

# 6.1 THE BLACK QUEER YOUTH INITIATIVE: CHALLENGING RACISM, STIGMA & EXCLUSION

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## Introduction

The Black Queer Youth (BQY) Initiative is a group for Black, African, Caribbean and multiracial youth, aged 29 and under, who also identify as LGBTQ2S. For over 16 years, BQY has been one of the only spaces exclusively for youth who are both Black and queer-identified in Canada, and has grown from a monthly group facilitated by Black queer community volunteers into a fully-fledged project of the Supporting Our Youth Program at the Sherbourne Health Centre in downtown Toronto, Ontario. Over these years, BQY youth and facilitators have devised a safe space for their community, where Black queer identities are celebrated and honoured while simultaneously facing the challenges of racism, stigma and exclusion—issues that have plagued the program’s participants and other Black queer youth from before BQY’s inception until today. This case study provides information on the BQY Initiative.<sup>1</sup>

## History: The Emergence of Racialized LGBTQ2S Organizations in Toronto

In 1985, readers of the magazine *The Body Politic*, at the time Canada’s oldest—and one of North America’s most prominent—lesbian and gay publications, found “a lengthy article exploring highly charged questions of racial and sexual politics” (Churchill, 2003, p. 114). The debate was sparked by a personal advertisement submitted by a gay White man requesting “a young well built BM [Black man] for houseboy” (Body Politic Collective, 1985). With these 31 words, Toronto’s LGBTQ community was embroiled in a debate around race, sexuality and identity.

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<sup>1</sup>The author of this case study would like to give a special thanks to Elisa Hatton, who documented much of the early history of the group, and to King, Ki, Verlia, MJ, Keith, Sapphire, Datejje, River, Anaya and Jason - past and present BQY facilitators.

In the early days of the LGBTQ2S rights movement in Toronto, gay organizations grappled with shifting conceptual approaches to public visibility, “gay identity” and the creation of a unified LGBTQ2S community. Nash (2006) outlines this history, arguing that since the late 1960s, Toronto’s gay and lesbian population has been given “an increasingly more tolerant reception,” with the gay village at the intersection of Church and Wellesley in downtown Toronto evolving as “its cultural and social centre” (Nash, 2006, p. 2). However, behind the tolerance exists “a highly contested and much critiqued urban landscape— a location deeply scarred by myriad battles fought over the social, political and cultural meanings attributed to the existence of individuals interested in same-sex relationships” (Nash, 2006, p. 2).

It can be argued that the early Toronto LGBTQ movement privileged the issues and needs of White, middle-class gay men, and excluded lesbians, trans, gender-expansive and two-spirit individuals, and communities of colour. The emerging gay neighbourhood at Church and Wellesley was largely dominated by gay men in the 1970s, and gay organizations were run by gay men, focusing primarily on issues that concerned gay men, such as the policing of gay men’s spaces and the need for better-quality gay-friendly businesses in the city (Nash, 2005). However, mainstream messaging of the gay movement’s activities presented gay activists as speaking on behalf of both gays and lesbians. This is one of the earliest examples of marginalization and exclusion in the history of Toronto’s LGBTQ2S community, with the result being “the formation and maintenance of a gay district and a gay movement in Toronto publicly associated with both gays and lesbians, even though largely White, middle-class and gay interests dominated both” (Nash, 2005, p. 116).

Similarly, gay organizations and the growing LGBTQ2S community constructed “gay identity” and the “gay community” around White, middle-class and gay interests and ideologies. Nash (2005) highlights this, asserting that “social categories of identity that structure social organization and social relations, such as ‘gay’ or ‘black,’ are neither fixed nor inherent” (Nash, 2005, p. 117). At any given time, there are a number of competing discourses in circulation, but “one particular meaning about the nature and characteristic of a subject or an identity comes to dominate within relations of power” (Nash, 2005, p. 117).

