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(Politically) Black at Toronto Pride:  
Queering Diaspora, Borders, and Disruption

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(Politically) Black at Toronto Pride:  
Queering Diaspora, Borders, and Disruption

by

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## **Abstract**

# **(Politically) Black at Toronto Pride: Queering Diaspora, Borders, and Disruption**

by

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On July 3, 2016, the Toronto Pride parade began its procession down Toronto streets. Before it would end, Black Lives Matter – Toronto organizers would disrupt the event with a protest. This collective of Black queer and trans organizers demanded the attention of Toronto Pride and its participants in a manner which challenges the normalization of state-presence and involvement in Pride, Toronto Pride’s own anti-Black histories, as well as myths surrounding the multiculturalism of Canada’s society and government. Black Lives Matter – Toronto’s use of the Black Lives Matter global network, its own membership’s diaspora positionalities, and its deployment of protest within a homonationalist context all work to forward a Black queer diaspora and geopolitical critique of homonormativity and anti-Blackness enacted and practiced by mainstream gay spaces, like Toronto Pride, and settler-colonial states, like Canada. Embracing theories and methods out of Black queer (diaspora) studies, geographies, and performance studies, this project reveals that Black Lives Matter –Toronto and their protest function as transnational resistance against an international project of anti-Blackness at the same time it operates in a distinct local-national context.

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## **(Politically) Black at Toronto Pride**

In the afternoon of July 3rd, 2016, Black Lives Matter - Toronto (BLM-TO) halted the Toronto Pride march, refusing to move until the demands of protest organizers were addressed by Toronto Pride as an organization. This moment of BLM-TO's interruptive intervention embodies real and imagined legacies of Black resistance, queer of color refusals, and Black queer disruptions which recognizes Toronto Pride as a space which exemplifies legacies of anti-blackness, commitments to the carceral state, and celebration of the settler-colonial nation all purposefully aligned with the homonationalist narrative of Canadian multiculturalism.

Of notable importance, responses to BLM-TO by Canadian media and LGBT media work to reify narratives of Canadian multiculturalism in the service of a homonationalism that casts BLM as "outsiders" to gay community. Despite the fact that the majority of the BLM disruptors were trans and queer-identified Canadians, they were still cast as foreign interlopers and threats to the Canadian state. BLM-TO's action represents a critique against the passive and positive narratives of Canada as non-harmful, non-racist, and pro-queer; BLM Toronto opts instead to publicly expose the profoundly racist and sexually violent homonationalism of Canada's gay mainstream.

## **Protests: Foraying through Disciplines**

Understanding Black Lives Matter - Toronto's protest at Toronto Pride in 2016 necessitates engagement with the act itself, reception to the act, as well as meanings prescribed to/associated with [the] protest. In disrupting Toronto Pride, BLM-TO finds intervenes and interacts with intellectual traditions which prove crucial to a positioning and understanding of the work the protest accomplishes.

Perhaps most immediately evident, this work looks toward Black queer (diaspora) theory as a crucial intellectual formation (Cohen 1997, 1999; Ferguson 2003; Johnson and Henderson 2005; Walcott 2005, 2007, 2016; Wekker 2006; Tinsley 2008, 2018; Gumbs 2010; Allen 2012; Bailey 2013; Johnson 2016; Gill 2018). In “Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjecture,” Jafari Allen positions Black/queer/diaspora in our current moment as a convergence of [ongoing and transnational] Black queer theory work,

Black/queer/diaspora work emerges in a moment in which the terms black, queer, and diaspora—between the porous strokes I have added here—have already begun to be elaborated beyond the metaphors and concepts offered by any one of these constituencies, and beyond false dichotomies of essentialism and antiessentialism. (2012, 211)

Allen offers Black queer diaspora not merely as theoretical frame or tool, but also an emergent ethic- crucial for Black queer theory- which expands beyond supposed the boundaries of any one position, as well as linear conceptions of connectivity or parallel displayed between any two [or all three]. One of Allen’s central concerns in evoking and naming Black queer diaspora is a holding towards the “black radical tradition of holding paid and unpaid intellectual, artistic, and activist labor as a serious, necessary undertaking” for Black gender and sexually defiant populations dispersed across and beyond borders via the multiple historical and ongoing displacements. Naming Black queer diaspora, working Black queer theory across borders, and paying homage and respect to the multiplicitous recognized and un[der]recognized labors of Black queer and trans folx all prove useful to this study. This collective body of intellectual theory and practice functions as an essential base for the project.

Black geographies (Robinson 1983; Woods 1998, 2007, 2017; McKittrick 2006, 2007, 2013; McKittrick and Woods 2007; Livermon 2013; Williams 2013; Shabazz 2015; Wekker 2016) offer a striking and critical intervention into the physical space of Toronto Pride and the imagining of [human] geographies. Katherine McKittrick's and Clyde Woods's call toward an honest and direct engagement with the *where* of Blackness as vital to understanding Black political action and consciousness in their introductory chapter, "“No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean,”" for *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*,

Black geographies disclose how the racialized production of space is made possible in the explicit demarcations of the space of *les damnés* as invisible/forgettable at the same time as the invisible/forgettable is producing space -- always, and in all sorts of ways...

Within and against the grain of dominant power, knowledge, and space, these black geographic narratives and lived experiences need to be taken seriously because they reconfigure classificatory spatial practices. (2007, 4-5)

McKittrick and Woods push against what they call bio-geographic determinism or the collapsing of race and space into fundamentally essential terms and categories. In positioning both their own introduction and the subsequent contributions of the text as critical interdisciplinary work which reveals race and space come into more focus in many ways and across varying points of perception and production, Black geographies become named and theorized as a necessary intervention. The *where* of Blackness as both a cultural and political formation and Black geographies as an epistemological relocation of racialized processes of spatialization are central to the study here.

