

QUEERING

URBAN

JUSTICE

*Queer of Colour Formations in Toronto*

Edited by Jin Haritaworn, Ghaida Moussa,  
and Syrus Marcus Ware, with Ríó Rodríguez

# QUEERING URBAN JUSTICE

## Queer of Colour Formations in Toronto

*Queering Urban Justice* foregrounds visions of urban justice that are critical of racial and colonial capitalism and asks: What would it mean to map space in ways that address very real histories of displacement and erasure? What would it mean to regard Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (QTBIPOC) as geographic subjects who model different ways of inhabiting and sharing space?

The volume describes city spaces as sites where bodies are exhaustively documented while others barely register as subjects. The editors and contributors interrogate the forces that have allowed QTBIPOC to be imagined as absent from the very spaces they have long invested in. From the violent displacement of poor, disabled, racialized, and sexualized bodies from Toronto's gay village, to the erasure of queer racialized bodies in the academy, *Queering Urban Justice* offers new directions to all who are interested in acting on the intersections of social, racial, economic, urban, migrant, and disability justice.

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EDITED BY JIN HARITAWORN, GHaida  
MOUSSA, AND SYRUS MARCUS WARE,  
WITH RÍO RODRÍGUEZ

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# Contents

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*Acknowledgments* vii

Introduction: Queering Urban Justice 3

JIN HARITAWORN, GHADA MOUSSA, RÍO RODRÍGUEZ,  
AND SYRUS MARCUS WARE

## Part One: Mapping Community

1 “Our Study Is Sabotage”: Queering Urban Justice, from Toronto  
to New York 29

A ROUNDTABLE BY JIN HARITAWORN, WITH CHE GOSSETT,  
RÍO RODRÍGUEZ, AND SYRUS MARCUS WARE

2 “We Had to Take Space, We Had to Create Space”: Locating  
Queer of Colour Politics in 1980s Toronto 45

JOHN PAUL CATUNGAL

3 Má-ka Juk Yuh: A Genealogy of Black Queer Liveability  
in Toronto 62

OMISOORE H. DRYDEN

4 Diasporic Intimacies: Queer Filipinos/as and Canadian  
Imaginaries 84

ROBERT DIAZ, MARISSA LARGO, AND FRITZ LUTHER PINO

- 5 On “Gaymousness” and “Calling Out”: Affect, Violence, and  
Humanity in Queer of Colour Politics 100

MATTHEW CHIN

## **Part Two: Cartographies of Resistance**

- 6 Calling a Shrimp a Shrimp: A Black Queer Intervention  
in Disability Studies 121

NWADIOGO EJIUGU AND SYRUS MARCUS WARE

- 7 Black Lives Matter Toronto Teach-In 138

JANAYA KHAN AND LEROI NEWBOLD

- 8 Black Picket Signs/White Picket Fences: Racism, Space,  
and Solidarity 148

TARA ATLURI

- 9 Becoming through Others: Western Queer Self-Fashioning and  
Solidarity with Queer Palestine 169

NAYROUZ ABU HATOUM AND GHAI DA MOUSSA

- 10 Compulsory Coming Out and Agentic Negotiations:  
Toronto QTPOC Narratives 187

AZAR MASOUMI

- 11 The Sacred Uprising: Indigenous Creative Activisms 202

AN INTERVIEW WITH REBEKA TABOBONDUNG  
BY SYRUS MARCUS WARE

- Epilogue: Caressing in Small Spaces 212

JIN HARITAWORN

*Contributors* 219

# 11 The Sacred Uprising: Indigenous Creative Activisms

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AN INTERVIEW WITH REBEKA TABOBONDUNG  
BY SYRUS MARCUS WARE<sup>1</sup>

