

Mapping Livable Geographies: Black Radical Praxis Within and Beyond Toronto

by

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Department of Social Justice Education
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Abstract

The mid-to-late-2010s involved radical responses to gentrification, surveillance and police violence toward Black diasporic communities in Toronto. My thesis research examines these realities and conditions of Black life in the city, engaging with the following areas of inquiry: *The geographies in which Black community organizing and Black art practice take place in Toronto; How Black community organizers, artists and cultural workers relate to and support one another's work, and how their work responds to historically and contemporarily absented issues concerning Black people in Toronto.* Contextualized through theoretic engagement with Black geographies, Black Canadian studies and Black radical thought, this project offers critical insight through a focus group of local Black artists, organizers and community members in Toronto who refuse notions of belonging within a state founded on Black enslavement and Indigenous dispossession. Instead, they theorize tensions and possibilities for Black radical creative practice to generate livable geographies rooted in care.

Keywords: Black geography, activism, Black radical traditions, creative practice, Toronto

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¹ I curated a soundscape while mediating the tensions and possibilities for Black futurity within and beyond Toronto. By sharing this playlist (Kirk, 2020), I hope to create alternative means of engaging with the concepts and ideas being explored throughout this thesis.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

We evaded twilight throughout the encampment – made hypervisible by the streetlights that shone down upon us in the night. The light’s incessance is worth noting, given the irony that we lost access to electricity just beneath the streetlights, along the perimeter of the occupation. Most nights were also freezing, as one might expect from the city at that time of year. The days were bearable, but some nights were unutterably bone-chilling. Some of the ways community members kept warm during the occupation were through the use of donated hand warmers and scarves, by walking to surrounding coffee shops, in sharing meals with comrades at the neighbouring 24-hour diner, and with laughter. A few tents had been set up during the first few days of the occupation, alongside a well-maintained fire within a barrel to keep families warm. All was safe and contained until those infrastructures were destroyed during a police raid on the second night of the occupation. Some community-members were physically attacked by the surge of officers, and the fires were subsequently put out with buckets of sludge.

Moments after the ambush, Sandy Hudson, co-founder of Black Lives Matter-Toronto, initiated a series of ad hoc performances with her own rendition of A Change Is Gonna Come, in attempt to ease the looming trauma. Her rendition influenced a number of other performers to come forward with their own artistic retaliations to police violence over the next few weeks of the occupation.

The spring 2016 encampment within the front corridor of the Toronto Police Services (TPS) Headquarters, was organized by Black Lives Matter-Toronto (BLM-TO) in response to police violence and more specifically, to two distinct murders by police. That of Andrew Loku, who was killed by TPS officer Andrew Doyle in 2015, and Jermaine Carby, who was killed by a

member of the Peel Regional Police a year prior. Black people and allies came together to retaliate against state sanctioned violence by staging a 15-day occupation at a site that Black communities typically associate with surveillance, intimidation, and violence – giving new meaning to reclamation in the city.

BLM-TO's Tent City featured a range of performative and creative activities that included dance parties, freestyle cyphers, and painting sessions - each of which affirmed the significance of the occupation, brought new life to its surroundings, and asserted Black radical presence in the city. These moments attest to the importance of couching our pursuit for justice, more livable geographies, and Black liberation with Black artistic and creative practices.

I've always been fascinated by how political, social, and environmental issues are both articulated by and strengthened through creative practices, along with the different ways in which movements for justice and liberation are sustained through art. I often incorporate responses to political issues within my own art, my involvement with activism routinely involves artistic elements, and I have always had a profound interest in learning the ways in which other activists, artists and thinkers have done the same. I am keen on learning more deeply about connections between these practices and the ways Black people insist upon and create spaces of belonging despite active efforts of being re/moved.

My thesis research emerges out of these experiences and interests, examining relationships between Black and/or of African descended peoples' (to be herein described as "Black") artistic and curatorial practices, resistance, racial justice, and the conditions of Black life in Toronto. This study offers a literature review on related research areas, along with substantive narrative analysis. The narrative analysis is based on dialogue that took place in a focus group hosted at the Black Artists' Network in Dialogue Gallery and Cultural Centre

(BAND), an organization in Toronto that supports, documents and promotes the work of Black artists and cultural workers. Contextualized through theoretic engagement with Black radical thought, Black geographies and Black studies, this project ultimately convenes a focus group consisting of local Black artists, organizers and community members in Toronto to discuss Black creative practice and theorize the tensions and possibilities of their collective work.