This study also locates a convergence alongside spatial-politics which feminists across multiple racial stratifications identify and interrogate within the field of feminist geopolitics

(Puar 2007, 2013, 2017; Richie 2012; A. Smith 2012; Maynard 2017; Neubert, S. Smith, and Vasudevan forthcoming). Geopolitical scholars, Christopher Neubert, Sara Smith, and Pavithra Vasudevan, argue that feminist geopolitics does work to displace the state as the assumed default unit of analysis through which political power across geographic bounds is expressed by instead demonstrating “that the global and local are not unilaterally ordered in a spatial hierarchy” (forthcoming). This feminist de-ordering of presumptions surrounding politics is integral to this project’s concern with local organizing against state symbols and apparatuses.

Thinking through BLM-TO’s protest at an event like Toronto Pride, importantly, necessitates engagement with critical (queer) pop culture and media studies, particularly that which reads pop culture as implicated in and informed by the sociopolitical (hooks 1992; Chin 1997; Puar 2007, 2013; Iton 2010; Russell 2018). This critical subfield regards popular culture as a space in which politics are developed, tested, communicated, and contested in a co-constitutive direction. The move to position pop culture phenomena outside assumptions of normativity and neutrality proves a necessary strategic intellectual guide for the work of this study.

In addition, performance as Black queer political expression (Lorde 1984; Hemphill 1991; Riggs 1991; Parks 1994; Muñoz 1999; Johnson 2003; Eguchi and Roberts 2015; Gill 2018) sutures this study across multiple formations of intellectual and creative engagement. Jose Estéban Muñoz positions the significance of public performances and their political saliency in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). Muñoz reflects on his semi-public encounters with Marga Gomez’s- a Cuban and Puerto Rican lesbian artist- performances and remarks,

The importance of such public and semipublic enactments of the hybrid self cannot be undervalued in relation to the formation of counterpublics that contest the hegemonic



supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere. Spectacles such as those that Gomez presents offer the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency. (1999, 1)

Muñoz's research with queer of color performances highlights important political logics which animate these public acts and signify dissent within the polity for their (queer of color) audiences. His work focusing on Black queer performances registers as explicitly and near-immediately political, as exemplified through the naming of Black queen, Vaginal Davis's drag as "terrorist." A recognition of and political reckoning with the innovative performative strategies which queers of color (Black queers, particularly, in this study) enact supplies workable space which this study takes up.

Finally, this project considers the archives and writings of Black Lives Matter as an emerging intellectual-historical formation (Garza 2014; Khan-Cullors and Bandela 2018; janayakhan.com; blacklivesmatter.com; blacklivesmatter.ca). Core principles, demands, herstories/histories, and memoirs all prove a vital archive in working through a multifaceted contemporary sociopolitical movement which understands itself outside the confines of a single nation-state's borders.

### **Transdisciplinarity and Disruption as Black (Studies) Method**

As an intellectual commitment, this text engages its sites and materials through strategic multi-amorous polyfidelity. This method lovingly and seriously takes together both Black feminist literary/gender/queer theorist, Omise'eke Tinsley's, "theoretical polyamory" and Black queer diaspora scholar, Lyndon K. Gill's, "promiscuous multidisciplinary." Of theoretical polyamory, Tinsley writes,

A philosophy as well as a practice, theoretical polyamory encourages movement between different modes of theorizing: music videos, popular songs, dance, film, erotica, speculative fiction, and fashion all “married” into one theorizing enterprise— -all accorded as much explanatory power as academic prose to make sense of black queer lives. It also brings into the same sheets a variety of intellectual producers whose ideas might not easily fit together. (2018, 172)

Speaking on promiscuous multidisciplinary in his own text Gill offers,

By insisting on a promiscuous multidisciplinary topography, *Erotic Islands* offers an intervention that is not simply relevant for anthropology, African diaspora studies, and queer studies, but rather indispensable for these increasingly connected fields... This book claims space as a key text within the nascent field of black queer diaspora studies. Informed by the scholarly and artistic work at the forefront of this new thought project, the present study further articulates and outlines the expanding terrain of the field. (2018, 17)

While this work is certainly aligned as an attempt to contribute to and further articulate expanding ideas within and concerning Black queer [diaspora] studies and is committed to bringing together varying and seemingly disparate intellectual producers, it also sits intentionally with the implications of offering strategic multi-amorous polyfidelity as a simultaneous attention to both frameworks. How does work concurrently approach polyamory- particularly of the fidelitous type- while insisting on promiscuity? Deriving from Greek and Latin respectively, the prefixes “poly” and “multi” both at their root mean “much” or “many.” Juxtaposed within a singular phrase, these terms collude with “amorous” (Latin root meaning to love or find pleasure in) and “fidelity” (Latin root meaning faithful or faith) to express acknowledgement of the

multiple loving or pleasurable theories which fulfill or sate the work and recognize a faithful commitment to those many theories, media, and disciplines as a methodological strategy which complements studies of Black queer diaspora. In this way, multi-amorous polyfidelity functions as one means of incorporating a Black queer diaspora reading practice as methodology within the manner presented by Black Canadian scholar of race, space, and queerness, Rinaldo Walcott, in his essay, “Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora,” where- when calling for a diaspora reading practice which disrupts nations and nationalism- Walcott writes,

Black diaspora queers have actually pushed the boundaries of transnational identification much further than we sometimes recognize. Black diaspora queers live in a borderless, large world of shared identifications and imagined historical relations produced through a range of fluid cultural artifacts like film, music, clothing, gesture, and signs or symbols, not to mention sex and its dangerously pleasurable fluids. In fact, black diaspora queers have been interrupting and arresting the black studies project to produce a bevy of identifications, which confound and complicate local, national, and transnational desires, hopes, and disappointments of the post-Civil Rights and post-Black Power era. (Walcott 2005, 92)

Thus, multi-amorous polyfidelity as a strategy attending to Black queer diaspora as method is a critical tool for interrogating the homonationalist, white-washing, capitalist, and settler-colonial politics of Toronto Pride, corporate media, and the Canadian state which BLM-TO protests.