In line with Canadian notions of “colour-blindness” and liberalist ideas that do not acknowledge race, and dismiss its impact, gay organizations formulated constructions of “gay identity” and “gay community” that were raceless and mainstream. However, in Canada, “racist ideology” has become so deeply rooted (Brigham, 2013), though often ignored, that Canadian society is “racialized;” that is, racism “has become a taken-for-

granted way of doing things” and “whiteness” has been positioned as the norm (Brigham, 2013, p. 121). Toronto-based gay liberation movements adopted political approaches that were “race-blind” and “gay-centric” (Catungal, 2013), which excluded racialized LGBTQ2S individuals from constructions of the gay community. The association of “gay identity” and “gay community” with White, middle-class and gay identities are also the root of deeply held assumptions of the Toronto Church-Wellesley village and other gay spaces: social spaces that normalize and naturalize the Whiteness of the community, while excluding racialized LGBTQ2S individuals.

Debates such as the one that emerged from the advertisement posted in *The Body Politic* reflected the tensions within the LGBTQ2S community when it came to looking at race within that community. Richard Fung (1985), a Toronto writer, artist and videographer connected with the Gay Asians of Toronto, in responding to *The Body Politic* debate, argued that a previously published statement that claimed “we as lesbians and gays understand homophobia, but we don’t understand racism,” failed to consider the experience of racialized LGBTQ2S individuals who experienced both homophobia and racism every day; and underscored the “ontological Whiteness of the imagined lesbian and gay communities” (as cited in Churchill, 2003).

Responding to this failure of the mainstream gay movement to include them and their concerns, “lesbian[s] and gay men of colour began to organize as a way of disrupting the ubiquitous whiteness of queer public culture” (Churchill, 2003, p. 125). During the 1980s, the political landscape of lesbian and gay organizing shifted in response to racism within the community, and organizations such as the Asian Community AIDS Services (ACAS), the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention (ASAAP) and the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention (Black CAP) were born. Lesbians and gay men of colour established organizations that “explicitly linked issues of race, ethnic difference, and sexuality,” and were part of a “a larger transnational political, intellectual and literary movement that linked issues of race, sexuality, belonging and class with questions of identity, citizenship and power” (Churchill, 2003, p. 124).

## **A Community Responds: LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness in Toronto and the Birth of Supporting Our Youth**

From 1969 to the early 2000s, gay men and lesbians made extraordinary gains securing legal protection, equity and visibility within mainstream Canadian society (Lepischak, 2004). Canadian lesbians and gay men became “more comfortable being out in large numbers, creating visible communities and taking on new challenges” (Lepischak, 2004). One of the outcomes of this visibility was an increased awareness of struggles around gender identity and sexual orientation for LGBTQ2S youth at younger ages. For many youth, this happened at a time when they were financially and emotionally dependent on biological families, which made them extremely vulnerable in the face of the homophobia, transphobia and stigma that continued to pervade Canadian society (Lepischak, 2004). High housing costs, low youth employment and eroded social supports left many LGBTQ2S youth marginalized, underhoused or homeless, and while services existed in the 1990s, many of these services failed to address the particular needs of LGBTQ2S youth.

Ontario elected a conservative government in 1995, and there were “major cuts to health, social services, public housing, education and other relevant programs” (Lepischak, 2004, p. 89). These cuts had a “profound impact on the lives of queer and trans youth and the services they used” (Lepischak, 2004, p. 89), resulting in the LGBTQ2S community exploring possible responses that would not rely on government support.

The Supporting Our Youth (SOY) program began in 1998 as a community-based intervention to facilitate contact for youth with positive adult role models and for youth seeking peer supports (Lepischak, 2004). While the SOY program facilitated spaces for LGBTQ2S youth to connect, there was still an important need for a space dedicated to addressing the impacts of homophobia, transphobia and racism. Life was more challenging for racialized LGBTQ2S youth, who also experienced discrimination based on race and culture (Lepischak, 2004). A United States (U.S.) nationwide study of schools revealed that most LGBTQ youth of colour reported experiencing victimization because of their race or sexual identity, while half of LGBTQ youth of colour reported victimization because of both race and sexual identity (Bridges, 2007). Over a third of LGBTQ youth of colour had experienced physical violence as a result of their sexual orientation (Bridges, 2007). LGBTQ youth of colour were forced to contend with homophobia from the broader society, as well as systemic racism both outside and inside the LGBTQ community.

