

# All Power to All People?

## *Black LGBTTI2QQ Activism, Remembrance, and Archiving in Toronto*

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SYRUS MARCUS WARE

**Abstract** In this article, the author considers the erasure of racialized and indigenous histories from white trans archives, time lines, and cartographies of resistance. The author examines interventions by black queer and trans historiographers, critics, and activists who have attempted to reinscribe blackness into the history of LGBTTI2QQ space in Toronto. Lastly, the author considers how power and privilege influence what is allowed to be remembered, and what is considered archivable. The classic archive structure — primarily white trans and queer archives — is the allegedly neutral disembodied collection of objects that create and inscribe a narrative of struggle and resistance that always begins with whiteness and that is used too often in the service of homonationalism, gay imperialism, and the vilification of the less progressive other. The author suggests that we start with a black trans and queer history as a way to orient us toward different pasts and futures, and a radically different account of the present and what needs to change.

**Keywords** black, trans, archives, Toronto, time

In this article, I will consider the erasure of racialized and indigenous histories from white trans archives, time lines, and cartographies of resistance. I will examine interventions by black queer and trans historiographers, critics, and activists who have attempted to reinscribe blackness into the history of LGBTTI2QQ space in Toronto.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, I will consider how power and privilege influence what is allowed to be remembered, and what is considered archivable. This article was created through several collaborative feedback sessions with the Marvellous Grounds collective and draws on the emerging Marvellous Grounds archive project.<sup>2</sup> In particular, I draw on the writing of contributors Monica Forrester, a black trans activist from Toronto who has done sex worker outreach for the past two decades; Richard Fung, artist and activist and one of the founders of Gay Asians of Toronto; and Douglas Stewart, a black activist and organizer who started Blockorama and other key black queer and trans organizations in the city.

The classic archive structure—and I’m speaking here primarily about white trans and queer archives—is the allegedly neutral disembodied collection of objects that create and inscribe a narrative of struggle and resistance that always begins with whiteness and that is used too often in the service of homonationalism, gay imperialism (Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem 2008; Walcott 2015), and the vilification of the less progressive other (Taylor 2003; Stoler 2010; Said [1993] 1994; Dadui, forthcoming). As Haritaworn argues in *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others*, the queer time line we are describing/critiquing suggests a seamless march toward rights, with hate crime activism as the apex of history into which the rest of the world must be forced (2015: 109–22). Instead, I am suggesting that we start with a black trans and queer history as a way to orient us toward different pasts and futures, and a radically different account of the present and what needs to change. As I will illustrate in this text, we need to consider what we want to remember and how we want to remember it, building an archive of our movements going forward to ensure that intergenerational memory can inform our activism, community building, and organizing. By tracing the histories of QTBIPOCs in Toronto,<sup>3</sup> and the omissions of these narratives in mainstream archives, we can begin to do this work.

I would like to begin by calling names, following author Courtney McFarlane (2007) and his important commitment to remembering the great legacy of black queer and trans folks in Toronto over the past several decades. I want to call names to bring the spirit of these activisms into the room with us, to remember that it is ongoing and enlivened by a consideration of the past, present, and (Afro) future (Yaszek 2006; Butler 2012). I’d like to call into this space the important work of trans women of color and indigenous trans and two-spirited folks who are often omitted from the archives—from official records and collective memories of what has happened in this place. And so I call names:<sup>4</sup> Mirha Soleil-Ross, Yasmeen Persad, Monica Forrester, and Nik Redman. The names of those with us, but also those who have already passed on, include Sumaya Dalmar, Duchess, and countless others. I call these names as an act of remembrance and reverence, but also as a suggestion for where to begin looking for our trans-of-color archive—in names called and stories shared.