In the spirit of strategic multi-amorous polyfidelity which recognizes the critical significance of Black queer creative knowledge production, I incorporate my own and others’ poetry which serve as critical and creative analysis of key moments in conversation with BLM-TO. Here, poetry is not merely an exercise in play with form, but rather a commitment to a lineage of

canonical, creative Black queer knowledge-makers which both sustains and challenges the scholarship and, thus, enriches this project's findings more fully. The works of Audre Lorde, Marlon Riggs, and Essex Hemphill- both poetry and essay- point toward the profound political potential of producing previously unattainable understanding for one's own self or that of one's community through creative and literary realization. In "Poetry is Not A Luxury," Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet, Audre Lorde, writes on the vast import of poetry for Black knowledge in the diaspora (1984). Positioning its possibilities to elide or subvert white, Western conventions of knowledge, Lorde writes,

But as we become more in touch with our own ancient, black, non-European view of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and therefore lasting action comes... It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (1984)

Here, Lorde situates poetry as necessity in Black queer or femme life and positions the form as a non-negotiable site through which one must have access in order to fully conceive and read lives and experiences.

In the introduction of *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, Hemphill meditates on his early years spent yearning for poetry which spoke toward and from Black gay men. Recognizing the possibilities for an emergent Black gay literary tradition to have its

solidification and expansion in his contemporary moment, Hemphill remarks that Black gay men's pursuit of literary excellence will produce "evidence of being powerful enough to transform the very nature of our existence" (1991). Though distinct in their gendered specificities, both Lorde and Hemphill offer their Black lesbian and gay readers an ethic or politic for embracing and working knowledge through the disruptive possibilities of poetry as a critical and life-affirming venue for Black queer subjects. While Lorde and Hemphill offer creative production to her readers as necessity, Black gay, Texas-born filmmaker and poet, Marlon Riggs, intervenes creative "Negro faggotry" directly into his essay "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen" (1991). Discussing the exploitability of Black gay men and their gendered and sexualized performances for public acclaim and profitability by those who are not Black gay- or bisexual- men, Riggs intervenes the essay form with the multiply interspersed "SNAP!" which insists a recognition of Black queerness and Black queer creativity within the form- rather than merely the subject- of scholarly text.

Much like the performance work of Black queers like Lorde, Hemphill, and Riggs, the poetry here serves as productive site of theorizing about the lives and imaginations of Black queer folks and an insistence on registering these knowledges across multiple forms of engagement.

### **Black Lives Matter - Toronto: A Brief History and the Pride Disruption**

On July 13, 2013 in the wake of George Zimmerman's acquittal for the murder of a Black child, Trayvon Martin, three Black women organizers- Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi- began building a movement called #BlackLivesMatter which aimed to center Black political will and mobilize action against the state-sanctioned killing of Black folks (Garza 2014; blacklivesmatter.com). After the 2014 police murder of Michael Brown and the ensuing

organized protests and demonstrations against continued police brutality and media demonization against Black communities in Ferguson and St. Louis, Cullors, Garza, and Tometi would go on to begin developing the Black Lives Matter Global Network as a decentralized and chapter-based framework of pro-Black activists and organizers organized around a shared set of guiding principles of which included a commitment to the centering of those on the margins of Black geopolitical visibility, like Black queer folx, trans people, and women.

Black Lives Matter - Toronto would quickly emerge out of this new global framework. In October of 2014, janaya khan, Alexandria Williams, and Yusra Ali co-found BLM-TO in response to the police killing of Jermaine Carby during a traffic stop in Brampton, Ontario- part of the Greater Toronto Area (janayakhan.com). BLM-TO would, then, be quickly called to public action after Toronto Police fatally shoot Andrew Loku, a 45-year old Black Sudanese man with PTSD who was at the time living in housing created as space for those with mental illness. As one of its first public acts of dissent within Toronto, BLM-TO “crashed the police board meeting and shut down the streets,” demanding justice for the Loku, Carby, and Sammy Yatim- a Black 18-year-old who died on a Toronto streetcar after being shot eight times by a police officer in 2013 (janayakhan.com).

Importantly, BLM’s U.S. and global genesis share an intimacy with the emergence of BLM-TO. janaya khan and Patrisse Cullors met in June of 2015 and became life-partners- later marrying (Cullors 2016). khan, a Black trans and queer Canadian, currently serves as a global ambassador for the BLM global network and continues to work closely with both their co-founded chapter in Toronto and their partner, Cullors, a co-founder of BLM during its initial emergence in the U.S. Known as “future” within the BLM movement, khan, was present during BLM-TO’s disruption of Toronto Pride in 2016. As a global ambassador of BLM generally, and

a present co-founder of BLM-TO specifically, khan's presence and geopolitical positioning insists BLM-TO's action cannot be read in a void divorced from histories of Black protest and queer [of color] disruptions. Instead, looking toward moments and figures which khan and other organizers are likely acutely aware works to understand BLM-TO as transgressing the U.S./Canadian border through their cross-locating of anti-Blackness as internationally operative and deploying disruptive strategies within gay Canada which mirror critiques of the homonational mainstream in the U.S.

