

# Resisting Erasure: Forging Our Own Space and Histories



by

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## Abstract

The idea that queer communities, due to their marginalized state, are inherently accepting of all identities regardless of race, gender, culture, and religion is extremely flawed. Racism and discrimination based off one's identities are commonly experienced within LGBTQ2IA+ community, placing queer and trans, Black, Indigenous, and more people of colour (QTBIPOC) in a vulnerable position forcing them to seek out and forge spaces where their identities feel welcomed and valued. This major paper and the accompanying film contributes to these discussions by exploring the spatial accounts of queer racialized people who are living, working, playing or participating in activism in Toronto's Church-Wellesley area, also known as The Village. This major paper and film also includes an analysis looking at the impacts of planners and the field of planning on how queer racialized people experience queer space; putting forth a perspective that is absent from the practice, including the curriculum. This major paper therefore provides an argument for the need to reconstruct how spaces are formed, whilst beginning to underscore the inadequacies of the system(s) which planning and adjacent city-building professions operate under.

**The link to the film that accompanies this paper is here:**

<http://marvellousgrounds.com/resisting-erasure/>

# Foreword

*Resisting Erasure: Forging Our Own Space and Histories* makes several contributions that count towards my fulfillment of the MES degree. For this work, I have put together a film that includes detailed accounts from queer racialized folks who share their valuable knowledge and stories on QTBIPOC activism and space-making. This includes shared moments of resiliency through stories depicting lived experiences involving racism, race/culture-based exclusion, and discrimination. Their insights underscore significant aspects of city-building that is currently missing from virtually all planning curriculums and practices in Toronto, Canada, which are: QTBIPOC space-making and planning through a racialized lens for racialized people. Thus, my major paper and film explores these critical gaps within the planning and city-building realms, and begins to imagine more equitable forms of creating space that avoids instances of exclusion, and are reoriented outside of systems that have historically sought to oppress racialized and queer racialized communities.

This major research paper and film's components demonstrate my work in all three areas of concentration outlined in the Plan of Study: 1) Space-making, 2) Intersectionality, and 3) Planning. Both my major paper and film explore how queer racialized folks are forced to forge their own spaces where their identities can flourish away from racism, racial prejudice, and discrimination that often plague the White-dominated spaces of the Church-Wellesley area (or "The Village"). Moreover, these identities are multi-faceted therefore most queer racialized folks are not exclusively combating racism within space, but also discrimination based on their religious, cultural, and physical characteristics (e.g. queer Black Muslims, non-binary persons with disabilities). Thus, it is critical that planning adapts to these socio-spatial experiences of exclusion and identity alternative processes, practices, and ideologies that centre the queer racialized perspective, one that is often erased or left out of the conversation.

## Dedication

This major research and film are dedicated to all the queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, and many more queer folks of colour who have worked diligently to ensure queer racialized folks have the rights they do today. Although these rights are often contested and invalidated within today's society, queer racialized folks of the past and present ultimately provide myself and many others with courage, as well as examples of love and empathy, and most importantly joy which is so needed in the world today.

# Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

It is the year 2015, and as a newly legal 19-year-old enjoying his winter holiday break, I begin to enter and actively participate in the queer bars and clubs in the City of Toronto. Looking back, I am cautious and docile - a newly out queer man who is bursting with excitement to finally, for the first time, consume a whole glass of alcohol and submit to the transformative experience known to be Toronto's queer nightlife. Indeed, my first "queer outing" at Crews & Tangos, a well-known drag bar in the City, is life changing. That night, I find myself surrounded by queer folk of all shapes, genders, sizes, and personalities. I feel like the Lindsay Lohan character Cady Heron in *Mean Girls*, who just arrived at a new school and finds herself exposed to a sea of eyes peering at her and noticing the awkwardness and foreignness exuding from her.

In the years since, as I began to explore and experience various commercial queer spaces in the City, this feeling of awkwardness did not fade. In fact, I have never stopped feeling like a foreigner, no matter how many permanent commercial queer spaces such as bars, clubs, or coffee shops I have visited.

In my academic and professional work, I am trying to make sense of why I continuously have to navigate this feeling of foreignness, which makes me wonder if I belong in any mainstream physical queer space. It was only when I stopped trying to conform to White norms that I became aware of the flaws and divisiveness of White beauty standards that pervade the LGBTQ2S+ community and portray it as one enormous kumbaya, of Greek gods with attractive chiseled facial features, and hair so full and vibrant. Interrogating these standards and portrayals of queer masculinity in the queer community allowed me to become cognizant of an immaturity, and an ugliness, that plague the minds of many queer folk. This ugliness manifests as racism masked as "preference", or as a kindness and friendliness that are exclusively shown to those who correspond to these ideal beauty standards. It takes the shape of depressing amounts of classism, racism, elitism, sexism, transphobia, and even internalized homophobia. After regularly observing and experiencing it during my attempts to occupy the physical queer spaces in the city, I came to realize that queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, and many more people of colour need our own spaces of liberation and acceptance. Space for us and created by us!

The purpose of this research and the film that came from it, *Resisting Erasure: Queer Racialized Space and People*, are to question rather than normalize the dominating presence of Whiteness, as embodied especially by White gay cis-men, who crowd and occupy the majority of physical queer space within the LGBTQ2S+ community. It builds on the works of scholars and activists such as Carmen Logie and Mj Rwigema (2014), who claim that queerness is often represented by White queer people, as opposed to queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (QTBIPOC) – and among this group especially to cis and trans women of colour – whose lived experiences<sup>1</sup> are rendered invisible within queer communities like the Church-Wellesley Village in Toronto.

In the first section of this paper, I provide context on the preliminary stages of this research, including a breakdown of how participants were acquired and consulted, as well as how I materialized the concept for the film. I then discuss the methodology and methods that informed my research, drawing on key frameworks such as Sandra Harding's (1995) standpoint epistemology, which guided the participant interview process. I interviewed more than 10 individuals, and 4 were selected to be featured in the film to provide space for their truths to be heard. Each participant in my film shared vulnerable stories in responding to several questions centred around the intersecting themes: queerness, race, and space. The next section is a literature review that explores writings produced by queer racialized scholars, activists, and artists on the relationship between queerness, gender, space, and justice, as well as how each theme intersects with each other. I then discuss the findings from my interviews, including participants' perception of The Village as a white space, as well as the issue with colour-blindness, the intersection of queer space and QTBIPOC identities, the impacts of COVID-19, and the fundamental question, "Who are queer spaces created for?". I end the paper by discussing

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Pitter's (2020) definition of the term lived experience grounded in urbanist thought, is used to convey my understanding and application of term. It is as follows: "Lived experience is an important form of expertise often underutilized in urban development processes. Individuals with lived experience of a place and/or social identity possess a deepened knowledge of neighbourhood strengths, challenges and opportunities. Lived experience experts are also the keepers of important place-based stories and rituals. When this form of knowledge is coupled with professional expertise and translated into design, programming and policy decisions—community transformation processes are more harmonious and productive." (p.2)



the potential that the planning profession and adjacent city-building roles have in transforming how queer racialized people experience spaces in The Village and the City as a whole.

The erasure of queer racialized folk from White-dominated queer space is one of the key reasons why we must create our own space, using processes and methods that center our lived realities. Instead of fighting to be accepted into space that perpetuates histories of segregation, racism, and exclusion, we must look to innovative practices and ideologies that were forged by oppressed individuals and groups. This paper does this with a review of three cases of QTBIPOC space-making that bear important lessons for urban planning, and that are modelled and discussed in three texts, including Niki Lane (2018)'s paradigm of QTBIPOC space-making as 'scene space', Bacchetta et al.'s (2018) framework of collaborative QTBIPOC space-making, and OmiSoore Dryden's (2018) concept of spaces of elsewhere. These case studies are grounded in stories detailing the significance of queer racialized space that is created by and for queer racialized folk. Each case conveys how queer racialized spaces are uniquely designed by the space-maker(s), and that no single space is sufficient to satisfy the cultural and racial identities and associated lived experiences of all QTBIPOC. As the participants in my film each confirm, the importance of queer racialized space for our stability, well-being and continual growth, cannot be underestimated.

Throughout this paper and the film, I explore spaces within the Church-Wellesley Village that constitute divided landscapes. I examine themes of colour-blindness, erasure, exclusion as well as belonging, alongside QTBIPOC space-making practices that highlight these concepts. While the paper and the film are meant to be read and viewed together, my paper provides important context by discussing how QTBIPOC live, work, discover moments of joy, and navigate physical queer space. It thereby helps prepare the reader by equipping them with a critical lens through which to engage with the lived experiences and stories shared by the participants portrayed in the film.

## Context

As a person who identifies as a homosexual Afro-Asian cis-man, I experience complex intersectional<sup>2</sup> facets of oppression and isolation that dissociates me from many urban spaces. Drawing on such experiences, for this research and film I compiled detailed accounts of QTBIPOC with homonormative queer spaces within the Toronto Church-Wellesley Village, as part of a bigger project to understand and transform the relationship between urban development and QTBIPOC people. My work deals, firstly, with physical, mainstream, or commercial queer spaces, which I interpret to be LGBTQ2S+ bars, clubs, and coffee shops that are not temporary (permanent) in nature and are privileged with the capital to exist indefinitely. Secondly, it explores temporary spaces, which are much more common within the QTBIPOC community as a result of gentrification and exclusion. One of the arguments generated by this project is that it is the latter where we tend to create our own 'elsewhereness' or "spaces, where home and belongingness can be attained by the means of redefining identity away from exclusion and marginality" (Pecic, p. 41, 2013).