### **Coming Out as Trans and Black**

When I entered the largely white trans community in Toronto in the late 1990s, coming out as a black trans person felt incredibly isolating. The 519 Church Street Community Centre’s trans programs were in their infancy, and though they did a lot to promote early trans visibility, the ephemera they created tended to reproduce the idea that there were few (if any) black trans people. Online resources like FTMI (Female-To-Male International) and the Lou Sullivan Society didn’t do a

good job of connecting with and creating work by trans folks of color, something that would eventually change after years, if not decades, of trans folks of color mobilizing and organizing. And so I came out and felt quite isolated. But through organizing within black queer spaces, I met other people. I worked with Yasmeen Persad through 519's Trans Shelter Access Project, and I connected with Monica Forrester through my work at Pasan. We shared information and resources. I found out through researching sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) in North America that one of the first trans people to have SRS inside the United States was Delisa Newton, a black trans jazz singer. I learned about Storme DeLarverie, a black gender-variant performer and activist who set the stage for countless future trans artists of color. Where was I to go to find out about black trans history in Toronto? Historical and grassroots queer archives often don't do a good job at actively participating in the documentation and preservation of the artifacts, stories, and materials of black and African diasporic cultural production and activism (Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd 2009) despite a stated desire by community members to have their work be part of a visible archive.<sup>5</sup> This erasure is part of a larger conceptualization of the black queer subject as a new entity, whose history is built upon an already existing white LGBTTI2QQ space and history.

### **A Marvelous Archive: Black and Trans Communities through Time and Space**

Trans lives of color follow a different temporality: we fail the progress narrative espoused by the white trans movement, as advancement is typically reduced to acquiring "rights" that are inaccessible to most and in fact are wielded against so many on the margins of the margins through the prison industrial complex, the war on terror, and the aid development industry (Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2013). At the same time, trans lives of color open up different futures that are not just a reproduction of/diversification of/assimilation into the same. As Sylvia Rivera explains, trans folks of color were at the front lines in part because they experienced rampant marginalization and as a result they "had nothing to lose" (quoted in Gan 2007: 118). Our relationship to the law changes our relationships to space and organizing and creates a certain set of freedoms and also restrictions in our work (Rivera 2007; Ware, Ruzsa, and Dias 2014; Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009; Palacios et al. 2013). Rivera and her communities put everything on the line to fight for systemic change and self-determination because of these relationships. Here, I am pointing to a different set of activist ancestors to create a tension with and challenge how we remember collective struggle.

By starting with QTBIPOC narratives, we gain a different entry point into trans and queer collective time lines of resistance and archives, and we interrupt the ways that these omissions produce a whitewashed canon. Starting with our stories and reading them alongside more mainstream narratives, we can inform

trans theory, guide future activism, and set the stage for new ways of working for change. Jacques Derrida (1996: 78), in his seminal work *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, argues that we produce something through these acts of remembering, or sharing stories: we create a sense of physical, liminal, and phenomenological space to consider our past presents and futures. In contrast, the prioritization of white queer and trans people's history by white historiographers suggests that all LGBTTI2QQ community organizing and development was created by and for white people (Ramirez 2015; Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd 2009). Instead, we offer a type of counter-archiving, as conceptualized by Jin Haritaworn et al. (forthcoming-a) in their introduction to the Marvellous Grounds book project *Queering Urban Justice* (Haritaworn et al., forthcoming-b). Counter-archiving highlights the problems of a presentist agenda that selectively highlights and erases subjects, spaces, and events to expand its own power in the present into the future, without letting go of the past or the future. It further questions what acts, subjects, and inscriptions legitimately constitute an archive. The question thus becomes not where is the archive but, rather, why are black subjects always already conceptualized as new additions? The stories of the resistance that black peoples have enacted since being on Turtle Island continually get forgotten and erased.

