Day 1 of the Domestic Exchange: Austin, TX

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We just came out of a powerful two-week International Exchange in Mesoamerica, but we know that not everyone can travel internationally nor be away from home for several days. We also know that we can build relationships of trust and solidarity across difference without having to leave the country. For the first time, Move to End Violence coordinated a three-day “domestic exchange” for Cohort 4 members who were unable to travel with us to Guatemala but who are deeply interested in themes of migration, government repression, land, and resiliency.

Our small group gathered in Austin, Texas today for a series of meetings with three organizations—Jolt, Youth Rise Texas, and American Gateways— that are focused on Black and Brown communities, building power, and meeting needs while centering arts & culture, healing and resiliency, and self and community care.
We started the day with Jolt, whose executive director Cristina Tzintzún is a member of Cohort 4. Organizing Director Tess Ortega described their work to build power within Latinx communities across the state, much of which is focused on the leadership of young and adult women. “Women are more likely to vote and volunteer, and we want to make sure they get the credit by being in leadership.” Via their many student chapters, they polled young people on issues they care about – immigration, climate change, health care, and college affordability topped the list – and what they would need to vote in upcoming elections. “Many people in our community can’t vote, that’s why it’s so important that those who can do vote to make sure our needs are represented.” One of the key strategies is using arts and culture as a form of resistance and supporting artists-in-residence. Their quinceñeara on the steps of the Texas Capitol protesting a bill that would allow law enforcement to ask anyone for their residency documentation went viral.

When asked about how Jolt addresses anti-Blackness in Latinx communities, Tess pointed to their work to build relationships and coalitions with Black organizations and that they intentionally include Afro-Latinx representation in their art and materials. “Latinx is not a separate community from Black folks. We push on what it means to identify as Latinx.”

Buoyed by the power and joy of cultural resistance, we went to Youth Rise Texas, where they are supporting the next generation of Black and Brown organizers to fight mass incarceration and immigrant criminalization. They do this by working deeply with small groups of young adults aged 15-20, many of whom have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system, through using art to tell their stories, youth organizing training, and centering healing and mindfulness. After watching a video about their mobilization efforts to reach young voters, they opened our afternoon together with a session of guided meditation led by one of the youth organizers and going around in a circle to share our favorite self-care quotes and messages. Audre Lorde, Nayyirah Waheed, Cha...
One thing that captured our attention is the way young people are deeply respected in the organization and the care that is taken to never exploit them. Advanced youth organizers are trusted to lead much of the training curriculum, building a pipeline of leaders who will eventually take over the organization. A restorative justice culture where anyone can call for and be part of a circle when harm has happened supports their work to dismantle power dynamics. All youth organizers are paid, including summer program participants, with the understanding that many are either helping support their families or they need economic stability to be liberated from their families. A youth emergency fund provides short-term funds for basic needs for any member who needs it. This has required Youth Rise to advocate for the real cost of their program with funders, which is also an opportunity to be explicit about what really takes to support young leaders.
We closed the day with Natalia Drelichman, Director of Legal Programs and Team Development at American Gateways, which provides legal services and education to immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, including victims of trafficking. She described real challenges, including the lack of social services available for people in need, knowing that searching for a safe place to sleep takes precedence over legal matters. The fact that the Texas state legislature only meets once every two years (one of four states the U.S. to still do that), making it sometimes difficult to pursue more creative legal and policy strategies. And misinformation and the way that media saturation can cause people to lose interest at a time when long-term engagement and solutions are needed, such as with the public’s understanding about family separation and the scare that immigrants who access public benefits will be denied citizenship.

We also discussed the impact of trauma and the need for self-care. Natalia raised the triple trauma of immigration – the push facto in their home countries, the danger of the journey to the U.S., and the inhumane conditions once they reach the border. Many migrants are victims of sexual assault and domestic violence and the process continually re-traumatizes them. One way they are trying to address this is by having trans folks not be detained at all and instead moved immediately into shelters with trans-competent services. They are also paying attention to self-care for the staff “We have to think about what do I need to care for myself so that
It was a very full day that reinvigorated us, sparked ideas and questions, and planted seeds for possible future collaborations. Off to Houston tomorrow!
Today we spent the afternoon having a homemade lunch with leaders and members of Organización Latina de Trans en Texas (OLTT) at Casa Anandrea, their house in Houston that provides emergency shelter for trans, intersex, and queer people, especially those who are undocumented. About 20 people welcomed us, mostly, though not exclusively, Latinx folks from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. Some just recently came out of immigrant detention while others have been in the country for twenty years. Antena Houston joined to help us practice language justice in the meeting.