My research began by asking three critical questions: "Where are the QTBIPOC spaces within the City of Toronto?"; "What are the socio-spatial impacts of exclusionary planning on QTBIPOC?", and "How do QTBIPOC experience space as individuals comprised of multi-layered, intersectional facets tied to their identities?". My questions delve into the erasure of QTBIPOC individuals from histories during and after the production and formation of Toronto's queer spaces. Jin Haritaworn, Ghaida Moussa, and Syrus Marcus Ware (2018) describe this erasure incisively as they argue "QTBIPOC are missing from times and places that are legible as 'gay,' 'queer,' 'LGBT,' and 'trans' as a direct result of policing, gentrification, eviction and other processes of exclusion, erasure, displacement and dispossession" (p. 5). Through my work, I shed light on the critical mass of QTBIPOC who are missing from Toronto's queer spaces. I do so in the

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<sup>2</sup> In mentioning intersectional experiences or facets of an individual's identity, Jay Pitter's (2020) interpretation of the term intersectionality, which builds off of Kimberlé Crenshaw's original definition, is used and applied throughout my work. It is as follows: "Intersectionality is a theory and analytic framework coined by African American scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. It helps us to understand how various aspects of our identities such as race, class and gender overlap, creating interconnected forms of discrimination. This scholarship is increasingly applied to restorative justice, health care and city-building as it enables professionals to mitigate systemic and spatial barriers" (p. 2).

less erasable medium of film, thus attempting to immortalize our truths, voices, spoken histories, and unique identities. Historically, the existence and works of QTBIPOC have been undervalued and erased as noted by Río Rodríguez during a roundtable with Jin Haritaworn, Che Gossett, and Syrus Marcus Ware (Haritaworn et al., 2018) that was first held during the Equity Seminar Series at the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. Rodríguez (2018) states: “Events like Operation Soap, the bathhouse raids, which was the largest mass arrest in Canadian history, are commonly told as white narratives that omit the presence and roles of people of colour in these events” (p. 37). Thus, it is important that this research and film consciously undo this erasure and silencing in order to protect and honour the stories shared by my participants, and to contribute to this counter-archive that leaves an “indelible mark” in Toronto’s queer and QTBIPOC communities. Similarly, in exploring existing work by queer racialized people, I set out to protect and honour QTBIPOC stories shared throughout history and in my film.

The initial inspiration for my work came from reading Jin Haritaworn’s, Ghaida Moussa’s, Syrus Marcus Ware’s, and Río Rodríguez’s anthology, *Queering Urban Justice*, which compiles narratives from various queer racialized people who explore the contributions QTBIPOC have made to cities that often neglect their existence. For example, queer of colour geographer John Paul Catungal (2018)’s chapter in *Queering Urban Justice* reflects on how racialized queer folk were disproportionately impacted during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, especially in the 1980s. His chapter notes that Black and Asian queer bodies were forced to form the Black Coalition for AIDS preventions (Black CAP) and the Asian Community AIDS services (ACAS) to address their respective communities’ HIV/AIDS concerns. This institutionalized racial neglect noted in Catungal’s (2018) chapter, as well as the barriers imposed by homonormative structures, and the queer racialized organizing that pushes back against these oppressive forces are themes that similarly came up in my interviews.

Through this research and the film that accompanies it as a key output, I have been able to highlight various ways in which many QTBIPOC experience the queer space within the Church-Wellesley Village, and how the multi-layered, intersectional facets of our identity influence our engagement with these spaces. For instance, my participants Mycah Panjaitan

(she/her/they/them) and Shaquille Bulhi (he/him) (who will both be introduced in the next section), navigate queer permanent space in the Church-Wellesley Village differently from each other. Mycah explores these spaces from the perspective of a bisexual, non-binary, femme who isn't overly represented within these White male dominated spaces, whereas Shaquille moves through these spaces as a Black, gender-fluid, cis-man surrounded by anti-Black prejudice and fetishization of the Black body. Overall, the film fills some important gaps in queer representation, which is often imagined as white and single issue. It also draws up new possibilities for making space and occupying space, and thus promises to open up alternatives to the current confines of urban development in the neoliberal city.

## Methodology & Methods

My methodology treats QTBIPOC space-making as an, often collaborative, process of critically examining a physical, material site that requires a (re)imagining and transformation of the existing socio-spatial infrastructure. To elaborate on this process of (re)imagining space, I draw on the earlier works of Henri Lefebvre<sup>3</sup> (1991) that explore how space is visualized. In his Triad Spatial Model Lefebvre discusses spatial practices (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational space (lived space) (Westfall, 1994). He describes perceived space as the socio-spatial discourse surrounding a space or place, which can exist within and between our daily routines and the urban fabric itself (such as private/public buildings, sidewalks, pathways, corridors) (ibid, p. 38). This concept of perceived space has helped me understand that space is not exclusively material but can be imagined through myths, stories, historical representation, or public opinion. Lefebvre's second concept, of conceived space, which he describes as the space of scientists, planners, and urbanists, describes space as formed through verbal communication, signage, symbols, and images (ibid, p. 38 and 39). Conceived space refers to how one perceives space through information gathered and

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<sup>3</sup> In honouring the histories and lived experiences of queer racialized folks, especially Black, Indigenous, and Afro-mixed queer and trans people, who empower and inspire my work and personal resolve; I have directly drawn from their significant contributions to queer urban and socio-spatial research for a majority of my research. It is important that information on queer racialized people and our lived experiences are sourced from individuals who look like us and navigate cities and space similarly to us. As such, although I draw from Henri Lefebvre's triad spatial model to inform aspects of how I visualize space, I respectfully consider it a primer in exploring how I (re)imagine and understand my experiences of space through a queer racialized lens.

disseminated from spoken and written communication received by members of a community or the general society. Lastly, Lefebvre's third concept of lived space informs how I begin to visualize and understand physical space. Lived space is described as "space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users', but also of some artists and [imaginaries]" (ibid, p. 39). Lived space, then, describes our individual perception of a physical space, that is in turn informed by our personal experiences, identities, personalities, culture(s), and values. This third concept from the Triad Model incorporates ideas of perceived and conceived space without being reduced down to either, as it discusses how space is formed within prefabricated physical environments/places, whose original intent/use can nevertheless be altered through feelings, the imagination, and (local) knowledge (Zhang, 2006, p. 221).

(Re)imagining and visualizing a physical site, following Lefebvre's Triad Spatial Model, requires the integration of QTBIPOC space-making on intersections such as race, space, and sexuality, even if Lefebvre himself did not consider these as significant. It urges the development and implementation of strategies and regulations aimed at fostering as well as maintaining feelings of safety and belonging for QTBIPOC. The concept of QTBIPOC spaces and space-making was introduced to me through two notable texts, *Queering Urban Justice*, by Jin Haritaworn, Ghaida Moussa, Syrus Marcus Ware, and Río Rodríguez (2018a), as well as *Marvellous Grounds*, by the same authors (2018b). The anthology *Queering Urban Justice* includes a compilation of narratives from various queer racialized people who explore the contributions QTBIPOC have made to cities that often neglect their existence. In *Marvellous Grounds*, the authors have created a counter-archive that expresses through storytelling the significance of artistry and performance for QTBIPOC in organizing as well as self-discovery. Both of these texts serve a significant role to my research and film. However, more importantly they re-centre precious QTBIPOC histories that have been erased and neglected by scholars, many of whom are also LGBTQ2S+ but do not foreground an intersectional analysis.

A major theme that is centered in this work is the erasure of QTBIPOC individuals from the production and formation of queer space. Jin Haritaworn et al. (2018b) describe this erasure incisively as they argue that "QTBIPOC are missing from times and places that are legible as 'gay,'

‘queer,’ ‘LGBT,’ and ‘trans’ as a direct result of policing, gentrification, eviction, and other processes of exclusion, erasure, displacement and dispossession” (p. 5). Throughout this paper and during the interactions, as interviewer and editor, with my participants in the film, I similarly shed light on the critical mass of QTBIPOC who have been erased or are missing from Toronto’s queer spaces.

As discussed above, my methodology is informed by Sandra Harding’s (1995) standpoint epistemology. Following Harding’s assumption that knowledge is contested between multiple perspectives, I propose that space is cognitively mapped from multiple positionalities. Harding’s theory helped inform critical investigations into how dominant knowledge is critiqued, and marginalized knowledge is produced, as reflected in the accounts of my participants portrayed in the film and the case studies examined below. Standpoint epistemology reminds me as the filmmaker that knowledge and space are often co-produced in academic and cultural productions such as my film, rather than emanating from an all-knowing disembodied ‘theorist’ who is often assumed to be white, heterosexual and cis-male. In an interview with Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A. Olson in discussing the importance of including the lived experiences of all social factors in the production of knowledge, Harding states:

By taking the experience of ‘people of color and gays and lesbians and working class people and people of various ethnicities’ as a starting point... standpoint epistemology seeks to produce a *stronger* objectivity, a more generally useful body of knowledge, and a way beyond the impasse between foundationalism on the one hand and relativism, or naïve experimentalism, on the other (p. 193).

Harding’s work on standpoint epistemology conveys the importance of including the multiple perspectives of the marginalized and oppressed, such as QTBIPOC, who can contribute more objective and diverse accounts of cities and space. It thereby helps me acknowledge that although there may exist several similarities between racialized queer folk, their experiences of the world will always differ. Thus, each person undergoes unique upbringings and is exposed to different cultures/sub-cultures, social groups, and various queer-accepting/non-accepting social backgrounds. By drawing on standpoint epistemology and integrating its concepts into my filmmaking process, I ensured that my film pieces together a more inclusive representation of our multiple positionalities and experiences of queer space.