Rebeka Tabobondung is a multimedia artist who creates video and new media works. She is the co-founder of Maaiingan Productions, an Indigenous-led graphic design and arts company, and *MUSKRAT Magazine*, an online magazine of Indigenous activism, art, and movement-building. Rebeka divides her time between her reserve on Perry Island and Tkaronto. While head of the University of Toronto's Centre for Women and Trans People, Rebeka facilitated a large-scale town hall and several small-scale meetings to usher in a new era of gender freedom, which rooted trans and gender fluidity in an Indigenous world view. One of the results of her work was the renaming of the centre to be inclusive of trans and gender-variant people. Rebeka's well-known video, *The Original Summit: Journey to the Sacred Uprising*, documented the experiences of a bus full of queer, trans, and allied Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) from Toronto to the Free Trade Area of the Americas summit in Quebec City in 2001. Considering this large-scale movement-building as part of a much larger global uprising, Rebeka's film offers insights into BIPOC queer, trans, and allied communities in the late 1990s and early 2000s. She challenges the white-centred and -led activism that was prevalent in many early-2000s movement spaces in the city, instead remapping a genealogy of the BIPOC resistance that shaped the city.

In the following pages, Rebeka speaks about these projects and highlights how they resist the erasure of Indigenous people, histories, and lands, and help Indigenous and people of colour who are queer,

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<sup>1</sup> We thank Anupama Aery for transcribing this interview.



Two-spirited, or trans arrive at different understandings of themselves, their histories, and their presents. Rebeka is joined by Syrus Marcus Ware, a visual artist, community mobilizer, educator, and researcher from Toronto, with whom she shares part of her journey. In this conversation, the two discuss fifteen years of activism and point us to the power of artistic practice in not only challenging dominant histories but also building and sustaining communities. Along the way, they share their insights into archiving histories lost or buried through colonization, the spaces that brought them to reclaim their identities, and the connections among anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles, Indigenous self-determination, and queer and trans movements. In these histories, as Ferguson noted, struggles for space are tied to struggles of time (quoted in Dinshaw et al. 2007). Thus, the struggle to claim space for queer and trans Black, Indigenous, and people of colour at the University of Toronto is tied to that institution's history as a branch of settler-colonial conquest, and the struggle must therefore reject nationalist tellings of history by supporting Indigenous autonomy. This also applies to the struggle to claim space within activist movements. Thus, the fight against neo-liberalism in Quebec is shot through with Québécois calls for sovereignty, which reinscribe the erasure of Indigenous peoples.

REBEKA: My name is Rebeka Tabobondung, and I am of mixed ancestry. I am Anishnaabe Ojibway from Wasauksing First Nation. I'm Beaver Clan. My mother was born in Holland, and I grew up in over fifteen towns and cities across Canada, but I've been back in the traditional territories of my Anishnaabe ancestry for the last twenty years. I am a publisher and founder of *MUSKRAT Magazine*. I've been involved in media arts and activism for a very long time. I'm very passionate about storytelling, and it's kind of ironic that your project is archiving the work or activities we were involved in fifteen years ago because we didn't really archive it back then. In my own activism, the question of archiving has evolved to telling stories, to capturing and then disseminating them.

What I saw as a young Native person fifteen years ago within mainstream activist circles was a real lack of analysis or acknowledgment of the impacts of colonization and colonialism. It made the activism of that time and my involvement feel very, very shallow because it did not go into the depth of history, of Canadian history, or the history of any of the places in which the activism took place. So it was basically liberal people on stolen Native

land that were espousing leadership around progressive values, while there was, like, a huge elephant in the room about colonial experience and devastation and theft. Basically the lies of what Canada is all about.

The power imbalances that were existing weren't discussed. At the time I was working at the University of Toronto, at what was then still called the Women's Centre. There were a lot of people of colour activists there who were really involved in embracing a larger analysis around colonialism but also around race and culture and identity. As an Indigenous person, I really connected to that cause. As a result of colonization I, and many Indigenous folks from my generation, were subject to an assimilationist policy against Indigenous people. Growing up, our culture was practically erased, as were our languages, by residential schools. I didn't even hear my language until I was in my twenties, not only because I was disconnected from my community physically but because my father's generation was shamed into not speaking their languages – my father's first language was Ojibway. This was probably reinforced by their own parents, who wanted them to be successful in the "white man's world," so they were encouraged to assimilate in order to survive. I could really relate to what the activists at the Women's Centre at the time called "identity politics." But I don't want to call it identity politics because it's really just acknowledgment of who we are, and that matters to me.