OLTT started about 4 years ago after trans women at an LGBT event were confronted for using the women’s restroom. When they asked the organization hosting the event for accountability and to agree to demands for trans women, the organization refused, an experience birthed OLTT, led by Ana Andrea Molina. “We cannot be excluded from our own community.”

Through their Trans Empowerment & Leadership Program, they fight for the rights of trans people by bringing women to the Texas state capitol and to Washington, DC to advocate for issues important to them. “Straight people have fun at our shows, but they ignore our narratives. It is our responsibility and privilege to fight for our issues. If we don’t do it, no one else will do it for us.” OLTT sees leaders as powerful political ambassadors who are speaking out on behalf of the larger community. In a great example of using cultural resistance as a way to support the political work, they hold an annual pageant judged by a panel of activists, where the winner is “not a barbie doll but someone who can speak powerfully in front of a crowd.”

Another key part of their work is the Deportation Defense Project. Along with the push factors for most immigrants of poverty and violence, trans women have additional layers of hardship, such as being disowned by family members at a young age, sexual abuse, constant harassment, and job discrimination. Trans women who are Indigenous and/or Garifuna also confront racism. Many of the are detained at the U.S. border without any resources, housed in terrible conditions and facing deportation. Member after member shared their story of how OLTT was a lifeline for them, often being the only organization to offer support, by coordinating legal services, getting fines lowered and paid, providing transport and a place to stay. And, more importantly, by providing emotional support, sisterhood, and hope.

Solidarity and sisterhood are essential parts of the way they operate. “We don’t have to be best friends, but we have to be sisters in the struggle.” They receive no funding for most of what they do, including rent and food for the emergency shelter. Any grants they have gotten so far are small and often support specific programs. They fundraise for donations through garage sales, drag shows, and bingo. The women who are able to make money donate to keep things running. No one is on payroll and everyone is a volunteer. This solidarity is extended out into the community, too. During Hurricane Harvey, they housed over 50 people who were displaced. They held a successful clothing drive for homeless folks in the area, knowing that many LGBT people are on the streets. They recently opened up their services to LGBT and non-binary people broadly, knowing that not everyone in their trans community agrees with that decision. “Some people only care about what they can get for themselves. We are not just fighting for our own rights, but the larger LGBT community.”
It is clear that a valued show of solidarity from the broader community would be to support this important work with much-needed funds. They also named the need for more people to pay attention to the many trans women who are still in immigrant detention along the Southern border – progressive lawyers, judges, and service providers are crucial. They also need more job opportunities for trans women, especially jobs that pay living wages for dignified work. These Translatinahs will continue doing their incredible work but can continue scraping by to meet as many needs as they can, but it is on the broader community to ask ourselves how will we show up in solidarity with them. “We’ve been thrown out of our families and social groups as soon as we talk about our needs. Here we are a family. We are powerful. We are chingonas.”
On our last day of the domestic exchange, we hosted a roundtable of activists from Houston who are leading powerful and transformative work in Black and Brown communities in Texas:

- **Eesha Pandit**, member of MEV’s Cohort 2, co-founder of Center for Advancing Innovative Policy, and founding team member of South Asian Youth in Houston Unite (SAYHU)
- **Ana Andrea Molina**, director and founder of Organización Latina Trans en Texas, whom we met on [Day 2 of the exchange](#)
- **Monica Roberts**, African-American blogger, writer, and transgender rights advocate and founding editor of TransGriot
- **Ola Osifo Osaze**, founder of Black LGBTQIA+ Migrant Project (BLMP)
- **Kelvin Lopez**, Organizer at Jolt Houston, and whose Austin office we visited on [Day 1 of the exchange](#); Jolt is a member of [ME' Cohort 4](#)
Houston is currently known as the most ethnically diverse city in the United States. This diversity, which has happened over time with demographic changes, highlights the need for Black and Brown solidarity and making connections between our struggles, while also understanding the differences, nuances, and complexities.

**Mass Incarceration**

A key connection raised by panelists is the mass incarceration of poor Black people and the high rates of detention of immigrants. Said Eesha, “Our communities are separated into different wings in the prison, but it is literally the same structure impacting us and it’s the same companies profiting off our imprisonment.”