Why Black Toronto?

This past decade, we have witnessed the city make a name for itself on an international scale. Black culture has been at the forefront of the city's emergent social and economic value, as indicated by the cumulative success of artists like Drake, the Raptors' first championship victory within the NBA, and Caribana, an annual street festival modeled after similar engagements across the Caribbean. Each of these have not only drastically contributed to Toronto's economy (Artscape, 2015; Davis, 2019; Ferreira, 2019). More importantly, they have each their own unique place within the city's legacy, laying the foundation for Toronto's reputation as a trailblazer for urban multiculturalism. In turn, the city's brand value (Aboelsaud, 2020) has attracted a number of businesses and condominium developers seeking to have their own set of shovels in the ground. Be that as it may, Toronto's marketability continues to have direct impacts on housing affordability – for instance, while the city's natural population growth is projected to exceed 2041 targets by almost 500,000 residents (Canadian Centre of Economic Analysis & Canadian Urban Institute, 2019), the increase in apartment and condominium construction is already largely unaffordable to low-income renters and buyers. So much so, that Toronto is cited as being second worst only to Munich, for having the worst housing bubble risk in the world (Cox & Pavletich, 2020). To that effect, overdevelopment within the city has also led to the approval of record-breaking urban renewal projects across a number of historically

low-income neighbourhood, which have already had drastic impacts on predominantly Black, racialized and urban Indigenous communities (Browne, 2019). Attending to these simultaneous changes across Toronto, makes clear the relations between the communities who attract people toward the city, and those who are at the same time pushed out. This is what scholar of urban cultural landscapes, Brandi T. Summers, calls these Black aesthetic emplacement, or: “a mode of representing blackness in urban capitalist simulacra, which exposes how blackness accrues a value that is not necessarily extended to Black [people]” (Summers, 2019, p. 3). Said differently, superficial notions of Black history, Black art and Black struggle are decontextualized, repackaged and sold to non-Black markets in processes of gentrification. In essence, while Blackness is used to propel its desirability, Toronto’s affordability crisis has and will continue to displace and disproportionately negatively impact Black communities.

While there are references to provincial and national contexts throughout this thesis, Black Toronto is the focal point. I am particularly interested in how Black people in (historically or presently) predominantly Black neighbourhoods in Toronto like Bathurst, Jane & Finch/Black Creek, and Regent Park, are creating more livable conditions for themselves and others. Be that as it may, it is useful to couch contemporary and regional discussions within broader temporal and geographic contexts. This explains the balanced focus on Toronto, Ontario and Canada in Chapters 3 and 4, in which Canada’s perceived benevolence - reinforced through emancipation stories about the Underground Railroad – is not only traced, but easily and often obscured by its historic and contemporary colonial violence against Indigenous people and its implication in the Transatlantic Slave Trade (McKittrick, K. & Woods, C., 2007; Walcott, 1997). Furthermore, maintaining a more focused discussion on Black Toronto lends itself useful as a template for organizing strategies and creative practice that can be taken up by Black diasporic people across Canada.

While the majority of the thesis will be spent speaking about Black geographic landscapes, it is important to note that this contestation around affordability and safety in Toronto this past decade – consolidated atop decades of inequities - is a reality that impacts a range of racialized and urban Indigenous communities, working class people, women and non-binary people, deaf and disabled people, and queer and trans communities as well. The experiences of these communities overlap and take place in relation to the stories I am highlighting throughout the project. That said, as a Black woman who was raised between neighbourhoods like Woburn, Scarborough, and Parkwoods, North York, both of which are targets of these rapid changes, my intention is to be as attentive as possible to memory-keeping historic and contemporary stories of resistance within local Black communities. My research is grounded within the nexus of anti-coloniality, anti-capitalism, Black feminisms and Black liberation, and the belief in the significance in telling our own stories. In essence, it is an attempt to better understand and learn from the experiences and knowledges of Black diasporic communities, with consideration that when the most marginalized people in our society are free - Black Muslim people, Black disabled people, Black queer people, Black trans and non-binary people and Black poor people, for instance, - we will all be free.