SYRUS: This moment in the late 1990s saw a lot of change around how we organized, and so much labour by those on the margins pushing for more intersectional analysis in our activist movements, making space for all of us to fight for self-determination. Can you say more about your experiences within the largely queer and trans activism at the centre at that time?

REBEKA: That's why I really connected to people like you, people who were valuing their cultural identity and looking at how it was impacted by the mainstream and by colonization. Those that considered how it's so important to make those connections to race and, of course, beyond that to gender and sexuality. Just understanding that this Western lens is so, so rigid and confining – that it's really just a lens, and there's so much more beyond that. That's how I became very passionate with my first documentary, *The Sacred*

*Uprising*, about our journey to Quebec City in 2001. We were going to protest this globalization – this neo-liberal globalization – but I felt I was also going with a lens of how that connects to Indigenous lands and Indigenous rights and environmental justice. It was really, really important for me, when I was in Quebec City, to understand what the Indigenous history there was. Because so much of the mainstream narrative at the time was just the question of Quebec sovereignty and how Quebecers had the right to self-determination, and while I think everybody has a right to self-determination, you can't silence one, erase their history, steal their land, and just assert your culture and yourself and dominate. That was the subject matter of my documentary. I was making those connections to our activism and colonialism. And I very much did it to share that with my fellow activists. I felt like they weren't, at the time, thinking very deeply, as deeply as they needed to, to really transform things.

SYRUS: Which is what we wanted to do: we wanted to transform and build a just society. We went together on a bus that was all people of colour, Indigenous people, and some white trans people. We were so frustrated by the open calls for "all activists" to head to Quebec to fight without any consideration of the different kinds of risk we would each experience on the front lines. So we hired a seventy-five-person bus and went as a big, solid group of Indigenous, [people of colour], and trans folks committed to making sure we all made it back out of Quebec together. And you had interactions with other Indigenous activists in Quebec, some of which are featured in *Journey to the Sacred Uprising*.

REBEKA: At the time, the late Rodney Bobiwash was a mentor of mine. He was an Anishnaabe activist who also had a very broad lens around making connections and valuing other forms of knowledge and building on that through activism. He was making links between people in the north and the south, especially among Indigenous people. At the time in Toronto, it felt like the Indigenous activist community, at the University of Toronto, was not exactly a big community. There weren't a lot of Indigenous students, and those that were there were in kind of survival mode. Many were older students coming back to school after being away for a while, and they had lots of family responsibilities, and so there was not a lot of leadership in that kind of activism stream. I remember at the

time, too, the connections with OPIRG<sup>2</sup> and the Women's Centre. They really wanted to support Indigenous spaces, the creation of Indigenous spaces, and leadership for students at the University of Toronto.

I was the president of the Native Students' Association, and so one of the ways that we thought that it could be supported was through creating a new, autonomous Native Students' Association that was funded by the students themselves. I remember trying to build support for that with Indigenous students at the university at the time. They were very supportive, but the administration's stance was to "squash that as quickly as possible!" – to not rock the boat. They said that if we tried to push for too much, all funding for Indigenous programs at U of T could be threatened. So we were faced with quite a hostile environment. And, therefore, the support dwindled, too – people were scared to support us. It took a while. I felt like during the years spent at the Women's Centre, we were really dedicated. We recognized that it was a very special and unique place, where people of colour, trans people, and Indigenous people were actually the leaders. In a lot of other universities, that's not the case, right? We really wanted to build a foundation there. We recognized that student leadership doesn't usually last for years as people build their careers, get their education, and then move on. But we really felt that when the time did come to move on, we wanted to leave a strong foundation.