*Picture this scene*

*July 3rd, 2016*

*in the Canadian summer heat*

*Pride, a parade takes place*

*in Toronto streets*

*A state-sanctioned, nation-affirmed celebration*

*New annual ritual for a gay-national consummation*

*on these same streets which bled*

*Cries and unrest after makings of the Black dead*

*Joyous festivities frame a more recent turn to compliance*

*At the same time, they render an eerie, yet not unrecognizable silence*

Echoing its 2014 acts of public dissent, BLM-TO's disruption of Toronto Pride deployed in no less spectacular and demanding fashion. BLM-TO members began their protest in earnest as they entered into a major intersection along the procession path. Stopping mid-intersection, sitting down in an effort to halt forward momentum, and setting off multi-colored smoke canisters, BLM-TO protesters, dressed in all-black, presenting femme ferocities, and armed with

megaphones, offered a striking, memorable, and terr[or]ific image. In this moment, BLM-TO may be read as deploying- to borrow and alter feminist and queer theorist, Jasbir Puar's (2007), term- a terrorist re-assemblage in which the protesters anticipate the media production of their disruptive Black [queer] bodies as terrorists within or terrorizing gay space. Terrorist re-assemblage, then, names that anticipation and the strategic embrace of terror iconography as a critically deployed tool which negotiates usability out of demonization (by the nation-state), allowing BLM-TO to attract greater attention in regard to their named demands for Toronto Pride as well as their public insistence toward a recognition of the violence of anti-blackness within the multicultural Canadian state.

### **Mother Moves: Founders, Femme-inisms, Forward**

*“Shut. It. Down!”*

*Hold up. Embodying, performing*

*our*

*Black queer ancestors and contemporary Black queer mothers*

*now*

*Before moving any farther forward, hear these demands:*

*No Pride in Police. No Pride in Prisons.*

*Pride in resources for Black queer, Indigenous two-spirit, and queer of color communities*

*Self-determination as meaningful inclusion*

*Action-plan to make Pride accountable*

*What this means:*

*Homonationalism does not serve the vulnerable. It serves the powerful.*

*Pride space consumes Blackness; centralizes Black aesthetics*



*Yet is reactionary against Black political presence./?!/*

*Honored guests? Not here to be abject objects.*

*Dissidents like other mothers: Marsha, Alicia, Audre, Opal, Major, Patrisse*

Understanding Black queer mothering is necessary in order to grasp the position BLM-TO occupies as a community formation which sustains and trains Black queers. Mothers in BLM-TO take up a labor which does not neatly align with heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, and capitalist ideas of the mother that suggest the primary and most important role of mothering is reproduction (of family-units which maintain daily functions which reproduce the capitalist state). (U.S.) Southern Black queer feminist and mother-poet, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, centers the disruptive importance of the Black queer mother in her dissertation, “We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968-1996,” asserting,

This position in critical tension with capitalist ideas of family is also a position out of time with the clock of development that used the same progress narrative to deploy welfare reform domestically and structural adjustment policies internationally. For all of these reasons these Black feminist literary producers inhabited the queer threat of the pathologized Black mother. She who refuses to reproduce property reveals a dangerous desire for something different. She who refuses to reproduce properly bears the mark of the alternative, the mark of the criminal, the mark of the terrorist. She who refuses to reproduce property must be busy teaching us something else. She who refuses to reproduce the status quo threatens to produce a radically different world. (2010, 13-14)

The threat of the Black queer mother is a profound challenge to the settler-colonial nation and the capitalist state in that she (the Black queer mother) performs motherly duties not in service of capitalist conceptions of property or nation-building mandates that assess raising law-

abiding/law-aspiring as the standard for raising properly. Instead, Black queer mothers function as creators of community in a manner which disregards the normativizing investments of the nation-state in favor of a body of ethics which prioritizes the well-being of Black queer communities and promotes- through the raising of future mothers- a continuation of Black queer families. In the Canadian context, then, Black queer mothers of BLM-TO represent contestation of the legitimacy of the state as a multicultural authority which may more pressingly suggest a challenge to the sovereignty of the Canadian government. Importantly, this threat is one which threatens to endure as the political mothers of BLM-TO, such as Khan and Williams, nurture more mothers within an anti-establishment movement, proactively insisting a multi-generational continuity in disruptive activism.

In “Mother Knows Best: Blackness and Transgressive Domestic Space” from *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, E. Patrick Johnson writes,

As opposed to the ‘father,’ the mother figure is perhaps the most prevalent familial trope in the black gay vernacular and culture. To be hailed as “mother” is to be held in high esteem and regarded with great respect.... Both Peppa LeBeija and Willie Ninja became ‘mothers’ because they were seen as leaders and ‘elders’ who not only had compassion for those who became their ‘children’ but also were wise about ‘the life’ and what it takes to live life on the margins of society. (2003, 91)

Ballroom child, performance ethnographer, and theorist, Marlon Bailey writes at length on the gender system within ballroom cultures, as well as their accompanying kinship networks (2011, 2013). In his seminal text, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*, Bailey offers this description of the role and labor of house parents:

The gender system also fosters the flexible gender and sexual arrangements within Ballroom houses. Houses are led by mothers (Butch Queens, Femme Queens, or Women) and fathers (Butch Queens, Butches or Men) who, regardless of age, provide parental guidance to numerous Black LGBT people who have been devalued and rejected by their blood families, religious institutions of their childhood, and society at large... the housework in which Ballroom are involved is especially necessary in a city they characterize as hostile to Black LGBT people. (2013, 92-93)

Importantly, Bailey provides insight into the vital role house mothers- and house fathers- occupy amidst systemic and social conditions of harm toward Black queer and trans communities. He also positions the house mothers as a multi-gender operative role, stating elsewhere in the text that while he did not observe a large portion of ballroom Women (cisgender women who may be lesbian, bisexual, otherwise non-heterosexual, or- less often, but still present- heterosexual) as house mothers during his fieldwork, there has been a significant increase in Women within ballroom cultures which has marked a noticeable shift in participation in the vital community functions of house mother (2013).