Experience with Organizing

My interest in Black radical traditions grows out of my own involvement in student organizing and activism during my undergraduate experience at the University of Toronto Scarborough. I started becoming involved on campus through Caribbean student organizing - minute-taking and event planning with Caribbean Connections led to the moment in which I saw the value in creating collective spaces to better support communities made vulnerable, and in generating connections with off-campus initiatives. Fall 2014 solidified that potential, when

Caribbean Connections worked with our student union to organize a “Hands up, don’t shoot” walk-out on campus, in solidarity with activists in Ferguson, Missouri following the police murder of Michael Brown (Scarborough Campus Students’ Union, 2014a). We subsequently utilized the momentum we had established, organizing a shuttle bus filled with Scarborough students eager to attend Black Lives Matter-Toronto’s inaugural protest (Scarborough Campus Students’ Union, 2014b). I ultimately served two terms as an executive representative with the student union, wherein one of the highlights was securing permanent office space for the Racialized Student Collective. In addition, I continued developing my own potential for organizing, primarily by supporting students and surrounding community through campaigns, advocacy, and initiatives. Organizing in solidarity with food service workers on the picket line during UNITE HERE’s Aramark Strike, taught me about the value of resisting proposed terms if they do not serve the needs of those who are made vulnerable (Denton, 2017). Meanwhile, learning from grassroots organizations like TTCriders during Mayor Tory’s SmartTrack proposal amendments reaffirmed the ways that educational institutions like University of Toronto Scarborough and York University serve as agents of gentrification, particularly within low-income neighbourhoods in Scarborough and Black Creek (2016, Cleaver). Both examples of organizing and coalition building were instructive for building better understanding of how it might look to create more livable geographies in the city.

During my time with SCSU, I began connecting with other Black student organizers across the University of Toronto, which eventually led to the formation of the first Canadian chapter of Black Liberation Collective (BLC), a network of Black university student groups dedicated to transforming institutions of higher education through unity, coalition building, direct action and political education. While each collective takes up campus-specific issues and concerns, every BLC chapter maintains three unifying demands: (a) Black students and Black

faculty are to be reflected by the local Black populations (b) free tuition for Black and Indigenous students, and (c) that universities divest from their direct and indirect investments in prisons.

The inspiration to establish and momentum to maintain BLC UofT was largely inspired by Black Lives Matter-Toronto's activism beyond post-secondary institutions. Their critical organizing, along with the work of Idle No More, No One Is Illegal, Students for Justice in Palestine, Tamil organizers who led the Gardiner shutdown, and so many others have contributed to re-establishing Toronto as a hotbed for contemporary radical organizing into the early 21st century. In thinking about its connectivity to much broader movements for anti-racist and anti-colonial justice, it's important to note that coalition building across intricate arrangements of Black students and community members is not new. Deciding to include increased supports for Transitional Year Program (TYP) within BLC UofT's list of demands, for example, was deliberately made in sequence with a lineage of education justice organizing at the University of Toronto since the 1960s. In Chapter 3, I will speak more in depth about TYP and its connection to histories of Black radical organizing in Toronto, alongside its relation to the work of Black Education Project. In sum, my own experiences with Black student organizing have played an instrumental role in inspiring this thesis, in addition to the multifaceted histories of Black activism in this city.

My Art Practice

While I've always had general interest in artistic practice, my decision to take up art as a medium through which I could share stories otherwise untold, started after I was introduced to activism and organizing. Alongside shisha scholar and artist Mitra Fakhrashrafi, I am a co-founder of Way Past Kennedy Road, a group of multidisciplinary emerging artists based in

Scarborough and other neighbourhoods made vulnerable across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). To date, we have co-curated two multimedia exhibitions. *Sanctuary Inter/rupted* was the first - a group exhibit that explored issues of internal borders, illegalization, and unbelonging in Toronto. Through the multimedia group exhibition, Black, Indigenous, and racialized artists reconsidered Toronto's sanctuary city legislation within the context of everyday deportability and the ways that illegalization is mapped on the body, regardless of status (Fakhrashrafi et al., 2019). *Sanctuary Inter/rupted* was in many ways a catalyst for my focused consideration of different ways through which radical political analysis can be communicated through creative practice – the exhibition, its complementary programming throughout the show, and the subsequent article we released in *Canadian Geographer* (Fakhrashrafi et al., 2019) each offered targeted critiques of Toronto affirming itself as a sanctuary city in 2013.