### **We've Been Here: Black Trans Organizing in Toronto and Beyond**

Contrary to the claim of newness, countless artists, activists, poets, and community mobilizers within black queer and trans communities in Toronto have done the work of documenting our stories. This archive of black movements over time and space exists and is exemplified by, for example, Debbie Douglas, Courtney McFarlane, Makeda Silvera, and Douglas Stewart's (1997) anthology that brought together queer black authors in Canada entitled *Má-ka: Diasporic Juks: Contemporary Writing by Queers of African Descent*, the piles of historic video, the vivid textile banners and art by black queer and trans people created for Blockorama<sup>6</sup> (currently housed in local activist Junior Harrison's basement, highlighting a large gap in the municipal archive), and the embodied interpersonal storytelling that happens when we get together in community—at Blockorama; outside a black queer dance party by local DJs Blackcat, Nik Red, and Cozmic Cat; and in the park outside the queer community center, the 519 Church Street Community Centre. There is, in fact, a big literature on the black queer and trans subject already, and here, I'm thinking of the important work of Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2008), Rinaldo Walcott (2009a, 2009b, 2012), Omisoore Dryden (2010), Cassandra Lord (2005, 2015), and so many others.

The "newness" of the discourse of the QTIBPOC subject is further belied by the long history of activism by QTBIPOCs across this northern part of Turtle

Island. Toronto in the 1970s and 1980s was brimming with activism by QTBI-POCs, who organized around homelessness, LGBTQ issues, HIV/AIDS, education, apartheid, and disability justice, as well as challenged racism and other forms of systemic marginalization and oppression, to name but a few examples. Folks were getting together to write letters in support of activists fighting apartheid on the continent, including to South African gay rights activist Simon Nkoli. Artists were coming together to form political arts initiatives like *Desh Pardesh*, a festival of queer and trans South Asian arts and culture in Toronto; *Mayworks Festival of the Arts*, a labor arts festival that makes intersectional links between class, race, and gender through an understanding of labor arts; and the *Counting Past Two* festival, one of the first trans film festivals in North America. Mainstream LGBTQ records and municipal archives have omitted these initiatives, yet they exist in our community and persist in an oral tradition of telling and retelling, embodied in our activism. These tellings and retellings are self-directed and draw on what Eve Tuck has conceptualized as a desire-based research: the need to root our considerations in a “framework . . . concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” in order to “document . . . not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope. Such an axiology is intent on depathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered. This is to say that even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression” (2009: 416). Indeed, these archives interrupt the neoliberal insistence on the forced telling and retelling of a one-dimensional narrative by those on the margins—a telling that is obligatory in what Tuck contrasts as damage-centered research. Instead, these shared memories tell of a deep, intersectional knowing that can inform our understandings of our own lives today, direct our future activism, and help us build stronger communities rooted in care and justice. These lived movements and collective memories are described by Monica Forrester, who talks about her entry into activism in the 1980s. She helps us understand the different relationship that young black trans women of that time had to archivable ephemera—keeping the kinds of objects that mainstream archives value as proof of value/worth was hard given what they were up against. She states:

The corner was the only community that existed. At that time, it was the only place where we could share information. And, that’s where I’ve learned a lot . . . the determination to make change. . . . And when I was thinking about history, and archiving, I thought, “Oh! I wish I took pictures.” . . . Because we were in such a different place back then. I think survival was key. No one really thought about

archiving, because we really didn't think we would live past 30. Our lives were so undetermined that no one really thought about, "Oh should we archive this for later use?" (Quoted in *Marvellous Grounds*, forthcoming)

Forrester's text references an urgent activism that aims to prolong life and chances of survival in a white supremacist and transphobic world, but it frequently eludes dominant queer narratives of space and time. Thus, QTBIPOC organizing happened not in the village but at the corner. Her story informs our understanding of subsequent activisms in the city, for example, shaping our understanding of how to organize to stop sex workers from being pushed out of the LGBTQ Village neighborhood in Toronto as part of ongoing gentrification processes and anti-sex worker stigma. By situating our understanding of the corner as being a community center, as a home, as a classroom, and the other ways described by Forrester, we can build a fight that ensures that the access points the corner represents are intact when we are done fighting.