SB4, a current law that allows law enforcement to racially profile people by asking for their citizenship documents, is another example. “We are all getting profiled,” said Monica, “and when they are done messing with Latinx immigrants, they are coming for Black folks, including Black trans folks from the Caribbean.”

**Economic and Political Impact**

The panelists also pointed to how communities of color and trans communities get shortchanged in the economic and political spheres. “Communities of color helped Houston grow into an international city with a booming economy,” shared Monica, “but the trans community and immigrants are not integrated in that.”

Ana Andrea shared that while activists celebrated Obama and progressive Texans like Wendy Davis, their administrations were signing agreements with ICE and overseeing immigrant detentions and deportations. “People who call themselves progressive use to grow their numbers. But in their path to their objectives, they forget our goals.” This is partly why Jolt organizes young Latinx people to register to vote and run for office, shared Kelvin.

These same divisions show up between communities of color and among LGBTQ communities. “There are over 130,000 undocumented South Asians in Texas,” shared Eesha, but they use the narrative of being “good immigrants” to stay under the radar. “How can we be in solidarity with other undocumented communities if we aren’t willing to admit it?” Ola discussed the ways Black and trans immigrants are targeted for punishment and criminalization within detention centers, “it’s another way that anti-Blackness shows up.” There was also heated discussion about the ways white LGBT organizations ignore the leadership of trans leaders of color. They banded together to defeat an anti-trans bathroom bill but were silent when Latinx trans folks were fighting SB4. When trans folks of color were calling the alarm about the exclusion of trans people in early versions of the Employment Non-Discriminat Act (ENDA), white leadership didn’t listen to them. “There is internalized transphobia in our movements and white trans folks don’t want to be led by people of color,” said Monica.
Transphobia, anti-Blackness, and racism also impact how resources are distributed. “It’s like there is a mafia within movements an obscures the work. If there are resources, you should share them,” commented Ana Andrea. Millions of dollars were raised for Hurricane Harvey relief and none of it went to OLTT, even though they were housing tens of people displaced by the storm. After a discussion led by Ola on the minimal percentages of funding that goes to trans organizations, Monica shared, “Leadership of color not funded properly and not being respected, especially in the South.”
Cross-Community Organizing Opportunities

The panelists are clear that Houston is the perfect place to do cross-community organizing. Because of Texans’ experience with “repressive regimes and problematic governments, some of the most innovative organizing is happening here, but it gets disregard and disrespected,” said Eesha. “Rather than looking to us for insights, progressives see us as a place to be fixed.” Observed Ola, always surprised by the invisibility of Texas in the progressive movement. It has a much stronger progressive history than people s Trans organizing is focused on the coasts and Chicago, but Texas has had a major impact on the modern trans movement.”
The Struggle and Promise of Love – Reflections on the MEV Domestic Exchange

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Oftentimes, in social justice movement spaces we witness and experience the very harms that we’re moving to dismantle on a societal level – sometimes in ourselves, and sometimes in others. Many times we only witness the trauma and not the solution, as the only real solution is the act of moving in practice.

As a movement, if there ever was a point of reaching critical mass – it is now. We are at a pivotal point in our collective journey – a point which can propel us to unimagined levels of unity, healing, positive transformation and progress; or push us into an era of disenchantment, chaos, instability, moral decay, and negativity.

As a member of MEV Cohort 4, I have been gathering with other movement leaders for over a year through a series of convenings. Our most recent convening, our fourth one, was a choice of an International Exchange in Guatemala or MEV's first-ever Domestic Exchange, which was held in Texas. The Domestic Exchange, led by MEV faculty Trina Greene Brown, was a push forward in a positive direction towards unification and equitization – through learning from the doers and taking direction from the ones who are impacted. Through actively learning, we learned how we can give a hand and how to practice actual solidarity.
In each encounter, we witnessed examples of building communities that uplift, support, and empower each other; and saw leaders who walked with their people, rather than riding on top of their people:

- **Jolt** was an example of an organization who supports their people in healing through their art. Through their Artists in Residence program, art is seen as central to long-term culture change and their artists get paid and have opportunities to sell their work to other audiences. Instead of consuming their people's creativity, they have created an avenue where their people could sustain themselves, through their creativity while moving towards liberation.

*Pictured: Tanvi Sheth and Monica James of Triumphant 2gether, Trina Greene Brown and Priscilla Hung of MEV, Tess Ortega of Jolt*