This methodology is in tune with existing writings produced by racialized lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and two-spirited (LGBTQ2S+) individuals, which focus on historical experiences of erasure and exclusion. Río Rodríguez's (2016) portfolio produced for the master in environmental studies at the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University – which helped produced the interactive story map on the *Marvellous Grounds* website – outlines how heteronormative *and* homonormative spaces in Toronto follow a neoliberal logic that produces QTBIPOC feelings of invisibility and exclusion. The spatial analysis highlighted in Rodríguez's portfolio, including of spaces such as Crews & Tangos, resonates with the personal lived experiences that have informed this research, described above. They further reverberate with the stories and discussions shared by the participants in the film. In their portfolio, Rodríguez includes an interview with Syrus Marcus Ware who states: "The racism, sexism, and surprisingly homophobia and transphobia in The Village [Church-Wellesley] is actually really prevalent" (Ware, cited in Rodríguez, 2016, p. 77-88). Ware illustrates this with the emotional backlash that characterized open letters to the editor (Syrus Marcus Ware) and other feedback on queer of colour art in The Village, notably the mural by Meera Sethi at Church and Wellesley, that forms part of the Church Street Mural Project and beautifully depicts queer and trans South Asian activism and communities in Toronto (Rodríguez, 2016, p.77-88). Rodríguez's (2016) portfolio, which includes the creation of an insightful map that locates user-entered QTBIPOC spaces that are often fluid and temporary, likewise emphasizes that the difference signified by QTBIPOC identity is often met with significant rejection in the Church-Wellesley Village, and is excluded from white-washed queer histories and other homonormative politics. As a result of such instances of displacement, Rodríguez concludes that we are forced to map our own histories and spaces where we can feel represented and welcomed.

Building on these writings, my documentary examines the unique lived experiences of QTBIPOC such as my interview participants and me, and sheds light on the spaces where our QTBIPOC identities are celebrated and welcomed. The topics that I explored in the interviews include: perceptions of the Church-Wellesley Village, racism, colourblindness, Whiteness within queerness, queer space predominantly occupied by White patrons, queer racialized space, and the relationship between these spaces and Canada's performative multiculturalism. I was able to do so in conversation with four participants, whose names are Shaquille Bulhi (he/him), Mirza

Rehman, Mycah Panjaitan (she/her/they/them), and Benjamin Tobias Bongolan (he/him). Shaquille Bulhi is a queer, gender-bending expressionist and planning student at Ryerson University, who speaks directly on his experiences with Toronto's queer spaces as a Black queer man. Mirza Rehman (pseudonym) requested to not have their identity disclosed in my work and identify as a queer Muslim. Mycah Panjaitan is a bisexual, gender-nonconforming QTBIPOC advocate, artist, and an unapologetic educator about the complexities of queer and queer-Asian discourses. Benjamin Bongolan is a Filipino cis-man, who is a practicing planner and does projects on various scales, from local to global. Each of these participants were recruited from my personal network. Interviews lasted between one and over two hours.<sup>4</sup>

I utilize film as a tool for collecting and capturing qualitative data. The employed mixed-methods approach helped position the film's QTBIPOC participants as a collective of knowledge producers, as well as stakeholders. In order to document the participants' reflections, I used a hybrid storytelling research method to depict the complex interconnected realities of QTBIPOC. Hybrid storytelling incorporates traditional elements of narrative fiction film as it can involve staging, framing, as well as scripting (Robertson, 2015). Staging entails the use of certain forms of improvisation to assist in framing and scripting. In other words, it 'paints the picture' of what is being filmed (Robertson, 2015). I found that these elements of hybrid storytelling did not alter the truth or objectivity within the stories shared by any of the participants. Instead, my use of framing, scripting and staging during the editing process aimed to emphasize particular elements of a scenario, in hopes of amplifying subjectivity and evoking a higher sense of empathy and emotion from the viewer. For example, I utilized hip-hop inspired instrumental in the beginning of the film as an undertone to my own voice, to establish a more welcoming and calming atmosphere.

Since filmmaking happened during the COVID-19 2020/2021 pandemic, I conducted my interviews over a web-call service, Zoom. While I was anxious that this would negatively impact my film, I found the reverse to be true. In fact, the genre of the video call organically portrayed

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<sup>4</sup> A snowball effect pursued after each interview which allowed me to connect and interview more than 10 other participants. These additional interviews from outstanding queer racialized artists, industry workers, advocates, and planners are not featured in this film as they will serve as building blocks and content for future projects planned down the line.



my participants in the talking head format, where the shot includes just part of their torso and their head. Completing my interviews over Zoom thus did not reduce the quality of my conversations, nor my ability to establish a welcoming and comfortable storytelling/sharing environment for my participants. It organically resulted in a form of staging that served to highlight the work that my participants put into transforming their bedrooms and homes into spaces where they feel safe and empowered to celebrate and live in their truth and identity. As discussed below in my findings, for many QTBIPOC, ensuring their homes and communities, rather than sites of violence and trauma, are space(s) where they can heal and possibly be themselves, is indeed a new reality.

## Literature Review

Literature discussing the creation and preservation of space significant to QTBIPOC was crucial in informing the overall portrayal of the community, and while engaging participants. OmiSoore H. Dryden's (2018) roundtable in Jin Haritaworn's, Ghaida Moussa's, Syrus Marcus Ware's, and Rio Rodríguez's anthology *Queering Urban Justice* focused on discussing the various politics and practices that helped create Black LGBTQ spaces in Toronto. Her roundtable with queer Black elders in Toronto presents an important conversation as it touches on the absence of queer of colour and other intersectional approaches to city, urban, and environmental justice. In response to this absence, Dryden introduces the notion of 'elsewhereness', which became useful for describing the QTBIPOC spaces described by my film participants. Dryden defines spaces of elsewhereness as non-homonormative spaces where Black queer and trans diasporic lives already exist, surrounded by other Black, African, and Caribbean diasporic queer folk who allow their sexualities to blossom (p. 63). This concept helped me understand alternative queer racialized space discussed by participants in the film, such as Yes Yes Y'all, New Ho Queen, Blockorama, and Vogue Ballroom Parties. These spaces are often temporary in nature and describe a notion of home and belongingness that can be attained by (re)imagining space away from exclusion and harm.

Spaces of elsewhereness, protests lead by racialized queer folk, Yes Yes Y'all, and New Ho Queen all developed through unique forms of QTBIPOC space-making. While there is an extreme

lack of permanent queer racialized space in the City, there is one notable exception. El Convento Rico has since 1992 provided a safe haven for the LGBTQ2IA+ community. Grounded in the lived experiences and identities of Latinx queers, the bar/club space is welcoming of all QTBIPOC (Dunn, 2017). Today, it has a mix of heterosexual and queer patrons, and is thus not strictly a queer space (Boles, 2005). However, it still succeeds in celebrating the identities and cultures of queer Latinx by ensuring that queer racialized people are protected and respected. For example, the organizers of El Convento create a sense of safety and belonging for Latinx and other queer racialized folk by featuring queer-centred entertainment such as drag artist performances (Dunn, 2017). In the following paragraphs I explore and further define QTBIPOC space-making through the literary works produced by the Queer of Color Spaces collective, Niki Lane, and the authors of *Marvellous Grounds*.

### Case 1

Eight queer and trans of colour professors and graduate students experimented with inclusive space-making practices at the University of California in early 2017, while also engaging topics pertaining to QTBIPOC space-making. Amongst these eight were Paola Bacchetta, Fatima El-Tayeb, Jin Haritaworn, Jillian Hernandez, SA Smythe, Vanessa E. Thompson, and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, who all sought to foster critical and politically constructive spaces during their stay at the University. According to an article co-authored by the group (or “Queer of Colour Spaces”) (Bacchetta et al. 2018), they created space through many methods, including collective writing and altering the existing physical space to adhere to values they sought to materialize (p. 45 & 46). The authors define QTBIPOC space-making as an individually or group-led practice that aims to generate spaces that honour values of transparency, reciprocity, racial and cultural difference, a sense of belonging, as well as safety – especially for trans people of colour. This is relevant in a context where individuals are still murdered, profiled, and face prejudice because of their race, and protests, revolutions mainstream physical or commercial-based queer spaces today fail to hold these values to a similar significance, which is why there is an urgency to have and fund QTBIPOC space-making initiatives.

Another space-making method employed by the group was a community agreement, which was ritually recited during every session (Bacchetta et al. 2018, p. 46). Its repetition served as an effective reminder of the various forms of violence which racialized queer folk face while navigating space. Lived experiences with anti-Black racism, the labour performed by Black queer and trans women, and accessibility barriers such as pronouns and mis-gendering were all subjects included in the agreement. The agreement thereby stepped into a historical tradition of QTBIPOC space-making that relies on the unspoken work that is done on top of parenting, caregiving and mental health. It serves as a reminder that QTBIPOC space-making is an intensive and extremely exhaustive practice that heavily depends on collaboration with fellow community members or trusted allies. This tradition paves the way to a decolonial abolitionist future where space exists not just for us but for our children and future generations of racialized queer folk. There, queer folk can share space while being respected in their disparate and unique lived experiences.

The QTBIPOC space-making strategies of the Queer of Colour Space in Europe project resonate with my own attempts to co-create QTBIPOC space in my film project, which required mutual trust and vulnerability within the planning and conceptualizing process. This further resonates with other QTBIPOC texts which are discussed in the following paragraphs (Lane 2018, Ahmad 2018). The authors discuss the space created during their residence at UC Irvine as a polyglot and heterotopic community, via Foucault's concept of a heterotopia – a space formed outside of the norm by marginalized populations that repurposes, (re)cultures, and (re)engages resources existing within the space to ensure the histories, labour, and cultures of current and past occupants are honoured and valued (Bacchetta et al. 2018, p. 52 & 53). Queer of Colour Space's formed polyglot and heterotopic community resonates with OmiSoore Dryden's (2018) concept of elsewhere, which similarly describes spaces made for the 'other'. This is in tension with traditional urbanists and planners who do not represent or understand these spaces through mainstream texts or practices, since they are made by racialized people to affirm the lives of their communities.