Furthermore, in the face of ever-present systemic violence, "no one really thought about archiving, because we really didn't think we would live past 30." Just because we didn't keep ephemera doesn't mean we don't have an archive and things to remember. For obsessive collecting of memorabilia, think of the elaborate pin button project launched at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, a national archive of queer culture that was founded in 1973, and that now is the largest independent queer archive in the world.<sup>7</sup> Despite claims that it represents and reflects queer culture across Canada, many have critiqued its lack of racialized historical content and visible trans archive, as well as its anachronistic name, "Lesbian and Gay Archives." Displays such as the thousands of pin buttons mean nothing without the embodied memories and stories that contextualize their creation. We might speculate how the archives of Monica Forrester would have differed from the elaborate pin button project. What would the archives of Monica Forrester have looked like had there been the capacity to create such documents at that time of great struggle? What would have been created or changed through the process of such recording? What would the community have had to look like, and who would have had to be in power to foster an interest in the creation of such an archive? What would power have had to look like in the village at that moment for the lives of black trans women to be considered worthy of archiving or remembering? We can reflect on Forrester's text to help us understand recent QTBIPOC interventions in the city, such as the Black Lives Matter-Toronto (BLM-TO) shutdown of the Toronto Pride Parade in June 2016 and the subsequent antiblack racist backlash and violence that followed within Toronto's queer and trans communities.<sup>8</sup> Her articulation of who gets to hold power and have ownership over the directions and decisions of these communities, in

essence, who is remembered as being here and part of the fight, is brought to life in the BLM-TO moment. Their presence in the parade was seen by many to be unexpected, and their political analysis considered divergent and unwanted, with some white community members chanting, “Take this fight to Caribana,”<sup>9</sup> suggesting that black queer and trans organizing was not “of the Village,” as this is an always already white space, but rather that our organizing belonged to an explicitly black space, Caribana. BLM-TO’s leadership, largely made up of queer and trans members, and their role as Pride Toronto’s honored group still did not afford their belonging to the (presumed to be all-white) queer and trans community.

Forrester’s text tells of the need for an intersectional understanding of what has happened within black queer and trans communities in Toronto in the past four decades. She urges us to consider sex workers, poor and working-class trans women, and others who are marginalized within larger black queer and trans organizing as historical subjects. At the same time, her historical narrative does not simply “bring black trans ephemera to the archives.” It raises larger questions about who can interpret our histories, and who can understand our embodied repertoires.

### **Conclusion**

I began this article by calling names. I will end it by sharing an encounter that illustrates, or perhaps embodies, the problem with the archive. Memory is a fascinating process. The more we recall, or perhaps repeat, our memories of events, the more we begin to remember the memories more than the events. The memories of an elder I encountered, for a variety of reasons including antiblack racism, transphobia, and the active marginalization of trans indigenous and racialized people from these movements, do not recall our presence at these events and eventually become “the event.”

I recently met with a self-proclaimed elder, a white gay activist whose account of the Toronto bathhouse raids is widely cited. He asked me for an interview, and I was telling him about my own organizing, and my desire to build on the important work of trans women of color leading our movements. He leaned forward and said, matter-of-factly, “You know, it’s not true. People nowadays say that trans women of color were there, but they weren’t. I was there. I would have remembered.” He was so certain that he was a more accurate witness of what had happened in the Toronto and New York histories that he could discount the living stories of trans women. He felt such confidence in his own memory as being *the* memory, *the* archive, *the* impartial record of human history. We simply were not there in his mind, and thus we were ripped from the fabric of time and space.

But we *were* there, and we are, as Miss Major says,<sup>10</sup> “*still fucking here*” (Ophelian 2016). And we already exist in the beautiful (Afro) future. By beginning here, by starting with these genealogies, we can re-remember that we are here, that we will continue to exist, continue to fight, to struggle for change, and to win, as Assata Shakur urges us (1987). Black trans archives live in the moments of shared story, of names called, of gatherings and celebrations in public space. Our archives live in our bodies and minds, and they span time and space.