Black Lives Matter co-founders Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors - all three Black queer women- can be understood as house “mothers” to the global Black Lives Matter movement and the activists around the world who call it home. BLM has long held the centering of Black women, queers, and trans folx as leaders and vital knowledge holders for any meaningful Black radical movement as critical and core to its principles (Garza 2014). Garza, Tometi, and Cullors ignited and continue to fuel a surge of member-led, queer and trans affirming Black grassroots organizing. Their early strategies of mobilization, community partnership, and strategic spatial disruptions laid the groundwork for a particularly Black queer

kinship across BLM cohorts today. This kinship reflects the structure of the ballroom house; Garza, Tometi, and Cullors are “mothers” from whom the “children” continue to learn survival and resistance.

Finally, I want to suggest that BLM Toronto borrows and learns across Black queer diaspora frameworks, languages, and knowledges made available like sustenance from movement “mothers” Garza, Tometi, and Cullors. The activists both teach and embody Black queer strategies of disruption that women, queer, and femme organizers- the learned house children- deploy as strategies of critique and refusal, even as they- like Khan and Williams- mother Black queer communities of their own.

### **Black Queer Diaspora, BLM Confronting Nationalisms**

Rinaldo Walcott situates Black queers in Canada within a Black queer diaspora in his essay, “Homopoetics: Queer Space and the Black Queer Diaspora,” writing, “Black queer life in Canada is diasporic and transnational. By this I mean that Black queer life borrows and shares across national borders to constitute itself locally” (2007, 235). Walcott also positions Black queer diaspora’s function “as a network of borrowing and sharing of cultural expressions, products, language, and gesture” (2007, 234). Critically considering BLM Toronto within the context of these observations draws attention to Black queer diaspora as a productive site of sociopolitical convergences across borders. In fact, BLM Toronto’s disruption serves as a locally enacted, but contextually transnational event. In other words, BLM Toronto borrows and engages across geography and space-time a body of political memories- both real and imagined.

*“Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.”*

*Response to an acquittal.*

*A love letter spread via #BlackLivesMatter*

*“Hands up. Don’t shoot.”*

*A new protest refrain.*

*Insist they gaze. In multi-layered ways.*

*“Say her name.”*

*A vocal, digital insistence.*

*Don’t let their memories fade. Though they be laid.*

*“Black identity extremists”*

*Reads FBI report*

*No need for retort, this was not meant to be solely a state-based resort.*

*Cry out [in] Florida, Ferguson, Texas, tomorrow.*

*Show out [in] New York, Atlanta, today, Toronto.*

Black queer diaspora allows for temporal-spatial shifting to signify across BLM’s emergent moments across the United States and the Toronto Pride protest. But is there something regional/national-spatial about Toronto Pride and BLM’s founding moments in the U.S. which demonstrates political interconnectivity and reveals additional salient political relevance within both? Here, an answer might be found in the interrogation of the national or regional meaning of each space in relation to their greater polities, respectively. *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship - Study Guide*, a document published by The Canadian state’s Citizenship and Immigration agency, gestures toward a Canadian national sense of [a particular type of] gay and lesbian inclusion as national function stating, “Canada’s diversity includes gay and lesbian Canadians, who enjoy the full protection of and equal treatment under the law, including access to civil marriage” (2012). The Ferguson Unrest (also and, here, subsequently referred to as the Ferguson Uprising) occupies a significant space in the early political formation

of BLM as a political network. A series of protests, demonstrations and riots occurred in Ferguson and St. Louis during this time following the police murder of Michael Brown and again after the grand jury decision to not indict the officer responsible. Among these included incidents where enraged and bereaved members of the Ferguson community were reported to have broken windows in shops and allegedly participated in looting. I can remember national media coverage during this time which often made links between chants of “Black lives matter” occurring during the Ferguson Uprising with looters, often lambasting looting as an unnecessary and undesirable act- particularly when compared with what media often referred to as “peaceful protest.” In an Al Jazeera interview, BLM co-founder, Alicia Garza, emphatically declines to distance herself and BLM’s principles from actions which the media (including the interviewing reporter, Dena Takruri) deemed “violent” (AJ+ 2014). In response to a question posed by Takruri in regard to the Ferguson Uprising which asks what tactics BLM advocates and where she “draws the line” Garza states,

We advocate those types of tactics that really shake up the comfort level... My response to that would be: do we have the same level of outreach when a window gets broken as we do when a young Black person gets killed in our communities? And if we don’t, there’s a real disparity there and we need to figure out what that is. (AJ+ 2014)

Garza’s commentary disrupts capitalist assumptions which afford private property a position of social sacrament. Instead, Garza interrupts capitalist logics which would enshrine the societal sanctimony of private property while denying social value from life of a Black teenager, insisting that the normative gaze through which property damage and Black death is being viewed is profoundly out of step with the goals and principles of BLM. This gaze, while certainly capitalist, should also be read as American nationalist. In his article, “The Nation as a Propertied