Habibiz was our second group exhibit, which took up Toronto's Shisha Ban to consider what it means to further criminalize spaces that are already hyper-surveilled and to extend a conversation on radical traditions of placemaking across the GTA (Kirk & Fakhrashrafi, 2019). Our artistic engagement informed Mitra's master's degree research on the shisha ban as it relates to Muslim placemaking, forced displacement and racialized surveillance practices in the city (Fakhrashrafi, 2020). My experiences of curating and engaging with other artists' brilliant work, have inspired me to explore the different creative pathways through which Black people are improving our sense of place in a city that thrives off our assumed disposability.

Summary

In this chapter, I have provided a brief snapshot of how my own positionality and involvements have in many ways laid the foundation for the scope of this thesis project. More specifically, I have spoken to my own experience challenging anti-Blackness through

organizing, examples of my own art practice, along with the value in orienting this study within the context of Toronto. In Chapter 2, I discuss the methods that shape this research. Chapter 3 provides a literature review of some essential readings and alternative material within Black studies which provide theoretical and historic basis for the concepts up for contemporary discussion with my research participants in the following chapter. The literature review is organized into five key themes – geographies and place; locally and nationally absented Black histories; Black radical responses; Black creative responses; and Black futures and liberation. Chapter 4 is organized into loosely similar themes, offering contemporary insight into how Black organizers, Black artists, and Black people in general are either working with/through/against earlier concepts that were materialized. Finally, I conclude in Chapter 5 by engaging with some of the ideas that were brought forward with the focus group, and sharing emerging ideas which surfaced.

This project responds to an urgent need for further research that combines theoretical research, commercial nonfiction literature, journalism, grassroots organizing, community programming, art, and other creative praxes, explaining how each component is uniquely woven into the fabric of imagining and creating Black radical futures within and beyond Toronto. In comparison with other Black diasporas in the United Kingdom and the United States, Black activism and creative practice have not been sufficiently researched in Canada. My thesis research is therefore an honest and humble attempt at capturing the vitality with which different Black organizers, Black artists and others within Black communities are documenting stories about their experiences, and how they are resisting anti-Blackness in Toronto, creating more livable conditions and futurities.

Chapter 2: Empirical Methods

Research Questions and Design

As noted in Chapter 1, the questions guiding this research are:

- a) Where are the places and spaces in which Black community organizing and Black art practice take place in Toronto?
- b) How do Black community organizers, artists and cultural workers relate to and support one another's work that addresses historically and contemporarily absented issues concerning Black people in Toronto?

I have responded to these questions through mixed methods involving the review and analysis of scholarly literature as well as participatory, community-based inquiry. As Eve Tuck and Marcia Mackenzie (2015) explain:

This type of orientation could perhaps be considered a strategic methodological approach, which involves selecting the methodology and methods of research best suited to the type of data and analysis most likely to critically inform the decision-making and conditions surrounding a particular issue. (2015, p. 93)

The value of mixed methods are in their fluidity, which is what makes it so well-suited for Black Studies research. This speaks to interdisciplinarity being woven into one of its central tenants, creating space for unique analyses and contributions within and beyond the academy. Indeed, Katherine McKittrick (2019) extends upon a framework used by so many other intellectuals within Black studies (Du Bois 1903) by more pointedly referring to this as Black methodology, in that "Black people have always used interdisciplinary methodologies to

explain, explore, and story the world”. While historic amnesia toward Black people in Canada is consistently at work, there lies strength in relying on mechanisms of memory-keeping within Black communities. As a researcher, my goal becomes using the array of methods available, pulling from on a diversity of methodologies with sound ethics, and drawing upon the connections between the lineage Black theorists and writers from community have recorded alongside Black artists, organizers, and the communities and contexts from which they work (May 1997, p. 236).