## Case 2

Niki Lane, a professor based at the American University in Washington DC, is an interdisciplinary cultural and linguistic anthropologist who creates and analyzes space for Black queer women (BQW). Lane (2018) specifically discusses 'scene space' for Black queer women in their work. This unique method of space-making revolves around the 'scene', as an unstructured set of BQW and allied social networks that transform existing sites into spaces where people can express themselves through words, art, dance, music, and social interactions (p. 61 & 74). This notion of scene space again resonates with Dryden's (2018) concept of elsewhere-ness and the temporary QTBIPOC spaces discussed above. In this paradigm of QTBIPOC space-making, scene spaces can take the form of book club meetings, seasonal/periodic events, festivals, artistic performances or experiences, support groups, house parties, as well as semi-public parties in commercial venues for racialized queer folk (p. 61).

An overarching goal of these scene spaces is to generate feelings of belonging and visibility for racialized queer folk who constantly navigate challenges of erasure within the urban landscape (ibid). This goal appears to be common across all QTBIPOC space-making practices and further highlights the realities of my participants. For instance, both Mycah and Shaquille share that they feel a general disconnection or lack feelings of belonging and inclusion while occupying several mainstream queer spaces in the Church-Wellesley area. They continue to highlight the importance of feelings of belonging and representation when envisioning their ideal queer racialized space. They further underline the significance of collaborative spatial design by people who represent their lived experiences and identities (of race, culture, sexuality, and gender) as it pertains to the planning and advocacy of space within the city-building realm.

## Case 3

QTBIPOC space can further be grounded in spiritual and religious practice. Jin Haritaworn's, Ghaida Moussa's, and Syrus Marcus Ware's book *Marvellous Grounds* (2018) features the story of Asam Ahmad who utilizes storytelling to describe their lived experience of navigating homelessness and queer spaces within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). A key moment in Ahmad's narrative is their meeting with Sadia, one of the founders of AQSazine, which is a grassroots

publication challenging narratives against Islam and Muslims in mainstream Western media. At AQSazine, Ahmad was invited to connect and co-create a space predominantly occupied by queer Muslim women by repurposing a member's living room into a social gathering space (p. 126). Based on these encounters with other queer Muslims, Ahmad argues that QTBIPOC representation as well as spaces are critical in generating feelings of inclusion and safety with their queerness. According to Ahmad, "meeting so many other queer Muslims felt like coming back home to myself... It's almost impossible to communicate the feelings of home and belonging I felt in those spaces after being so alienated from my own self-image for so long" (p. 126). At the same time, Ahmad notes that this positive experience with queer Muslim space is not shared by everyone. For instance, Asam mentions that trans Muslim women who attempted to utilize AQSazine space felt uncomfortable and promptly left: "trans people never felt like they were safe in our collective" (p. 127). This highlights the contested nature of QTBIPOC space and space-making practices.

Despite efforts to create space grounded in diverse values and queer racialized identities, QTBIPOC space may at times fail to provide its most basic function of belongingness. Nevertheless, the experiments in co-creating religious queer space space-making highlighted in this case bear important lessons for urban planners. They are again reminiscent of Lane's formulation of scene space, Bacchetta et al.'s framework of QTBIPOC space-making, Dryden's concept of spaces of elsewhere, and the ephemeral temporality of QTBIPOC space highlighted by Muñoz (2009). The challenge, then, becomes one of how we might make these spaces permanent in ways that translate their inclusive impulses and properties into the design of the city.

An array of literature has been read and reviewed, ranging from critical texts on planning, specifically those introducing the impacts of equity and racial representation on the profession as a whole (Pitter, 2020; Williams, 2017; Ahsan et al., 2020), to policy reports and city-sponsored surveys that document ongoing and worsening inequalities in the City (Metrolinx, 2016; City of Toronto, 2019; Canadian Institute of Planners, 2019). Moreover, I have reviewed writings on queer racialized identities that highlight QTBIPOC's exclusion from existing queer spaces, as well our innovation of, often temporary, queer space (Casey, 2018; Catungal, 2018; Dryden, 2018; Martin,

2020). Considering the bulk of literature reviewed for this research, I wish to highlight Haritaworn et al. (2008 a, b) as their frameworks of erasure and displacement was pivotal in motivating the creation of my film influential to this study's overall design.

As discussed in the following section, which introduces my findings, my research informs readers of a growing current of work aimed to establish equitable and inclusive planning, including design processes that prioritize the inclusion of more marginalized groups such as QTBIPOC people. As a planner and member of the QTBIPOC community, I critically explore the intersection of space and race as it uniquely pertains to racialized queer folk who experience differing spatial “racial interactions and processes (e.g. identities, inequalities, and conflicts)” (Neely and Samura, p. 2, 2011). The spatial experiences of QTBIPOC are thus viewed as non-singular and non-fixed. Instead, I examine how accounts of space may differ for trans women and men of colour, non-binary people of colour, Black queer men of colour, multi-racial queer people of colour, amongst others, who experience space differently. These experiences stem from exclusion on the basis of an intersection of racism, classism, and transphobia (Haritaworn et al., 2018), as well as, in some cases, erasure from mainstream organizations that provide HIV/AIDS services and other necessary support structures (Catungal, 2018).

## Findings

### The Village

The Church-Wellesley Gay Village (“The Village”) is the main site in which the participants in my film ground their stories and experiences with queer space in the city. The Village is Toronto's, as well as the GTA's, most prominent and sizable queer neighbourhood. Many of my participants in the film discussed it in exceptional terms. For example, Mycah Panjaitan put it thus: “The area that offers the few existing queer spaces and options for queer folk within the GTA.” The significance of The Village for this research is that although it is known as an alternative community for LGBTQ2S+ people, it is simultaneously cited as an often uncomfortable space for queer racialized folk. In my film, the participants collectively share their personal experiences, which align with similar stories by countless queer Indigenous, Black, Brown, and other queers of

colour, as reviewed above, who argue that they were victims of racism, discrimination, and exclusion while navigating or occupying space within The Village. These trauma-inducing experiences cause many queer racialized people to develop what another participant in my film, Shaquille Bulhi, refers to as a “disconnection with The Village”, or an acute awareness that our presence in the space is simply tolerated and not truly appreciated or welcomed.



*Figure 1* Image of Mycah Panjaitan taken from the film as she recounts on her personal experience of the Gay Village.

The inability to connect with a space or community due to socio-spatial exclusionary factors such as racism, colourism, and classism<sup>5</sup> results in major divisions that perpetuate tensions and segregated environments within the Church-Wellesley Gay Village. Shaquille illustrates this division by recounting his experiences with The Village as follows:

I feel like there is not a lot of Black or people of colour spaces... I definitely don't feel represented in Church Street or Queen (Queer) West queer spaces... If I was trying to find representation or trying to find space that has people who look like

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<sup>5</sup> Urbanist trailblazer Jay Pitter (2020) also provides a definition for “\_\_\_”isms. This definition is used to convey my understanding and application of the term racism, colourism, and classism throughout my work and is as follows: “harmful beliefs, behaviours or institutional practices by a group or person with power directed against specific groups, rationalized by an underlying belief that certain people are superior to others. Examples include ageism, anti-Semitism, audism, cis-sexism, classism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, racism, sexism, shadism, and sizeism.” (p. 1)

me, I would not go to Church or Queer Street West at all. And as someone that lives right beside Ryerson right now, which is basically the Church Street area... I still don't go to Church Street at night. It's not fun for me right now. I feel like there is a surface level of tolerance for Black people in The Village, and I feel that Black bodies are usually seen as people who we can extract culture from, but not truly celebrate or value as a whole.

As discussed in the literature on queer of colour space that I reviewed above, this perception of The Village is commonly shared by racialized people besides Shaquille. It is also echoed in the accounts of the other participants featured in the film. While the literature highlights the importance of safe havens to the mental and physical well-being of queer people, including spaces of healing that are accepting of queerness and allow queer people to embody their queerness fully (Blain, 2017), it is often forgotten that queer spaces often negate racism or anti-blackness<sup>6</sup>. In contrast, participants in this film highlighted the ways in which racism and racial prejudice form barriers which queer racialized individuals are forced to navigate.



*Figure 2* Image taken from film. Shaquille Bulhi recounts his experience of the Gay Village as a place that lacks space for queer racialized people.

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<sup>6</sup> The Black Health Alliance (2020) definition of Anti-Black racism is used in my understanding and interpretation of the term and is as follows: “policies and practices rooted in Canadian institutions such as, education, health care, and justice that mirror and reinforce beliefs, attitudes, prejudice, stereotyping and/or discrimination towards people of Black-African descent. (n.p.).



In contrast, participants foregrounded other spaces that they had sought out as queer racialized people. Many of these were temporary events such as Yes Yes Y'all (a monthly party temporarily hosted by a random club venue – most recent being NEST – that centres Black and Brown queer identities) and New Ho Queen (a queer Asian collective that focus on centring and increasing Asian queer identities/visibility, and hosts a monthly party at a random venue within Toronto), both of which are specifically curated for non-White queer groups. The temporary nature of these events and spaces resonate with what queer of colour theorist Jose Muñoz (2009) describes as “ephemeral traces, flickering illuminations from other times and places, [in] sites that may indeed appear merely romantic, even to themselves. Nonetheless they assist those of us who wish to follow queerness’s promise, its unrealized potential... to a queer feeling of hope in the face of hopeless heteronormative maps” (p. 28). Muñoz poetically describes how these temporary spaces, although ephemeral, are powerful in cultivating a strong sense of community amongst queer racialized folk. For example, event organizers intentionally include musical elements that celebrate and connect racialized folk, such as soca, reggaeton, dance hall, Kpop, Latinx, and modern remixed South Asian music, as well as food and clothing resonating with these diverse groups.