These issues came to the forefront in 2002, when a group of concerned members of the Black queer community began a process of engagement within the community. There were still few safe spaces for LGBTQ2S youth, and virtually none that offered safety on the basis of a Black queer identity. LGBTQ2S spaces were still spaces where individuals experienced racism. The Black community was not only seeking to create a queer space where Black queer and trans youth could engage without experiences of racism, but also sought to conceptualize a space that mirrored the disruption of mainstream LGBTQ2S spaces that flourished in the 1980s, and brought issues of race, ethnic difference and sexuality to the forefront.

## **BQY Beginnings**

BQY began as a community response to a lack of space and inadequate resources for the Black queer and trans community, especially for youth. The beginnings of BQY very much mirrored the birth of the SOY Program, and it is where BQY found a home in 2002. SOY's and BQY's beginnings reflected the community's response to a challenging time for LGBTQ2S youth, and also how the community mobilized to be responsive and take action.

The BQY initiative was created after a group of Black queer youth connected with members of the Black community to approach SOY about creating a program for Black queer and trans youth in Toronto. Virma Benjamin and Cassandra Lord are credited as the volunteer founder facilitators of BQY; however, volunteers like Michele Clarke, Karene Browne, Trevor Gray and Ahkaji Zakiya were also instrumental in building the program in the early days of BQY. In its early incarnation, BQY was a group for “LBGTTQ youth who identified as Black, who identified with the Black diaspora and/or youth who had links or identity with Africa and the Caribbean” (Elisa Hatton, personal communication, September 2007). Youth who attended the group came from all walks of life—some were street-involved or experiencing homelessness, or both, and some lived at home with families, while others lived on their own and were either working or in school. The group was developed to create a space for peer sharing, support and education. Each week brought new topics for discussion, organized workshops and opportunities for community-building.

Some of the challenges of the early model included the group's reliance on volunteers and unpaid labour for facilitation. As an initiative that grew from community, there was significant investment from the Black volunteers from the community to ensure that the

space continued. BQY met monthly for a short period before becoming a bi-weekly group. An administrative and coordination support person was hired in 2002 for BQY and other SOY groups, and after one year, BQY began meeting weekly. This, however, meant the group required additional support and, as a result, the administrative and coordination support person began taking on more group facilitation. BQY Youth members were also continuously invited and supported to try their hand at facilitation. There were requests that volunteers be given honoraria and that SOY consider hiring a facilitator, due to the difficulty of sustaining the group without consistent support. There were also concerns regarding time, caseload and support. Between 2004 and 2006, coordination and facilitation shifted, so that volunteers began maintaining a limited presence, no longer as official facilitators, but as allies. This period was an opportunity to train youth members in leadership and facilitation skills, and to share group leadership. For most of 2006, members successfully ran the group meetings. By the end of 2006, new positions were created, including a community programs coordinator and a full-time and a part-time facilitator, and BQY became fully supported by the SOY program.

## **Frameworks: The BQY Model**

BQY is a safe space for Black, multiracial, African and Caribbean youth under 29 years of age who identify as LGBTQ2S. BQY operates as an anti-oppressive, trans-inclusive, participatory, youth-centred space that is responsive to and defined by the needs of its participants. All BQY groups start with a check-in, where individuals have an opportunity to share their name and pronoun, ensuring that everyone is known by a name and all individuals are given a chance to speak. Youth participants work together with staff to create a respect agreement that guides how people will engage in the space. SOY maintains a respect agreement that is universal across SOY programming. The facilitators of BQY have developed additional comfort rules to support the respect agreement, and these are reflective of the specific needs of the group. The comfort rules focus on the importance of BQY as a space of “intersectional healing” by regulating other identities (constructed around gender, gender identity, class, status, etc.) that participants bring into the space, reminding people where the power and privilege reside, and encouraging them to respect others. Although participants share commonalities through their Black queer and/or trans identities, there are still numerous differences within the group. Even within the LGBTQ2S spectrum, there are divergent needs and perspectives; the needs of Black trans individuals in the group differ widely from those of Black gays and lesbians.