Community: Private Property and the Origins of Nationalism in the United States and Norway,” Norwegian researcher and historical sociologist, Eirik Magnus Fuglestad, offers an assessment of the intertwined functions of property and nationalism in the nation-state development of the U.S. and Norway:

The connection between property and sovereignty is reinforced in the concept of capitalist property. This becomes especially apparent when contrasted to feudal property, since while feudal property rights were often shared and confined to a certain class by privileges, capitalist property is normally private and confined to one individual- others have no rights to anything of or on your property. Capitalist property in land represents a form of sovereignty because it is an exclusive right, which means that it gives the property holder the right to exclude others from that which the property right covers. Applied to land, an exclusive property right means that the holder of the property becomes a ‘mini sovereign’ over the landed property, in the same way that a national sovereign governs a specific territory over which the laws of the nation are supreme. Similar to how national sovereignty excludes the rights of other groups over the territory, private individual property rights give individuals wide rights and freedoms to do as they please with and on their property (Engerman and Metzger 2004; Macpherson 1978; Reeve 1986). And so landed, capitalist property has a resemblance with sovereignty. (2018, 241)

Fuglestad’s positioning of the mini-sovereign invites a reflection on the media positioning of Ferguson demonstrators- effectively linked to BLM- as violators of sovereignty. In continual reference to property destruction as the most egregious and violent offense during the Uprising, the media positioned BLM as violators of the national mini-sovereigns which, in the context of a polity deeply invested in the [re]production of capitalism, additionally worked to position BLM

as anti-national- an entity unwilling to cooperate in the national desires of the U.S. state. Then-president, Barack Obama, also contributed to this positioning when he spoke before U.S. citizens on national television during the Uprising and proclaimed, “First and foremost, we are a nation built on the rule of law, so we need to accept this decision was the grand jury's to make” (cnn.com 2014). Garza’s move to embrace Ferguson demonstrator’s actions as aligned with BLM political principles, then, moves BLM into the U.S. national space as willful dissidents against the nation, a move not unlike that of BLM-TO during their disruption of Toronto Pride over a year later.

Recognizing private property and its meaning to the nation- the U.S. in this context- suggests that accusations of its destruction serve a discursive function as marking those [deemed] complicit as outsiders to the nation. Given that these exclusions are- in this context- widely and uniformly applied to Black folks politically associated with BLM, street-political Blackness (Black politics not invested in reformist and electoral politics as championed strategy) is constructed as outsider to the American nation, even as it exists as abject subject to the American state. The refusal to denounce the destruction of private property then functions as a “blackening” of political space, inverting notions of the Black outsider within the U.S. by insisting the U.S. nation cannot distance itself from a reality tied to racialization and Black existence as/within/of the nation.

Making use of the U.S. emergent framework and its intimate connections between founding “mothers,” BLM-TO, internally enmeshed in Black queer diaspora- through Khan’s and Cullors’s relationship, Black queer Canadianness, as well as the diasporic nature of Black queers within Canada being one or two (sometimes none) generations removed from the Caribbean- deploys such practices similarly, if with different intentionality. As indicated in *Discover*



*Canada*, gays and lesbians are positioned as a subculture within the Canadian state's self-conceptualized "multicultural" (2012). Thus, as Toronto Pride contends, it "has become a major Canadian arts and cultural event and the largest Pride celebration in North America" and "showcases Toronto on the world stage with diversity, inclusion and vibrant creativity" (pridetoronto.com); Pride is implicated as both a re/producer of the state and, perhaps consequently, a symbol of the Canadian nation. In this formulation, certain forms of sexual and/or gender deviance- married or marriage-seeking, presumably with child-rearing aspirations, law-abiding, and law-enforcing (particularly with respect to white, middle-class bodies)- become the legitimate gay and lesbian subjects whose participation in the production of state-sanctioned multiculturalism marks them not only as the real or worthy gays/lesbians but also as co-creators and thus proprietary inheritors of the nation. Consequently, the multicultural belonging advertised on the part of the state and embraced by and through Toronto Pride enforces borders to a supposed inclusion. While Toronto Pride's attempt at the inclusion of BLM-TO as honored guests of the procession moves to implicate Blackness- importantly, not Black queerness- as co-signing on- but not co-authoring- the Canadian nation through symbolic representation, the limits of settler-colonial multiculturalism are ultimately exposed through BLM-TO's disruption in Toronto Pride's and the Canadian media's unwillingness to legitimate Black queer dissent as opposed to co-optation. Despite state-sanctioned anti-Black, settler-colonial histories across national borders and on urban streets, Black queer dissent is happening. Black queer diaspora is in motion.

### **Racial-Spatial-Sexual Struggle**

BLM-TO's disruption of Toronto Pride critically made and unmade space. Katherine McKittrick argues,

I suggest, then, that one way to contend with unjust and uneven human/inhuman categorizations is to think about, and perhaps employ, the alternative geographic formulations that subaltern communities advance... That is, the sites/citations of struggle indicate that traditional geographies, and their attendant hierarchical categories of humanness, cannot do the emancipatory work some subjects demand. And part of this work, in our historical present, is linked up with recognizing both “the where” of alterity and the geographical imperatives in the struggle for social justice. (2006, xix)

Considering BLM-TO through the lens of sites/citations of struggle reveals the organization’s connection to a lineage of Black spatial manipulation as critique of or strategy in surviving contexts structured by anti-blackness inflected with classism, homo/transphobia and sexism.