And so that's why it was really important to us to change the name of the centre to the Centre for Women and Trans People. That was huge! We needed to show our community that we [were] "walking the talk." The space was open to exploring gender beyond the binary. At the time, fields like women's studies weren't embracing gender variance. Not to say that we were the only ones; there was a centre in Montreal that did this, too. We had travelled to Montreal for "The Fire This Time," a grassroots conference in the early 2000s, and to meet with the Dragon Root Centre to find out

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2 OPIRG stands for Ontario Public Interest Research Group. In Canada and the United States, the "PIRGs" have been key sites of radical and progressive student activism since the 1970s. On many campuses, they model queer of colour and other intersectional, anti-oppressive politics and employment practices in ways that surpass hiring, admissions, and curricular practices by the universities.

more about how they processed their name change and programming shifts. We were looking to them for leadership. Their name was based on a flower that had both sexes. We were inspired by them. But we also faced opposition back home. We had our funding threatened by the Graduate Students' Union, which showed that many people were not able to accept the idea of gender beyond their traditional thinking.

SYRUS: How does this relate to the overlap in the other organizing?

It's so interesting that, in that specific building in which the centre was located, you had (and still have) many activist orgs: you had First Nations House, you had OPIRG, you had the centre. We were all trying to decolonize our activism, and we were really thinking about the ways that this forced gender binary was totally connected to an experience of colonialism. In a way, this illustrates the lack of decolonization within those spaces, within the student movement. It showed the work that most student activists still needed to do to try to understand the reality of [being] Two-spirited, gender-variant, and really, just all humans be able to be in this space and work together.

REBEKA: I identified as bisexual, but even in my own life, I was still kind of in the closet. I felt like the attitudes in my community, in Wasauksing First Nation, made it hard to be out. I was going through a process of reconnecting with my community there. I felt like, at that time, it was not an open space to be out. There was a lot of judgment around Two-spirited people, so I felt that tension for myself personally because I wanted to be accepted there. [Laughs.] But at the same time, being in the city, I felt, was also tough. I was hearing some teachings about what Two-spirited meant, what it means. And it was such a very positive perspective! That really spoke to me, and it was just such an open, unconfining analysis or perspective of what gender is. To me, it just resonated so much. So I wanted to connect more with teachings around being Two-spirited. I wanted to share that kind of exploration, share what is happening with other people like myself. When we would do workshops, we would ask, What is gender? What is sex? We'd always conclude that it was like a circle, with lots of different possibilities which you cannot define. [Laughs.] And that's the beauty of it; that's a positive thing!

This was part of how we started Maaiingan Productions! My partner, Dave, is a graphic designer, and we created a collective of

Indigenous artists, designers, and photographers that wanted to support each other's work. We also had a larger vision of sharing those skills with other Indigenous communities, supporting Indigenous messaging in Toronto and beyond. That was part of having grown up in Canada – we grow up with a lack of Indigenous media representation. We lack even just educational awareness. There is a silencing of Indigenous history in the public school system ... anything beyond the fur trade. [Laughs.] Just to see ourselves represented so poorly in the media, and always portrayed through a Western lens, one that paints Indigenous people with all of these myths – for example, that we live off subsidies. Meanwhile, Canada actually lives off Indigenous people subsidizing Canada – it's a contradiction! The reason why Canada is rich is because of Indigenous land and resources. All these stereotypes about Indigenous people being lazy, being drunks – these are the things that still dominate the media, that create a public impression.

I think that the 1990s was the era where we first had the technological access and the media arts skills, where we first had power. We had access to cameras, portable cameras, and editing suites, and so we could just go out and just do it. That was a super-exciting time! We could also become entrepreneurs because we could own that equipment for ourselves. It was interesting to watch the impacts of this work. I remember being at the centre, and you used to make the most beautiful posters. We would use collage and make photocopies. It's almost like a lost art now – it was such a creative process!

SYRUS: Exactly! We'd go make photocopies, and it would be a movement-building activity because while we're making and cutting and pasting, we'd be talking and brainstorming. It's that kind of interaction that becomes a collaboration, rather than just sitting alone at your laptop, clicking your mouse. Digital art-making is a fine way to work; it's just a different process.

REBEKA: Now we can look back on that – and it's nostalgic – we see the value of that. And we certainly valued the creative beauty of it. Because they were such beautiful posters that we hung up with pride! But the thing was, I think, we also saw the power of the Internet to get our messaging across. I looked at other social movements and was inspired by the Zapatistas and the Native Youth Movement in BC, how they were bringing their cameras out. And now we see it happening in the States: everyone's got a camera. At

that point we didn't, but once we had access to them, we brought the cameras out when we protested. That was our security. A way to document and to share that with the world and hold the law enforcement accountable.