The framework of BQY has been informed by a number of theories and ideas. Most importantly, BQY is predicated on theories of intersectionality, which explores the interdependence between multiple identity categories (e.g., race, ethnicity and sexuality) and social inequities and exclusion (e.g., racism and homophobia) (Logie & Rwigema, 2014; Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1989; Logie, James, Tharao, & Loutfy, 2011). Intersectionality looks at the intersection of racial oppression with other oppressions based on “class, gender, ethnicity, age, citizenship and sexual orientation” (Brigham, 2013, p. 122). When looking at issues of discrimination, “addressing one system of oppression in isolation of others is theoretically inadequate and sorely ineffectual” (Brigham, 2013, p. 122). Messaging and programming for LGBTQ2S youth of colour, and Black youth in particular, need to be culturally competent, but also need to address issues that focus on social and psychological health (Brooks, Etzel, Hinojos, Henry, & Perez, 2005; Celentano, 2005).

BQY is a community development project, and through the creation of a Black queer and trans space, individuals are able to reimagine and re-conceptualize their identities outside of the dominant narrative. BQY is a space that is exclusive to youth who identify as Black and queer and/or trans, and is animated by staff who are Black and queer and/or trans. As a community development project, individuals in BQY are able to intersect and alter “different notions and projections of space” (Foroughi & Durant, 2013, p. 218). Individuals engage with others in the space, each rooted in their own social location and, through community development, can collectively critique everyday spaces. These critiques support revelations of the “hegemonic nature of space” and give way to “countering hegemonic space” (Foroughi & Durant, 2013, p. 218). This process supports the development of “collective experience” and “critical awareness,” which brings attention to who is and is not in the space (Foroughi & Durant, 2013, p. 218; p. 219). Community development can serve as a “tool of resistance” (Foroughi & Durant, 2013, p. 218), with space and social change critically reimaged, thus supporting “the possibility of moving from individual experience to collective experience” (Foroughi & Durant, 2013, p. 218).

BQY is also a manifestation of critical race theorists Solorzano and Yosso’s (2009) definition of a counter-space, which serves as a safe space and a regenerative space for people of colour to be free from racial discrimination, and where experiences of racism are validated. Counter-space is a place where counter-stories or counter-narratives are shared, as tools “for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 32). Participants are affirmed when sharing their experiences, and can rest assured that others are also experiencing similar oppressions.

BQY is very much a space to talk critically about race and sexuality. Themes and topics include racism in the LGBTQ2S community, critiques of queer spaces, mental health and wellbeing, self-care, employment, education systems, post colonialism, social media and popular culture, all balanced with occasional chill nights, where members can come in and simply take up space. BQY programming is not limited to the Sherbourne Health Centre (where it is primarily situated); members of BQY also enjoy planned events in the community; for example, attending relevant plays and movies (e.g., *Buddies in Bad Times*, the Toronto LGBTQ Inside Out Film Festival), and go to the Art Gallery of Ontario or the Royal Ontario Museum. BQY always provides a meal prepared by youth volunteers and facilitators. The meal ensures that all participants in the group have dinner, an important component that has continued since the group's inception, and is in line with BQY's and SOY's commitment to providing basic needs for group members. The meal is an opportunity to recreate the sense of family and community through sharing food. The cultural aspects of food are very significant for the group, and much of the cuisine is heavily influenced by the Caribbean.