*Garret.*

*“a top-floor or attic room, especially a small dismal one (traditionally inhabited by an artist)”*

*Artist? Yes, indeed.*

*To subvert centuries-long [legal] traditions of racial-sexual slavery required artful thinking*

*Garret.*

*9 x 7 x 3*

*A different possibility did not present itself easily*

*Living this freedom against unfreedom required embracing unfreedom of a differing kind*

*Garret.*

*Within the South. Against slavery. Apart [from] chattel. Parallel to domination. Between space/s.*

*Within space. Against her instincts. Apart from family. Parallel/ing trauma/s. Between break/ing.*

*Pre-conditions to flight, conditions of fugitivity, post-conditions of...?*

*Garret.*

*Harriet.*

*Made dangerous place...*

*useful space*

Harriet Jacobs- pseudonym: Linda Brent- in her own autobiographical narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), provides a critically important consideration that illuminates the ways in which Black sexualized subjects have thought through space as a means of subverting or critiquing [their] place. Jacobs details her use of the space of a garret firmly located within the plantation society in the U.S. South as an escape from the conditions of slavery (1861). Chattel slavery commodified Jacobs' making her an economically exploitable tool and producer, and it also made her an object always under threat of sexual violence. McKittrick provides her analysis on Jacobs's position stating, "Race, sex, and gender— her seeable body-scale— inscribe Brent as worthy of captivity, violence, punishment, and objectification; her bodily codes produce her slave master's surroundings" (2006, 40). McKittrick goes on to write, "If the geographies of slavery are primarily about racial captivities and boundaries, and the garret is both a site of self-captivity and a loophole of retreat, it becomes increasingly clear that it is Brent's different sense of place that allows her to explore the possibilities in the existing landscape" (2006, 40). Jacobs' use of space and McKittrick's analysis of Jacobs demonstrate the propensity of Black subjects to find spaces for survival underneath conditions of racial-sexual violence and terror. These confined spaces may provide the blueprint for an architecture of "racial-spatial-sexual struggle," for insurgent spaces that critique and/or subvert the very conditions that render Black women [and queers] vulnerable.

McKittrick's approach to Jacobs's as a vital source of racial-sexualized spatial knowledges which co-created space alongside geographies of domination extends beyond the

U.S. South and into a broader transregional and transnational politic. McKittrick's introduction to *Demonic Grounds* foregrounds the slave ship and transatlantic slavery as an early site in which the geographies of [British] North America began to co-constructively unfold (2006). As a Canadian scholar of Black geographies, McKittrick moves between distinct regional sites such as the rural U.S. South, the U.S. northeast, and the diasporic crossings from the Caribbean to the U.K. to the U.S. embodied by Sylvia Wynter and her work, endeavoring to reveal what she calls "more humanly workable geographies" across diaspora (2006, xxx). Indeed, McKittrick reads Jacobs as aligned within a Black feminist diaspora practice when she writes,

What interests me, in addition to geographic possibilities of the garret that Jacobs/Brent discloses, are the ways in which her racial-sexual body, and the naming of her (unprotected) body, underwrite other diasporic feminisms. That is, Jacobs/Brent names the body as a location of struggle. Throughout the narrative, skin, hair, arms, legs, feet, eyes, hands, muscles, corporeal sexual differences— these physical attributes, of Jacobs/Brent, her family, and her lovers, contribute to the possibilities and limitations of space. I follow my discussion of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by analyzing the conceptual threads between black women's enslaved bodies, the garret, and Marlene Nourbese Philip's poetics. I make these connections not to present an ahistorical reading of black femininity, but rather to address the ways in which the contributions of second-wave black feminism are diasporic precisely because the body, and the legacy of racial-sexual discrimination, have forced a respatialization of white Euro-American feminisms. (2006, xxviii)

McKittrick's gesture towards Jacobs's use of the body as a site/citation of struggle locates transnational and diasporic possibilities for politics which center the body in transgressive,

defiant, and disruptive manners against space which attempts to produce the dissident Black sexualized body as illegible in favor of more neat imagery which arranges space as racial-sexually neutral (here, a thinly veiled analog for compliantly white supremacist).

Racial-spatial-sexual struggle as a concept invites consideration of a range of simultaneously racialized, gendered, and sexualized communities or subjects who might deploy reworkings of space within racist, sexist, homo/transantagonistic, and capitalist places as critical resistance and for their very survival. In order to understand how BLM-TO “reworks” the space of Toronto Pride, a la Jacobs’s and McKittrick’s body as site/citation of struggle, an understanding of the [in]visibility of Blackness within Canadian- and more specifically Torontonians- LGBT spaces is necessary. Rinaldo Walcott provides “Black queer imposture” (2007, 243) as a useful framework for understanding this seemingly contradictory existence of Blackness in gay men’s spaces (and given the consistent slippage of using “gay” as the unofficial prefix to much media coverage and casual conversation surrounding Pride events, I believe extending this analysis to Toronto Pride is both appropriate and productive).

“The taint of blackness means that even one “black night” gives a club space the reputation of being a “black club” so that the place and space become firmly associated with black bodies, even if the place is not occupied by black bodies on every night of its operation.... These black spaces are often posed as queer imposture sites, but these imposture sites operate to have an impact on everything from styles of dress to music. Thus, one of the central ironies is that spaces of black queer ‘imposture’ also function as the reservoir of all queer desire.” (Walcott 2007, 243)

Walcott reveals the manner in which Black queer aesthetics are centralized in gay spaces and Black queerness is consumed and trafficked as social currency while Black bodies are deemed as

unnecessary and/or undesirable and consequently made invisible, unreadable, or (to borrow McKittrick's term) "ungeographic" (2006).