In considering the temporary nature of queer spaces for racialized members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, such as Yes Yes Y'all and New Ho Queen, participants stressed that Toronto and the GTA need more permanent spaces that adequately affirm and resonate with queer Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other queer people of colour. The work of Mari Ramsawakh (2019), a non-binary writer, podcaster, and creator based in Toronto, helps to demonstrate this need as follows:

For me, I wasn't able to really connect to my queerness until I started to connect to my roots and history. It wasn't until I met other Brown and Black and Indigenous queers that I started to feel at home in my skin and my gender and sexuality. And I couldn't understand how radical it was just to love my queerness as a Brown person until I understood the violence it took to put me here. I needed to surround myself with queers who looked like me, whose families spoke like mine, held beliefs like mine (n.p.).

In hearing and reading about stories such as Mari Ramsawakh's and Shaquille Bulhi's, an unpleasant irony becomes clear: The Church-Wellesley Village appears to be a safe and welcoming space for

White and White-adjacent<sup>7</sup> queer folk. In contrast, racialized queer people often face hardships “fitting in” or escaping prejudice within the same queer spaces. Thus, queer racialized space is imperative to the self-acceptance journey of many Black, Brown and Indigenous queers; for their coming out as QTBIPOC. They are arguably critical to our survivability and mental health.

The stories shared by my participants tackle topics such as the whitewashing of queer spaces, the erasure and exclusion of queer racialized folks, and the urgent need for QTBIPOC representation in queer spaces and histories. They throw a novel light on the QTBIPOC socio-spatial experience. By hearing the stories shared by my participants in the film, we begin to unravel the unrealized potential that queer racialized spaces have to empower and provide a platform for QTBIPOC to be seen and feel heard.

To occupy space is a privilege that QTBIPOC people should feel entitled to. This resonates with Henri Lefebvre’s (1972) idea of the ‘right to the city’, which is often used to describe movements by those who are displaced and disowned by capitalism, to fight to reclaim autonomy within cities (Butler, 2012). This idea also resonates with the ongoing resistance, as reflected in actions, activism, and cultural productions, by queer racialized people. Similar to many queer racialized folks, such as Shaquille, Mycah, and Ben who are constantly fighting for their own space and to have their existence validated by society and by governing systems, including the political and employment fields, that consider them second-class citizens and less significant than White and/or heterosexual people. In contrast, their accounts in the film named the barriers that perpetuate the continued oppression impeding on QTBIPOC inclusion and growth, and provided alternatives to White systems of power (see also Logies and Rwigema, 2014).

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<sup>7</sup> I use my interpretation of the term White-adjacent for my research which is a person who is technically racialized, but has access to, utilizes, and often benefits from White privilege. These individuals despite their racialized identities consider themselves better than their marginalized counterparts and distancing themselves from socio-political issues their community faces – this includes racialized people who have lighter or darker skin complexions.

## Divided queer landscapes

Toronto's Church-Wellesley Gay Village is characterized by public as well as private queer spaces that are racially segregated and largely void of diverse cultural representations. This is a result of various spatial-visual and morphological divisions. In exploring The Village, I analyzed the formation of buildings, the destruction and replacement of historical sites, the type of developments entering pre-existing communities, and the homogeneity or heterogeneity of constituent/patron demographics. I found that the majority of new and existing developments fail to plan for any racially and culturally diverse programs or spaces. In the film, Shaquille addressed this observation as someone who had frequented The Village for more than 5 years. He noticed a lack of space that celebrates Black or any QTBIPOC culture in a manner that centred joy and appreciation. As a result, he made an effort to avoid The Village whenever possible. This lack of queer racialized space was also conveyed through my footage of the Church-Wellesley intersection, as captured in the still in *Figure 3*. The still depicts a Black woman sitting on a cement blockade that has the words "Black Lives" spray-painted on it. The background is formed by a weed store and a restaurant at Church & Wellesley. I intend this image as a representation of the demand for space from Black and other queer racialized folk, which so often is received by White queer folk and the development sector as a request that is small and insignificant. This resonates with Martin's (2020) argument that art and creativity have historically been used by racialized queer folk in order to enact a kind of activism and social justice that is resilient and fierce, expressing shared anger, trauma, and tears. For instance, queer trailblazer Marsha P. Johnson used her platform as a performer to raise awareness to fight tirelessly for queer rights during the Stonewall riots (Martin, 2020). This history is captured by Black trans-feminine filmmaker Tourmaline in her film *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* on Marsha P. Johnson. The film follows Marsha P. (played by Mya Taylor) on her birthday, as she goes through a series of events eventually leading up to the moment when she ignited the Stonewall riots of 1969 (Tourmaline & Wortzel, 2018). In other words, artistic interventions by queer racialized people in queer urban landscapes work to represent and reveal the barriers that fragment our experience of the City, as well as our communities. They strategically highlight a fact that is resounding throughout this research: the divided queer experience.



Figure 3 Still of a Black woman sitting on a stone block that features a graffiti with the words "Black Lives" along Church Street.

The barriers/issues which fragment the experience of queer racialized folks within The Village differ by positionality, and according to the unique lived experiences of each individual within the QTBIPOC community. For example, a trans Black woman could experience not just racism, but simultaneously also transphobia, while a queer Black cis man is unable to experience this same intersection of hate and exclusion. Intersectionality feminist Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that the “issues involved in the interrelationships of gender, class, race and ethnicity and other social divisions... have been represented in ideas about intersecting social divisions used for political, legal and policy purposes” (p. 194). Yuval-Davis’ work resonates with Princeton University’s postdoctoral Research Associate Lilian Knorr’s (2007) discussion of morphological divisions, which she defines as “dramatic shifts in architecture, housing stock, and arbitrary changes in street pattern [that] signify neighbourhood change and can dissuade the movement of people through particular neighbourhoods” (p. 114). Race, class and sexuality also intersect in the exclusion of identities from development and neighbourhood change projects that lack spaces for working class queer racialized folk, as well homeless queer racialized folk. My interviewees argued that dramatic changes in architecture and street pattern are currently taking place that imminent threats to queerness in the City of Toronto. For example, condo units for skyscrapers such as 365 Church and the Stanley condos – which currently start at \$900,000 per unit (2020) – replace sites and symbols of queer history in the Gay Village. These unaffordable towers continue to pillage and

destroy queer livelihoods in the City. They significantly fragment the queer experience and minimize or destroy the joy obtained from queer space without contributing much to overall queer and queer racialized culture and identities.

The divided queer experience navigated primarily by QTBIPOC within The Village alludes to the already occurring erasure of our bodies in a context of gentrification, as accelerated by the ongoing condofication of The Village.<sup>8</sup> Within the processes of gentrification, a common issue that arises is the displacement of residents from a neighbourhood, such as the Church-Wellesley Village, which is currently experiencing redevelopment. QTBIPOC and/or low-income residents experience what is described by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC 2019) as exclusionary displacement, which means that a lack of affordable housing options are provided within new residential developments. Additionally, they also experience displacement pressures, which is when support services or spaces that QTBIPOC and/or low-income communities rely upon are replaced with new development that does not address their needs or racialized identities, for instance in the form of programming for racialized queer and trans folks (ibid).

The divided queer experience further resonates with the displacement that has already occurred as part of the history of the queer community. Famous trailblazers who drew attention to this are Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, the two well-known racialized trans-feminine activists who ignited and led the Stonewall Riots of 1969, which are commonly remembered as the birthplace of LGBTQ2S+ rights struggles in annual Pride parades worldwide (Brockell, 2019). In an interview for Global News, Professor Beverly Bain from the University of Toronto Mississauga shares that Black queer people were similarly witnessed at the forefront of the Toronto Gay Bathhouse Raids of 1981 (Bowden, 2020). Moreover, Alex Williams delivered a powerful speech condemning anti-Black racism that was met with racist and ignorant remarks during BLM's halt of the 2016 Toronto Pride Parade, which I further feature in my film. There is, in other words, a pattern of QTBIPOC folk placing themselves in positions of vulnerability and extreme danger in

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<sup>8</sup> Gentrification is defined by scholars Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly in Winifred Curran's *Gentrification* (2008) as an urban process of neighbourhood change that usually occurs in disinvested or priority areas. It results from the valuing of profits and wealth over community cohesion, and often involves an influx of upper-middle-class and wealthier residents into an area, making it unaffordable to existing residents who are subsequently displaced (p. 39).

order to protect and support the rights and livelihoods of the entire LGBTQ2S+ community. However, a critical analysis of PRIDE celebrations and queer activism and scholarship today indicates that the lived oppression faced by QTBIPOC is often relegated to the peripheral areas of the movement (Kiesling, 2017; Haritaworn et al., 2018). How can what passes for the queer movement, more precisely its self-appointed white leaders, claim to advance and achieve equity<sup>9</sup> and inclusion for us “all”, if they continue to perpetuate harmful exclusion towards the very racialized queer folk who have spearheaded the fight for the LGBTQS+ community? One cannot simply seek liberation for “all queer folk” if one blatantly disregards the lived queer experiences that lack race and class privilege.