## **Stigma**

One of the major challenges that participants of BQY face is stigma. Stigma is a pervasive force within both the Black and LGBTQ2S communities. Stigma can be described as a mark of disgrace or reproach and a perceived negative attribute that causes someone to devalue or think less of the whole person. Stigma associated with an LGBTQ2S identity within the Black community is a major barrier, and also acts as a deterrent for Black youth to come out to their families. Youth of colour are significantly less likely than White youth to come out to their parents (Bridges, 2007). A study of LGBTQ youth reported that within the White LGBTQ community, 80% were out to their parents, compared with only 61% of African-Americans (Groves & Bimbi, 2006, as cited in Bridges, 2007). Similarly, African-American LGBTQ youth reported feeling their religion and church viewed homosexuality as "wrong and sinful" (Battle, 2000, as cited in Bridges, 2007). Numerous BQY participants still live at home and avoid conversations regarding sexual orientation and gender identity with their families, due to the stigma associated with LGBTQ2S identities. Stigma is also a challenge within the BQY program itself. Participants often struggle with issues around mental health, poverty or housing. Most of the youth find it challenging to disclose personal issues to the group or to ask the facilitators for support. By the time participants finally reach out to facilitators, it is often after issues have been ongoing for some time.

Many of the youth at BQY value privacy, and prefer that their personal business is not discussed within the group. Even with the SOY respect agreement and the BQY comfort rules, participants continue to make judgements of others in the group around class, economic status and ethnicity. Participants are often reluctant to talk about mental health or the effects of poverty. Unfortunately, this silence perpetuates the stigma, leaving those who may be suffering to suffer in silence. It is also challenging to understand the complexity of issues facing Black queer and trans youth if the youth are not able to engage in the conversations. Given the numbers of Black LGBTQ2S individuals who are struggling with mental illness and addictions, there is an immense need for such conversations. BQY creates a safe space to re-establish a strong support system and build a strong, self-sustained and empowered community. While we must look within the community and acknowledge it as a strong and empowered community, we must also recognize the vulnerabilities and the work that remains to be done.

### **Conclusion: Continuing Challenges**

In 2011, BQY youth curated the program's first stage for Toronto Pride, creating a unique and much-needed space *for* Black queer and trans youth *by* Black queer and trans youth. Since then, the BQY stage has been an annual event that has grown each year. That space, however, came under threat with changes at Pride Toronto. In autumn 2015, the Executive Director of Pride Toronto met with the BQY Coordinator and staff at SOY, and informed them that the BQY stage, which was in its fourth year, would have to be relocated because of completed construction at its previous site. This began an almost yearlong process of negotiation with Pride Toronto around securing a new space for Black queer and trans youth. Many of the youth at BQY were angry with the way Pride Toronto had treated them, and felt excluded from the decision-making process.

While negotiations between Pride Toronto and BQY continued, Pride Toronto announced Black Lives Matter Toronto as one of the honoured guests for the Pride Parade 2016. This confused and angered the youth at BQY, who felt, although Pride Toronto was honouring the grassroots community organizing of Black Lives Matter Toronto and its significant representation from the LGBTQ2S community, Pride Toronto was also eliminating spaces for queer and trans Black youth, and replicating power structures endemic in the LGBTQ2S community; in fact, silencing the voices of Black queer and trans-identified youth.

For Toronto Pride 2016, BQY was given a stage, but this stage was not in the proximity of the other Pride events, and the youth were left feeling marginalized and insignificant as a result of Pride's actions. However, many youth from BQY decided to join Black Lives Matter Toronto in the parade, and took part in disrupting the 2016 Toronto Pride parade. Many of the BQY youth had never participated in the Pride parade before this; for many at BQY, Pride's treatment was the spark that ignited their social activism, and served as an important reminder of the need for BQY to take up space in the LGBTQ2S community.

This is one of BQY's greatest challenges: How does a program that started as a community initiative and has become part of one of Canada's largest LGBTQ2S youth-serving agencies continue to remain connected to community? And how does a program like BQY continue to adapt to meet the changing needs of its community? The group is continually grappling with questions like these as the community changes and the solutions may not be clear. What is clear is that critical conversations regarding race will continue to emerge in Toronto's LGBTQ2S community. From advertisements, to *The Body Politic*, to sit-ins during Pride: individuals within the community will continue to bring these issues and other issues to the forefront. These conversations are rarely easy and not always comfortable, but spaces such as BQY ensure that Black queer and trans youth can have these conversations in a safe and supportive environment, where divergent views are heard and respected and all individuals are given an opportunity to contribute. Most importantly, spaces like BQY ensure that youth can bring their whole selves to the table—to a space where queerness and Blackness are celebrated.

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