BLM-TO confronts the imagery of Black queers as impostures, using this positionality as firm grounding from which to launch a racial-spatial-sexual struggle from within Toronto Pride. BLM-TO are invited as the "honored group." BLM-TO accepts the invitation, firmly situating themselves within the space of Toronto Pride, literally in place at the front of the parade. A flurry of citizen and media commentary positions BLM as illegitimate usurpers of queer celebration, and, thus, as impostures due to their non-nationalist queerness. Through this, BLM-TO embraces the image of the Black queer imposture, halts the parade, and makes public their demands.

Among the list of demands from BLM-TO, one of their most adamant was the "removal of police floats in the Pride marches and parades" ("Demands - BLM - TO" 2016). Both Jacobs (through her "garreting" of Black visibility) and BLM-TO (in their stopping Toronto Pride and making demands) rework space in a function that responds to and critiques racist and sexually violent states and their nationalist citizenry. While Jacobs' racial-spatial-sexual struggle emerges within/against places of racial-sexual domination that produced and maintain the American state, BLM-TO's struggle surfaces within/against Toronto Pride - a place of racial-sexual exploitation in the service of homonationalist collusion with the Canadian state. Positioning what she calls the "emergence of a national homosexuality" (or homonationalism) in Western states, feminist and queer theorist, Jasbir Puar, in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, writes,

There is a transition under way in how queer subjects are relating to nation-states... from being figures of death (i.e., the aids epidemic) to becoming tied to ideas of life and productivity (i.e., gay marriage and families). The politics of recognition and

incorporation entail that certain— but certainly not most— homosexual, gay, and queer bodies may be the temporary recipients of the “measures of benevolence” that are afforded by liberal discourses of multicultural tolerance and diversity. This benevolence toward sexual others is contingent upon ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity, and bodily integrity. The contemporary emergence of homosexual, gay, and queer subjects— normativized through their deviance (as it becomes surveilled, managed, studied) rather than despite it— is integral to the interplay of perversion and normativity necessary to sustain in full gear the management of life. (Puar 2007, xii)

Thinking through Puar in relation to recent the hypervisibility of police alongside recognizable LGBT imagery and iconography, carceral studies scholar and queer activism historian, Emma K. Russell writes, “police pride might thus also be productively viewed through the lens of what might be termed *carceral homonationalism*” before further expanding “as the visibility of racialised state violence reaches new heights police attempts to cultivate a progressive ‘rainbow’ image have not escaped unnoticed” (2018). Indeed, BLM-TO’s demand for the ousting of police from Pride is proof of their sophisticated critique of carceral homonationalism and its attempt to obscure Canada’s own anti-Black [white gay-aligned] legal and carceral systems and histories. African diaspora scholar and Black feminist political scientist/theorist, Robyn Maynard’s, interventive text, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*, illuminates the Canadian state’s anti-blackness in law, policy, policing, and education (2017). Maynard’s research documents the anti-Black disparities in housing, education, police brutality, incarceration, immigration and deportation, as well as in the courtroom alongside Canada’s erasure of Canadian slavery and multi-generational Canadian populations of African-descent.

Maynard confirms that “the long history of anti-blackness in Canada has, for the most part, occurred alongside the disavowal of its [Blackness] existence” (2017). BLM-TO’s demand coupled with their disruption operates in multiple registers. First, BLM-TO contests Canada as a non-racist, multicultural nation, opting to publicly situate the Canadian nation-state in light of its violent policing of Black lives. Related to this, BLM-TO’s use of the U.S.-originated “Black Lives Matter” organizational framework and name, dislocates Canadian tendencies to displace racism solely onto the U.S. and relocates anti-blackness as a transnational project deployed similarly in both North American states at the same time the movement against anti-blackness is mirrored as a transnational, diasporic effort. Finally, BLM-TO critiques [white] middle-class gay racial-sexual exploitation of supposed Black queer impostures while positioning the visibility which Toronto Pride affords to “pride [in] police” as collusion in legacies of anti-Black violence. Each of these registers of critique are worked by BLM-TO to comprise a racial-spatial-sexual struggle against and within locally-enacted and transnationally-conscious geographies of racial-sexual domination.

### **Conclusion: Politics across the Diaspora**

The writings and works of Black Lives Matter founders of the global network, those of the Toronto chapter, and Black Canadian scholars Walcott and McKittrick share sensibilities which highlight the importance of the political to Black gender and sexual defiance in the diaspora. McKittrick and Walcott, as well as activists like Khan, reveal the criticality of diaspora in the making of [geo]political Blackness and Black queerness in Canada. The transnational political solidarity, cooperation, and coordination displayed through BLM-TO’s protest at Toronto Pride emphasizes the diaspora ethics and strategies positioned across these Black Canadian, Black feminist, and Black queer bodies of work. While nationally-critical and locally-



enacted, BLM-TO's strategies of disruption, mothering, and struggle are, crucially, also attentive to diaspora. The politics and performances embodied and enacted by BLM-TO look outside the nation-state borders toward Black queer diaspora bonds while simultaneously embracing BLM-TO organizers or "house children" as insistently crucial Black diaspora queers. In espousing a sprawling diaspora of political Black queerness and situating themselves as a critical space within it, BLM-TO offers a Black queer diaspora political praxis into a living archive of transnational Black queerness.

The transnational understanding and local-national attentiveness displayed by BLM-TO at Toronto Pride shows Black (queer) diaspora solidarities hold the potential to interrupt political geographies which work to de-authorize political Blackness within individual nations. BLM-TO's action illuminates an instructive and potentially productive geopolitical strategy which might prove one- not the sole or even most radical- tool for understanding anti-Blackness and anti-Black queerness as international projects which demand a Black (queer) resistance and resilience that is necessarily aligned with diaspora as its ethic, its praxis.

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