Knorr further highlights the existence of visual divisions, which “operate primarily on a semiotic level, impacting space through the communication of information, meaning, or affect”. She elaborates that the urban elements of visual culture are made up of the images, symbols, signs, and ornaments created by public and private actors in neighbourhoods” (p. 114). The dominant presence of Whiteness, which is again illustrated by the exclusion of QTBIPOC music and culture from queer space, is a further manifestation of such visual division. This division can be observed in many mainstream queer commercial spaces. It is further recounted in several of the interviews. For instance, participant Shaquille Bulhi shares his spatial observations of the cultural separation in Crews & Tangos, where Caribbean, Latinx, and what is often denoted as “Black music” are solely played on the second floor, while pop and EDM music are mainly played on the first floor, where the main drag performances happen. The confinement of Black and Latinx cultural music to the second floor creates racial disparities in the space, as the second floor becomes occupied predominantly by QTBIPOC, while the main floor becomes predominantly filled by White crowds. The racial and cultural division of space thus produces differential feelings of safety and belonging for white queers and for QTBIPOC. At the same time, it also gives rise to a separate space – the second floor – that is designed for racialized queer folk, allowing them to more easily connect with people who look and identify similarly to them. In fact, as elaborated

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<sup>9</sup> Jay Pitter (2020) provides a definition for the term equity, which is used to convey my understanding and application of the term throughout my work. It is as follows: “The practice of ensuring just, inclusive and respectful treatment of all people, with consideration of individual and group diversities. Equity honours and accommodates the specific needs of individuals and groups.” (p. 1)

below, this second floor was long one of the only non-temporal QTBIPOC spaces in the city, and is now threatened by the proposal to turn the building that contains Crews & Tangos into a condo.

This theme of division is also addressed by Mari Ramsawakh (2017), a disabled non-binary queer journalist, writer, and podcast producer referred to above, who writes in their article titled *Why LGBT spaces can be uncomfortable for queer people of colour* that queerness is commonly associated with White spaces. They elaborate that, these spaces are predominantly occupied by White or White-adjacent people and for many queer racialized folks it becomes a challenge to form meaningful connections in such spaces because of the lack of other racialized people there. According to Mari, this lack of racial diversity within permanent queer spaces has an assimilationist effect. In their own life, it meant that they felt pressure to appear and act more "White" in order to perform a kind of queerness that was intelligible to others. This pressure to assimilate into Whiteness in order to be "accepted" within White queer spaces is a reality that many racialized queers experience. For instance, Mycah (film participant) recounted her feelings of discomfort in The Village because of the lack of racial diversity within clubs as well as cafes such as Second Cup. She asserted that, as a racialized person she was not willing to assume an identity of Whiteness that did not accurately describe how she identified or navigated her own queerness at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. As a result, spaces for queer, trans, Indigenous, Black, and other queer people of colour became important in her life. To Mycah and others, these spaces can be crucial in allowing queer racialized people feel "normal" and safe.



*Figure 4* The new pride flag, which is inclusive of trans, Black, and Brown bodies and acts as a prominent symbol that evokes feelings of belonging and acceptance for many queer racialized folks (Image sourced from Greater London Authority in, Wareham, 2020).

The way spaces are imagined, the various symbols they hold, and what they represent demographically all combine to produce a narrative that signals to QTBIPOC whether they would be perceived or welcomed as potential patrons. Thus, to foster and support environments that are more mindful of QTBIPOC lived realities, it is imperative that planners, other city-builders, councilors, City staff, and leaders of queer spaces begin to identify, unpack, and remove factors that perpetuate spatial-visual as well as morphological divisions.



*Figure 5* Image depicting Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera being confronted by NYPD at the Stonewall Riots by [Alec Black](#).



## “I don’t see colour”

Why are lived realities and issues pertaining to the QBIPOC community constantly relegated to the peripheries of queer discourse, representation, and the overall movement? This section brings us back to the works of scholars such as Elena Kiesling (2017), Jin Haritaworn et al. (2018) and Nikki Lane (2018). Kiesling links the erasure of QTBIPOC people to a notion of colour-blindness, where people ‘choose’ to ignore the racial positionality of others (2017, par. 20). If skin colour is disregarded as a determinant of one’s experience of space, then colour-blindness<sup>10</sup> essentially enables people to ignore the multi-layered, complex, lived realities of the racialized body. It thereby serves to delegitimize the intersection of race and space. ‘Choosing’ to not acknowledge the significance of skin colour in one’s perception of queer reality results in what Haritaworn et al. describe as the erasure and violent displacement of QTBIPOC from queer-designated spaces such as The Village as well as Pride, and QTBIPOC spatial narratives of them (2018a, p. 21).

The dangers of colour-blindness were powerfully brought home by the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) intervention into the 2016 Toronto World Pride Parade. On their website, BLM-Toronto (2020) describe the event that mobilized them as the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murder back in 2013. They identify their goal as the eradication of White supremacy, the uplifting of Black communities, and the provision of building blocks to establish the power required to disrupt anti-Black violence inflicted by governmental institutions and law enforcement. In 2016, BLM halted the Toronto Pride Parade for 30 minutes to protest the anti-Blackness of the organizers of Pride Toronto (CBC News, 2016). Alex Williams who led this intervention during Toronto’s 2016 PRIDE Parade, read out a list of specific discriminative behaviours and actions Black queer folk experience, “Are you proud!? I don’t think there is much to be proud about. I don’t think there is cause for celebration when there are Black people dying. When there are Black trans people dying. We are constantly under attack! Our spaces are under attack! PRIDE Toronto: we are calling you

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<sup>10</sup> Despite the definition for color-blindness/color-blind provided in this paragraph, I also draw from the research on racial color-blindness from the works of Evan Apfelbaum, Michael Norton, and Samuel Sommers (2012) to inform my understanding and application of the term. Their definition is as follows: “Color blindness is rooted in the belief that racial group membership and race-based differences should not be taken into account when decisions are made, impressions are formed, and behaviors are enacted.” (p. 205).

out for your anti-Blackness, your anti-Indigeneity!” (Black Lives Matter Toronto, 2016). The main focus of queer activism at Pride was critiqued by BLM for being heavily dominated by the interests of White, middle-class gay men (CBC News, 2016). This whitewashing of Pride exemplifies the harmful erasure that Haritaworn et al. and Kiesling each highlight. The widely-mediated BLM intervention is the latest in a long line of QTBIPOC actions to highlight racist injustice. The massive backlash from the audience, footage of which is included in the film, as well as the violence of the months-long media debate that ensued, underline the concerted forces that work to still ignore and ultimately dismiss these struggles to undo the workings of racism and white supremacy, and the building of a more unified queer community that has space for all.

One of the ironies of colour-blindness is that the refusal to acknowledge the racial stratification of queer spaces and institutions often go along with a claim not to see skin colour. The resulting silence on racial injustice renders organizers complicit in the racist normalization of Whiteness, and allows inequality and racism to continue spreading further. One of the participants in the film, Shaquille Bulhi, highlights this by critiquing Toronto’s claims to being a multicultural city as disingenuous. He argues that the city, and the White people who claim to represent its queer community, stands for the appreciation of multicultural food, clothing, music, hairstyles, and languages. Yet when it comes to standing up for the injustices we face, such as the murder of racialized trans and queer bodies or the racial exclusion we experience from statements declaring “No Blacks, no Asians, no femmes” (within online queer dating space), there is a “loud” silence. As a result, White people often lose their ability to see and acknowledge the painful racism we endure. The harmonious claim to a “multicultural Toronto” ignores that there will be no peace or equality until we are all included. In order to improve inclusion for QTBIPOC, representation of racialized folk within positions of power must increase. More importantly, we must begin to establish our own spaces that celebrate the beautifully melanated skin we walk, work, breathe, play, and experience joy in.

## COVID-19 and its impacts on the queer community

Many queer spaces, and especially the temporary queer spaces created by and for queer racialized people, have become inaccessible during the COVID-19 pandemic which, at the time of writing, has lasted for over a year. As mentioned above, in conversation with Muñoz (2009) and Dryden (2018), these ephemeral spaces of elsewhere allow many queer racialized folk to grow and develop amongst other QTBIPOC. To me, this raised the question how the disconnection from these safe havens has impacted queer racialized people during the pandemic. Urban planners Benjamin Bongolan and I explored this new reality in our article titled “Queerness and queer space in the time of COVID-19” published on *Spacing Toronto* (2020). I will cite extensively from our article since the excerpt illustrates the impacts of the pandemic on queer racialized people rather well. In it, we introduce the perspective of Marquis, who is also one of the participants interviewed for my project but is not featured in the film, and who in this article has chosen an alias to protect his identity:

Marquis is a queer young man living in the City of Brampton who enjoys commuting into the City of Toronto, where he attends classes at Ryerson University. He values his time spent in and around Ryerson, not just because he’s pursuing an academic degree, but because his classes are in close proximity to the few queer ethnic spaces in the city, where he and his friends convene: the second floor of Crews and Tangos on a Saturday night, New Ho Queen and Yes Yes Y’all Events, and the annual Blockorama Pride event. These days Marquis feels like he’s losing the sense of confidence he has built up as a queer young person within these queer ethnic spaces. He is disconnected from his queer safe havens and forced to re-closet himself as he physical distances in his suburban community, which lacks supportive queer networks since his parents, roommates, and neighbours are not fully understanding of his sexuality (par 1, 2020).

There are several stories similar to Marquis’ that convey this feeling of disconnection from queer safe havens during the pandemic. In fact, all the participants who participated in this project reported feeling this way. As a result of the pandemic, many queer individuals, especially youth, are experiencing challenges expressing their queer identities after being confined in their homes to adhere to COVID-19 safety protocols. For some, they already lived at home with potentially abusive and non-supportive parents/guardians and now have to spend more time with them since there

are no alternative places to escape to. However, for others they were forced to move back home where they lack the welcoming environments required for their queerness to blossom.