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**Syrus Marcus Ware** is a Vanier Scholar and a Slyff Fellow. He is a visual artist, community mobilizer, educator, and researcher pursuing his PhD studies in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. Syrus holds degrees in art history, visual studies, and sociology and equity studies from the University of Toronto.

### Notes

1. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, two-spirited, queer, and questioning.
2. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and ERA, *Queering Urban Justice* is a forthcoming collection of art, activism, and academic writings by queers of color in Toronto from the Marvellous Grounds collective. It is a book- and web-based project and is coedited/curated by Jin Haritaworn, Alvis Choi, Ghaida Moussa, Rio Rodriguez, and Syrus Marcus Ware at York University in Toronto.
3. QTBIPOC stands for queer, trans, black, Indigenous, and people of color.
4. These trans activists contributed greatly to the development of trans community during the 1990s and early 2000s in Toronto. Mirha-Soleil Ross is a trans artist, sex worker, and activist who has led seminal research and organizing from the early 1990s to the present day in Montreal and Toronto. Yasmeen Persad is a black trans woman in Toronto who has worked over ten years to create access programs for trans women of color through the 519 Church Street Community Centre and the Sherbourne Health Centre. Monica Forrester is a black trans woman who has spent several decades doing street outreach and organizing among trans sex workers in Toronto. Nik Redman is a black trans man in Toronto who has worked for two decades to create trans-specific programming and resources for queer trans men, trans parents, and filmmakers of color. Sumaya Dalmar was a black trans woman who died in 2015 in Toronto. The handling of her case by the Toronto Police Service came under fire when her death was not initially reported. Duchess was a well-known black drag queen in Toronto who died suddenly of meningitis in the early 2000s in Toronto.
5. The lack of adequate archiving and a desire to create a black queer and trans archive have come up several times; for example, this was the theme and focus of the Toronto Queering Black History gathering at Ryerson University in 2010, featuring talks on the subject by Notisha Massaquoi, Rinaldo Walcott, Courtney McFarlane, and Syrus Marcus Ware. The gathering was organized by a student collective led by Lali Mohamed and has become an annual event.



6. Started in 1998 by Blackness Yes!, an independent committee of grassroots organizers, Blockorama is a day-long arts festival at the city's annual pride celebrations; it has engaged in over seventeen years of resistance to whitewashing within queer organizing. An explicitly political space, Blockorama consists of arts programming that spans twelve hours and centers the narratives of black and African diasporic trans, disabled and deaf, and queer people.
7. The Pin Button Project featured a campaign to solicit the donation of historic activist buttons from Toronto queer and trans people. The project had some content that reflected a racialized history, but it largely reflected a white queer history. For more information, see Pin Button Project 2016.
8. Black Lives Matter–Toronto (BLM-TO) was named Pride Toronto's honored group and as a result was asked to lead the Toronto Pride Parade. Along the parade route, BLM-TO held a twenty-five-minute sit-in, during which they presented demands to the Pride Toronto executive director, cowritten with two other black queer and trans groups: Black Queer Youth (BQY) and Blackness Yes!. The groups collectively demanded that Pride Toronto do better by black, indigenous, racialized, trans, and disabled people, and they refused to restart the parade until the Pride executive director agreed to address their concerns. There was tremendous backlash by white festival attendees, with many throwing water bottles at black activists, screaming racial slurs, and yelling that they were being "selfish." In the days that followed, many of the BLM-TO organizers received death threats and hate mail in response to this direct action.
9. The Toronto Caribbean Carnival, known by most as Caribana, is the largest annual festival in the city of Toronto. Held over several weeks and culminating in a day-long parade and carnival celebration, the festival is heavily policed, and the site of the festival has been moved from a prominent location down to the edge of the city's waterfront.
10. Miss Major is a lifelong activist and community organizer well known for her role in the Stonewall Riots and for helping to set up supportive programming for black trans women across the United States.

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