In addition to the connections between mixed methods and Black methodology, this project also finds itself in close proximity to critical race and feminist theories, in its emphasis on social justice, the value of lived experience, analysis and critique of interlocking systems of oppression and thriving within the flexibility of reflexivity (hooks, 1989; Lather, 2013, as cited in Tuck & McKenzie, 2015; Maynard, 2017; McLean, 2014). In thinking more deeply about stories written on our behalves, Black feminism particularly gestures toward a metaphorical space through which artists, thinkers, and organizers can begin to resist placelessness, captivity and dispossession through what McKittrick calls ‘sites/sights of memory,’ thereby creating space for new possibilities that aren’t bound up in rigidity or possession (Bhandhar, 2018; 2006, p. 33).

Literature Review

My thesis includes critical, interdisciplinary engagement with scholarly literature addressing five core themes that relate to my research questions: politicized geographies, absented histories, Black radical thought, Black creative practice, and political education and liberation. Given my questions about the spaces and places in which Black community organizing and Black art are happening, alongside the context in which interrogations on local

and national belonging are taking place, each necessitate deeper engagement with critical geography and anti-colonial literature. Attending to the histories of violence and erasure which enable the very foundation of structural anti-Blackness to continue existing, is crucial for critically engaging with the artistic and political retaliations against historic and contemporary issues concerning Black people in the city. Engaging with literature on Black radical thought is particularly useful, insofar as making evident the lineage of struggle across the Black diaspora. In particular, how these histories connect to contemporary moments of resistance taken up by research participants and their geographic, diasporic, and sometimes institutional communities (in the case of campus organizing). In addition, Black radical thought is a useful vantage point to consider integrative work between Black artists, Black organizers, and more generally, Black people in Toronto. Because Black cultural workers and Black artists play such a crucial role in creating more livable conditions for all people who are made vulnerable through structural inequities - in Toronto or otherwise, - prefacing analysis on discussions with Black artists requires preliminary multimedia review of Black creative practice. Finally, engaging with literature on political education and liberation helps to define the ways in which Black artists, Black organizers and Black people in general can generate clearer terms around the value systems that create better futurities within and around our communities. Each of the following core themes are discussed in greater depth within the literature review in Chapter 3.

Participatory Community-Based Inquiry

My study on examination of these questions uses qualitative methods of focus group dialogue and creative practice with six additional members of Black communities in Toronto. Again, the value of mixed methods is such that they offer much more flexibility as it pertains to interdisciplinary research methods taken up within a unique study. This research project

involves modest engagement with Participatory Action Research (PAR), a framework through which the following ethics are prioritized:

1. The generation of “an interdisciplinary science or body of knowledge, contexts, and problems of a particular setting”;
2. The building up of useful knowledge toward achieving social justice;
3. The development of techniques that facilitate collective search, recovery, and sharing of knowledge;
4. Mutual respect for academic and popular knowledge; and
5. Transformation of participating researchers in the struggle for radical change (Fals-Borda, 2006, as cited in Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, p. 89)

While PAR is an entire research methodology, my study borrows from specific methods and principals within PAR. In particular, I pay equal attention to primary qualitative research and secondary sources from academic literature, popular media, and artistic references. Moreover, this research project is inspired by PAR’s prioritization of building up useful knowledge that works toward attaining just and equitable futures for all. Finally, multiple exercises related to creative expression were worked into the focus group meeting, helping to create a space in which collective searching, recovery, and sharing of emergent ideas and new knowledge. The distinction here, is that this thesis project involves gaining perspective on the challenges faced by Black communities using a predetermined research framework, rather than a co-constitutive study in which all co-researchers create a mutually negotiated project.