As stated earlier, The Village is currently a site of active gentrification and redevelopment, which by practice normally produces unaffordable housing. This is evidently the case thus far with the previously mentioned 365 Church and Stanley condos. Based on the Toronto Public Health COVID-19 data, 83% of people reported with COVID-19 are racialized and 51% of reported cases in Toronto were living in households that could be considered lower-income (City of Toronto, 2020a). While the survey does not account for non-heterosexual households, it can be deduced that queer racialized and/or lower-income people are some of the most vulnerable individuals during this pandemic and are more affected by the high/classist housing prices of newer development. This often forces them to leave the City and return to environments that could potentially suppress their queer identities, as experienced by Marquis, ultimately adding additional trauma and increasing chances of experiencing family violence at home (City of Toronto, 2020b).

The difficulties in social distancing in the suburbs of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and becoming disconnected from queer hubs, are illustrated in my film by Mycah Panjaitan, who was introduced earlier in this paper. Mycah argues that the centralization of queer spaces in major cities such as the City of Toronto, creates unique challenges for those who live in suburban communities outside of the City, as well as for those who live far from the TTC transit lines. This is in accordance with Metrolinx's own statement that transportation within the GTA fails to provide reliable, accessible, and affordable mobility options for those who reside outside of Toronto (Metrolinx, 2016, p. 15). The centering of queerness in downtown areas of the City is exacerbating these spatial injustices for queer racialized people. This is especially the case for queer racialized youth, who largely depend on transit mobility to access queer services and safe spaces such as The 519 or other providers that have remained open to provide counselling and/or frontline support.

As highlighted by interviewees, we are increasingly forced to find our own ways to create space for ourselves, often resulting in the formation of temporary spaces that escape affordability and capacity constraints. A key finding of my study is the need for permanent queer racialized spaces that are able to ensure our integrity, beauty, and overall identities and allow us to flourish.

These findings suggests that the pandemic has exacerbated earlier spatial inequities that disproportionately affect QTBIPOC youth. According to a survey by the Human Rights Campaign (2018) in the U.S., which was completed by more than 10,000 LGBT-identified youth, 26% of LGBT youth report that their biggest problems are not feeling accepted by their family, while 42% of LGBT youth say that the area in which they live is not accepting of the queer community. Albeit from a different spatial and temporal context, these figures resonate with the accounts of the queer racialized individuals interviewed for my film, several of whom have returned to unaccepting communities and homes in order to socially distance. As a result, they have become disconnected from their queer safe havens and are struggling – as exemplified by Mycah’s and Marquis’ stories – to remain safe and true to their queer identities. Some, such as Marquis, further feel forced to re-closet themselves, which can have extreme consequences for one’s mental and physical health. The film produces preliminary evidence that the pandemic has caused significant trauma to queer people, especially queer racialized individuals, who are simultaneously enduring injustices pertaining to their race, culture, and/or religion. This reaffirms the importance of queer safe havens not just for the White queer community, but for the QTBIPOC community as well.

### Building cities - for whom?

It is important to note that the exclusion of queer racialized folk from space is in part perpetuated by the planning practice. This is not solely the fault of planners, but also interpellates a wide range of professional sectors (corporate, public, health, and immigration). When considering the history of planning and the city-building sector as a whole, it is evident that

responsibility for the hardships faced by racialized and especially queer racialized folk even today is shared. Professor George Lipsitz (2007) from the Department of Black Studies at the University of California argues that historically, racialized, specifically Black (and/or low-income) people were “relegated to different physical locations by housing and lending discrimination, by school district boundaries, by policing practices, by zoning regulations, and by the design of transit systems” (p. 12). This is echoed by author and placemaker Jay Pitter (2020) who argues that “urban planners have historically imposed technocratic approaches to transportation development, ‘slum clearance,’ low-income housing and provision of amenities” (par. 16). These interconnected experiences of exclusion stem from policies and practices formed and applied by an array of professions including planners, policymakers, politicians and others impacting the formation of space. They stem from a long and arduous history of exclusion, from the absence of any adequate form of reparations, to the gaps in the curriculums which train and prepare individuals for these city-building roles. Thus, it is no surprise that QTBIPOC and other racialized folk are presently marginalized from mainstream queer space in The Village and excluded from the processes involved in creating them. As Jay Pitter similarly concludes, the historical and present forms of exclusion of racialized queer folk such as gentrification have “caused harm to entire communities”, causing potentially irreparable damage for some (ibid).

Today, the tools and processes of city-building continue to perpetuate exclusionary experiences for racialized and/or queer folk. One example that brings us back full circle is Crews & Tangos, the bar that has been mentioned throughout this paper. Long a contested space whose history of racialized exclusion has paradoxically led to the creation of one of the few permanent spaces for QTBIPOC (albeit one that is confined to a smaller, less desirable area of the bar), the bar is now itself threatened by gentrification. As mentioned previously, the second floor of Crews & Tangos was unique in creating a safe haven for queers of various ethnicities who are Indigenous, Black, or people of colour. The entire establishment is now in jeopardy as a new condo development is being proposed on the site occupied by Crews (Smith, 2020). The 15-storey condo proposal from Graywood Developments currently intends to integrate the facade of Crews & Tangos into the proposed built form, thus maintaining symbolic signs of its existence (Figure 6). However, skepticism is rightfully circulating amongst Toronto’s queer community. As history has

shown, including the recent erasure through gentrification of the adjacent Regent Park's community, developments such as this tend to prioritize monetary profits over the safeguarding of communal bonds and the protection of vulnerable identities (Tovar and St. Louis-McBurnie, 2020).

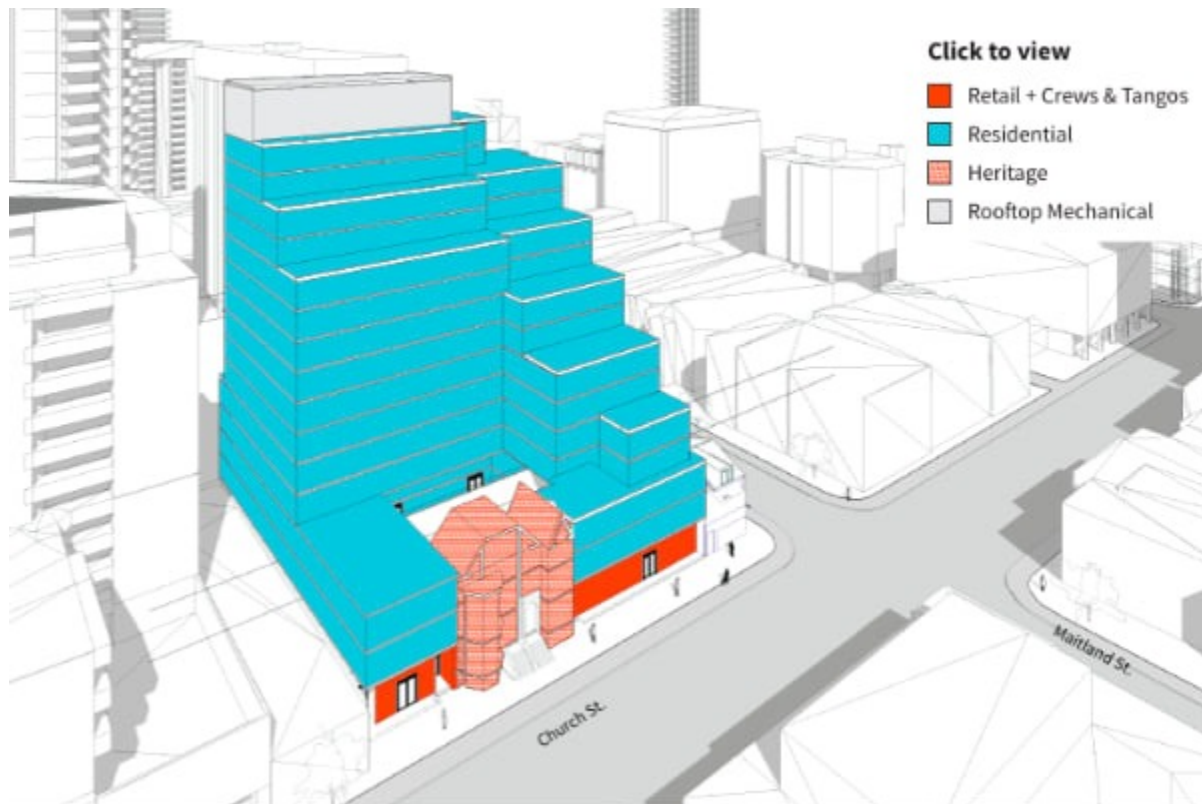


Figure 6 Rendering by Graywood Developments of the proposed mixed-use residential development. The façade of Crews & Tangos is integrated into the built form. (NOW Staff, 2020).

City-building tools such as the Downtown Secondary Plan (or “Downtown Plan”) for the City of Toronto open the door for such developments. The Downtown Plan invites developers into communities such as the Church-Wellesley Village for urban intensification purposes (policies 6.39 – 6.43). It designates the bottom of Church Street West where Crews is located as a key growth area for retail space (City of Toronto, p. 19, 2019). This designation can be beneficial for the community as it supports economic growth and maintains space for local businesses. However, the key flaw of the policies listed in the Plan under *Retail* is that there is no mention of maintaining space for racialized or queer ownership/purposes. This critical gap in policy reinforces what I have observed throughout this paper, drawing on my participants’ accounts as well as extant QTBIPOC scholarship, namely that The Village is White-dominated space that symbolically and materially

precludes any notion of Indigenous or Black ownership. Moreover, it puts the very few permanent spaces where queer racialized folk have managed to establish themselves, such as the second floor of Crews & Tangos, at risk of elimination. In its apparently neutral omission of the fact of QTBIPOC existence, the plan thus contrasts starkly with the inclusive practices and languages that have been explored throughout this paper as instances of space-making that attend to the lived experiences of those whose identities are often pushed to the furthest peripheries within city-building and White queer spatial formation. Overall, integrating inclusive practices and language exhibited through QTBIPOC space-making is important when producing formal government policy as it can lead to the development of ideas, policies, and actions that enable the potential dissolution or elimination of queer safe havens, especially for queer racialized people.