I remember at that time, every once in a while, you'd get these underground videotapes. We'd talk to other Native activists, and they would pass around videocassettes documenting these activist movements. For example, we received these underground videos about the Gustafsen Lake Stand-Off.<sup>3</sup> And we received other videos from the Native Youth Movement. The videos were proof of what was happening: "Yes, this really happened; look, watch this video!" I remember screening stuff like that at U of T. We had our own little video or film presentations in which we shared these videos. They were not out in the public discourse because uploading things to the Internet and sharing them via social media, the way we share videos now, hadn't even been invented. I think that technology has been so exciting! That is what I see now, how my activism has evolved. I just finished a short doc called *Spirit of Birth* (2015), which is about traditional birth knowledge and reclaiming space in Toronto through the Birth Centre. I'm still using technology to tell these stories.

As a result, I now have access to these pools of Indigenous people. Our communities are so connected; we can share information within our own networks. We're so networked, yet there's still so much work to be done to share messaging about an Indigenous point of view and an Indigenous lens on pretty much everything. And in Canada, where the political climate right now is very oppressive towards activism, towards dissent, the arts is a sector and field in which you can get away with saying a lot in the name of art. 'Cause art values expression! [Laughs.]

SYRUS: You've been making art that connects to your activism for decades. Can you tell us about the creation of your online publication, *MUSKRAT Magazine*?

REBEKA: *MUSKRAT Magazine* is an online Indigenous arts and culture magazine. We're funded through the arts councils, and it's

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3 The Gustafsen Lake Stand-Off stemmed from the long-standing conflict over unceded Secwemec/Shuswap land in the interior of British Columbia. In 2015, it resulted in a month-long stand-off at Gustafsen Lake between the Ts'peten Defenders and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Canadian military.

such a beautiful window to share Indigenous points of view and Indigenous world view. I felt extremely motivated to learn about connections [among] family, spiritual world, activism, and art. I'm glad to be able to document this for my child and my community and digitize and archive it. By doing so, I hope to breathe life into it, through different art projects, broadcasting, and publishing. What we share through art then leads to critical commentary. We're inspired by our recreation story: the story of the muskrat. At the time of a great flood, there was a sky woman who had rested on the back of a turtle. Muskrat was the weakest of all of the water animals that were there at the time. All of them had tried to dive down to the bottom to bring some earth back for sky woman to be able to make land, but couldn't. It was muskrat – the humble muskrat – who had the courage and the strength. In the end, he was the only one that was successful, and he brought that earth to the top.

I feel like that story has so many teachings; it's so important, and it helps to celebrate our values as Indigenous people: our celebration of who we are as people within the larger universe, that we're connected and dependent on the natural world and the animals, but also that we all have the power to change the world through our actions, even though we are led to believe that we don't have any power, when we actually do have power. We need to believe that we do and perceive that we do because, as I was saying, this is Indigenous land! We are resilient, and we have the tools via technology to share those perspectives and not be silenced. Hopefully we can share that with the broader world. I think that people could benefit from making connections to these teachings, but certainly *we* can benefit as Indigenous people by understanding and building a positive cultural identity.

*MUSKRAT* brings art, storytelling, articles together and then connects them to the idea of using all of the tools available to disseminate the information because having this online creates an access. We find that a lot of our content is shared immensely within our niche Indigenous networks, but then it does break through to other media as well. We see *MUSKRAT* as an archive. It is itself also a repository of things that happened in our community and all of the amazing work and elder people that should be heard. That's also reflected in our current partnership with Rez Radio 91, which is a storytellers' festival, interviewing local storytellers and keepers



of stories and knowledge. They will be celebrated and honoured, and their stories will be documented through a combination of interviews, video, audio. That's content for us, but we also see it as documenting and preserving our cultural stories. If you go to our magazine, there's a really great little piece that explains the history of the muskrat and how it helps us shape our understandings. It's a great interpretation of the teaching.

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