Considering how often the word ‘community’ is co-opted and used to mobilize regressive politics, it is useful to provide a working definition and its implications within the context of this research (Beaudry, 2014). While working through a range of various definitions for the word in their article *Considering Community*, Beaudry lands on a political-philosophical interpretation, in which community is understood as reliant upon an interactive sense of obligation, rather than simply an exclusion of the Other (Esposito, 2010, as cited in Beaudry, 2014). While there is power in taking up this concept of responsibility, belonging to a particular community can also be used as a safeguard that advances presumptions of monolithic set of values, altruism or incapacity of doing any wrong. Discussions between research participants in Chapter 4 reveal further engagement with the idea of working toward Blackness as a politic, rather than simply a representational construct.

Finally, I facilitated in the focus group by way of asking questions, explaining the creative exercises, active listening throughout the discussion, and summarizing key ideas to support participants’ explorations. In the spirit of this project’s social justice orientation, and in an effort to better reinforce an environment in which certain kinds of knowledge weren’t prioritized over others, I chose not actively participate in the focus group discussion. Offering clear preliminary guidelines around maintaining a positive group setting, free of oppressive actions or language, made it such that participants were comfortable building upon - and sometimes respectfully challenging - each other’s concepts and ideas.

Recruitment of Participants

The focus group involves six Black adult participants from Toronto - with the exception of one participant who later disclosed that they are based in Etobicoke but work and study in the city. Two participants involved in the study identify as artists, two participants identify as both

artists and organizers, one identifies as an organizer, and one participant identifies as neither an artist nor an organizer. It was important for me to have recruited a diversity of perspectives who were encouraged to draw on their own previous training, experiences, or observations as artists, organizers, cultural workers and community members to co-construct new knowledge for the study.

Because this research is focused on Black Torontonians/ Canadian experience, all accepted participants must have self-identified as Black, African-Canadian, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Caribbean or Black Continental African, which I refer to as Black throughout this thesis. In order to reflect the diversity of Toronto's Black population, efforts were made to involve participants who represent a range of Black ethnicities. In addition, accepted participants offer a diverse range of experience within their respective field – those with professional experience alongside participants with emerging talents.

Participants were recruited through advertisement posters and flyers, which were distributed across Black community hubs in the city – artist-run gallery and cultural centres, independent bookstores, Black-owned restaurants, community centres and barber shops. The call for participants was also shared through word of mouth and social media (notably, Twitter and Instagram). Meaningful outreach was important for this project, in the sense that it allowed me to renegotiate traditional understandings of sites of knowledge.

Potential participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire indicating their ethno-cultural background and specific work in Black/ activist/ arts/ communities in Toronto. From this pool of applicants, I initially selected eight who match the inclusion criteria for this study to form a focus group. Ultimately, two participants were unable to make the focus group meeting due to unforeseen circumstances that arose on the day-of.

Short phone meetings were then scheduled with each participant to provide them with further information about the study and to discuss informed consent. Each participant was given an Informed Consent form to review and sign in advance of the focus group, and physical copies were also available at the focus group meeting for those who weren't able to submit the signed form over email. Participants had the choice of using a pseudonym during the focus group meeting or being introduced by their full name, and ultimately pseudonyms have been used for each participant within the thesis.

Following the focus group and completion of a debrief questionnaire, participants were offered the option to meet with me independently, to review how their contributions would be used in the thesis - including quotes drawn from audio recordings.

Critical Race Counter-Storytelling and Black Community Creative Praxis

In Chapter 1, I made reference to the murders of Andrew Loku and Jermaine Carby, alongside the ways their lives were honoured by Black people in the city. After they were killed by Toronto and Peel Regional police officers, respectively, their stories were retold by family members standing alongside Black Lives Matter-Toronto. Sharing their accounts made visible the need for broader and more critical discussions on anti-Black police violence in Ontario and across Canada. In the same vein, Chapter 4 offers a narrative focus – some participants reflect on experiences of hostility and disregard toward Black people, while other discussions center experiences of clarity and inspiration for Black diasporic communities. These glimpses into the lives of Black people across Toronto, exemplify the strength of critical race counterstorytelling, or what Denise Taliaferro Baszile refers to as “[critical race theory]’s modus operandi” (2014, p. 239). In *Rhetorical Revolution*, Baszile draws upon *David Walker’s Appeal, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and abolitionist narrative-driven strategies during the 19th century

to offer insight into the ways in which counterstorytelling provides a constructive source of knowledge and a catalyst for change. In other ways, “we produce something through these acts of re-remembering, or sharing stories: we create a sense of physical, liminal, and phenomenological space to consider our past, presents, and futures” (Ware, 2020, p. 282). Beyond the ways in which it offers a space for mobility, or mobilizing around the stories themselves, counterstorytelling also serves as a generative tool for queering time. Moving beyond the linear construction of time offers a portal, which ultimately connects us to our past, presents and futures in more substantive ways. In turn, this brings us closer to generating conditions in which new worlds are made possible.