The field of planning and adjacent city-building sectors need to improve on conversations regarding equity and inclusion, as well as on increasing diverse racial/cultural representation amongst team members and decision-makers. Marlon Williams (2017) from Next City states,

I do believe that if planning is about how we *ALL* live together, then it must by definition be a stronger, better, more effective thing – if it truly includes all of us... I believe that if we can see *all* people, particularly more people of color as planners, we can move toward greater equity and actively expand the ranks and impact of our profession. Voices more diverse in every respect will make stronger the conversation of how we build stronger, healthier and more vibrant communities (par, 3 and 22).

This quote resonates with the phrase “Speaking for Ourselves”, which is grounded within Environmental Justice discourse. The phrase is primarily used by Indigenous and equity-seeking groups to advocate for their right to have their personal stories told by them and in their own voices, rather than by someone outside of their community (Agyeman et al., 2010). Thus, increasing the representation of queer racialized city-builders, including as Canadian urban planners, is necessary to ensure queer racialized folks’ unique lived experiences and perspectives are present at the decision-making table.

The absence of queer and/or racialized planners is an ongoing conversation and is specifically addressed by Toronto-based urbanists Saquib Ahsan, Ruth Belay, Abigail Moriah, and Gervais Nash in their article “Why is Urban Planning so White?” (2020). Ahsan et al. assert that



planning builds upon “settler-colonial land management practices” that have historically segregated and destroyed racialized communities (ibid). Furthermore, planners employed in Canada do not reflect the diversity of the Canadian urban and rural communities whose futures they are planning (ibid). This is further evidenced by the Canadian Professional Planners 2019 National Compensation & Benefits Survey (Figure 7), according to which only 8% of the entire profession are comprised of racialized people, with 1% identifying as Indigenous. Furthermore, only 5% of respondents identify as queer, which suggests that queer, let alone QTBIPOC perspectives, which are not even considered a sampling criterion in the survey, are also missing in important development processes (ibid, p. 14). If we take seriously the notion proposed throughout this paper, that permanent queer racialized space is acutely lacking in Toronto, it becomes clear that representation, while not enough to achieve the redistribution of space and resources that is needed to achieve real urban and environmental justice, is imperative for the creation of policies, by-laws, regulations and planning decisions that account for QTBIPOC experiences.

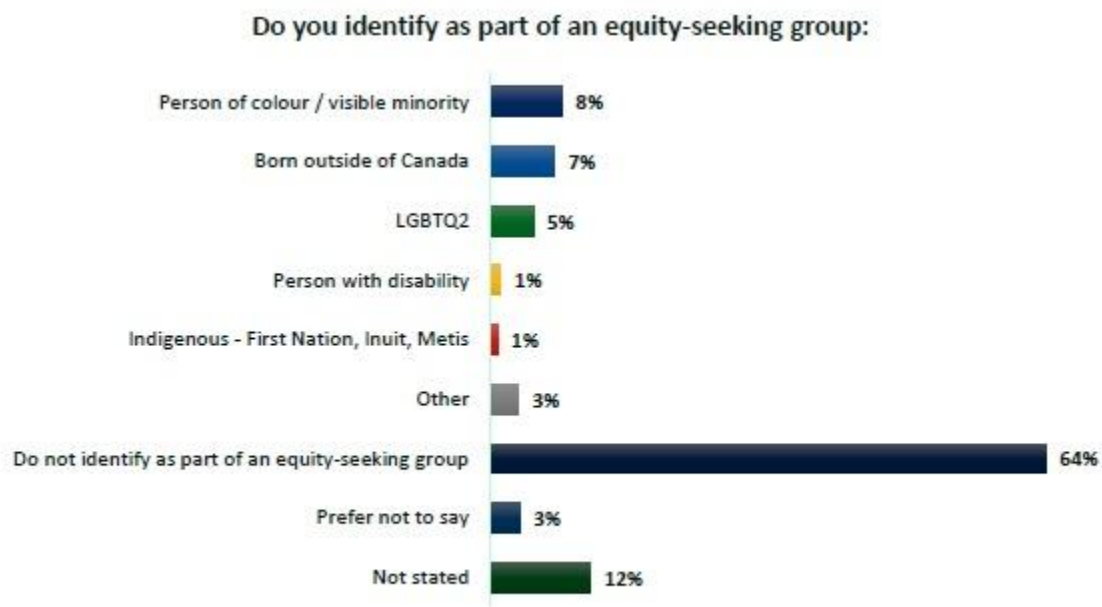


Figure 7 Canadian Professional Planners 2019 National Compensation & Benefits Survey documenting the representation of equity-seeking identities among planners in Canada (2019).

## Conclusion

The stories shared by my participants in the film confirm what the budding literature on space, race and gender/sexuality suggests: that historical and current realities of spatial inequity result in the exclusion and oppression of queer racialized people. Many queer racialized folks have endured the pain and the ongoing battles that have been perpetuated by racism and other interlocking forms of socio-spatial exclusion, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. As highlighted in this paper, the exclusion that results cannot be blamed on any single profession or its adjacent realm. To adequately forge a framework for distributing spatial and other resources more justly, we need a collaboration between experts from a multitude of professional sectors, as well as activists and allies working with QTBIPOC communities. The expanded set of knowledges, expertise, and lived experience that would result from these conversations may well challenge the very questions of what it is we are planning, and who we are planning for. More importantly, these diverse circles can begin to question how equitable the existing processes and tools used within the planning field are, and potentially imagine alternatives to practicing planning while dismantling and/or reforming current systems that evidently do not work.

City-builders, including planners and many others who work in the political, development, and community-building realms must begin to collaborate in ways that account for these multifaceted and nuanced interdependencies. This would entail a significant level of accountability and commitment among city-builders to make their processes, plans, policies, and strategies reflect and respond to the well-being of queer racialized folk and others whose experiences of space, both public and private, are often ignored.

Based on the information collected from my participants, I propose the following policy recommendations in order to reimagine the provision of equitable and inclusive space for queer racialized folk (see also Bawuah & Bongolan, 2020):

1. Diversifying who creates space and influences policy;

2. Acknowledging histories of lived oppression and racial/cultural exclusion in the creation of space and policy;
3. Generating critical documents (e.g. queer racialized spatial inclusionary design guidelines, queer racialized identities education strategies) that would have significant impact on how queer racialized folk navigate space;
4. Re-imagining public engagement processes by ensuring that they account for the lived realities of the working class as well as of Black, Indigenous and people of colour who are LGBTQ2S+;
5. Ensuring the language used in policy and official documents relating to space-making processes in the city is accessible to members of the general public from diverse backgrounds. Accounting for language barriers, reading levels, and income levels;
6. Integrating intersectionality into policies and official documents in order to become cognizant of the multi-faceted identities of queer racialized folk and other marginalized groups. Introducing an intersectional lens when thinking about how multiculturalism is prioritized within relevant processes and official/legally-binding documents;
7. Implementing an effective and inclusive planning and engagement framework that truly accounts for the intersectional facets and realities of queer racialized people.

Based on my discussion of QTBIPOC spaces in this paper and the film, it is evident that the built environment can invoke feelings of safety, joy, and self-discovery for queer communities. While queer-positive spaces exist throughout Toronto, more can be done to support the emerging needs of equity-seeking and marginalized groups, whose everyday lives and challenges have been impacted and exacerbated by COVID-19. However, as I have argued throughout, the structural forces of planning continue to subjugate, limit, and actively threaten the few inclusive queer spaces that exist. This is compounded by the inaccessible nature of city-building, whose knowledge base is typically accessed through formal institutional learning at the undergraduate and masters level.

The lack of space for queer racialized individuals can be partially attributed to their inadequate representation within the planning and other city-building realms as mentioned

earlier, which are dominated by Whiteness (Ahsan et al., 2020). Saquib Ahsan et al. (2020) synthesize this as follows: “In the absence of this diversity, how can planning understand the contexts of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (POC) communities, as well as address the issues these communities face: displacement, gentrification, socio-economic polarization, food insecurity, homelessness and gun and police violence” (par. 3). As argued above, this critique applies not just to planning, but to the entire city-building realm. As such, there is an urgent need for an action plan or strategy that adequately addresses the lack of queer and/or racialized people within the planning profession, which may prompt an initial investigation into the composition of Canadian planning classrooms/programs.

As I hope to have shown in this paper and the film, queer racialized people deserve the privilege of improved safety as well as belonging in The Village and beyond. We deserve access to spaces that are occupied by people who variously share or embrace our diverse cultures and identities. These spaces need not be confined to The Village itself which, as discussed, has become known among queer racialized people to be a problematic place of hate, ignorance, and prejudice. Examples that I have discussed here abound: from the treatment that Black Lives Matter activists received while halting the 2016 Pride Toronto parade on Church Street, to the stories shared by participants in the film. It is important to note that the spatial narratives that I amplify in this paper as well as the film, did not naturally exude from my thoughts or interviews, but instead were the result of a unique education – an education that is typically absent from planning curriculums and are strictly acquired from lived experience, trauma, and stories from those who look like me. This critical knowledge had to be obtained outside of institutions and from processes of unlearning dominant queer norms and planning accounts centering Whiteness and White worth. Queer racialized people deserve to be justly seen and heard as all other humans, equally! Having begun with my first steps into The Village as a younger queer Afro-Asian person, I thus end on a horizon that will hopefully be bigger than a few blocks: Where queer racialized people are entitled to better communities and cities that are inclusive of us all.

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