameworks. It calls for forms of transnational solidarity that acknowledge the specific experiences of TT people in diasporic communities. Transnational memory practices intersect with political activism, as memory becomes a tool for claiming rights and justice beyond national borders. TT communities

can mobilize memory not only to remember past abuses but also to resist ongoing discrimination and violence, emphasizing the continuity of states and societal oppressions.

The case of the joint Acceptess-T/SESSTIM research team for the archival component of MeS-T-HIV also highlights the intergenerational dimension of MJ (Nuñez Lodwick, 2024; Rojas-Granada, 2025). It illustrates how solidarities can be forged among people from diverse socio-political and generational backgrounds who come together within a trans community bound by the need for memory. Within this framework, by co-constructing the archive with older generations, younger ones contribute to the production, transmission, and valorization of community memory; this occurs formally, through the collective development of the archive, and informally, through the learning, and preservation of oral histories. This intergenerational transmission of memory is fundamental for the construction and preservation of collective identities within trans communities. The active participation of younger generations in co-creating archives alongside elders ensures that memory remains a living, dynamic process. Such practices foster the community's capacity to thrive.

MeS-T-HIV mobilizes resources specifically dedicated to care via the use of memory and community documentation. Overall, our archival project expands the scope of community-based health approaches and practices through its grounding in the lived experiences, cultural values, and the engagement of the communities it serves. It is framed within a holistic vision of health that encompasses the improvement of quality of life through the creation of moments of sociability, the work of memory, and restorative justice. Such practices seek to foster social inclusion and empower participants, while at the same time reconstituting both individual and collective narratives (Punzalan and Caswell, 2016). In this sense, the critical trans gerontology (see above) approach to archival work is particularly relevant. Within this epistemological framework, exposure to or life with HIV, as well as the experience of minoritarian lives, is understood not only as a source of vulnerability, but also as a potential lever for reclaiming power over one's life and one's place in the world. From this perspective, MJ refers to the enactment of restorative justice beyond the boundaries of the formal legal system, through the reclamation of individual and collective historical agency, made possible by participatory

documentation, socio-historiographical work, and community-based archival practices (Booth, 2001).

The case of the MeS-T-HIV project demonstrates how memory, research and archives can converge to advance both health and justice. It shows how community-based archives can expand the meaning of MJ, reframing it as a transnational, intergenerational, and participatory practice rooted in the lived experiences of migrant and immigrant TT sex workers communities. Future work will further develop this perspective by integrating the voices of participants, an essential step that could not yet be implemented in the present article as the sociological fieldwork of the project is still ongoing.

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