Another important element of participatory community-based inquiry that engenders meaningful dialogue between people, is the involvement of what Rosalind Hampton (2011) calls Emancipatory Art Education (EAE). EAE uses an “asset-based” approach to creative research and pedagogy with Black communities, building on pre-existing strengths and knowledges of individuals, community associations and institutions, and local social and cultural practices (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002, cited in Hampton, 2011, pp. 7-8). Combining aims and practices of community art and participatory research, “EAE seeks to develop creative communities of inquiry” (Hampton, 2011, p. 8), which is a central mechanism for the figures presented in conversation with dialogue in Chapter 4, and as a subsequent area of analysis in Chapter 5.

Community Partnership

The site of the focus group meeting was the Black Artists’ Network in Dialogue Gallery and Cultural Centre (BAND), an organization in Toronto that supports, documents and promotes the work of Black artists and cultural workers. BAND was co-founded in 2008 by Maxine

Bailey, Karen Carter, Julie Crooks, and Karen Tyrell, four Black women who sought to create an environment for Black visual artists to showcase their work and develop their craft (Dejene, 2018). In many ways, its inception was a new iteration of the Canadian Artists Network: Black Artist in Action (CAN:BAIA), a collective of artist-organizers which had been active 20 years between 1989 – 1997. The goal of CAN:BAIA was to provide a space of self-empowerment for Black artists in Canada through “professional development opportunities, engage in practices of self-representation, and dialogue with international black artists” (Fatona, 2011 p. 147).

Hosting the focus group discussion in a community-run location was a decision made in keeping with the spirit of politicizing place, the redistribution of power, and recognizing the value of being un beholden to the academy as a sole site of knowledge. Rather than coordinating a room booking at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, hosting the meeting at BAND became a proactive way of working toward challenging any presumption that participants’ contributions would be determined by their engagement with/ proximity to academia.

Establishing a working relationship *before* approaching BAND with a request to utilize their space for focus group meeting was an imperative aspect of the partnership. Working with Karen on a course paper about BAND in November 2018, and supporting their work by attending events and donating to their community library, helped to gradually and intentionally establish trust and understanding between both parties. These actions each laid the groundwork for finally approaching BAND in Spring 2019, with the request to host my focus group meeting at the gallery. Ultimately, the centre was able to open up a physically accessible meeting room for the meeting, and provide a small donation for me to offer participants with refreshments, catered lunch, and TTC travel subsidy for those who required.

Data Collection and Analysis

The major components of data collection from research participants had been a two-fold in nature: (a) the focus group meeting, and (b) a subsequent and fully-optional debrief questionnaire available to all research participants.

The focus group meeting had been a full-day initiative that took place at BAND Gallery and Cultural Centre, and the means through which a vast majority of my primary research data was collected. The focus group involved facilitated discussion involving both informal conversation and critical dialogue, alongside two art-based activities. All formal discussions and critical dialogue during this meeting had been audio recorded and transcribed at a later date, and all art that had been created was photographed. All raw data had been stored on a password-protected, personal laptop computer, and was backed up in a password-protected file on a USB key and stored in a security box in my supervisor, Professor Rosalind Hampton's office. It had been made clear to all participants when conversations were and were not being recorded.

In addition to the full-day focus group meeting, the debrief questionnaire was available to all participants via Google Forms. The questionnaire had been created in effort to provide a space in which additional thoughts, concerns, or ideas could be shared. In the case that any insight or observation was forgotten during the meeting, or a participant did not feel comfortable sharing anything in a group setting, the questionnaire allowed for any supplementary commentary to be shared.

Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann's work (2015) plays a formative role in my approach to research interview analysis. Borrowing from methods in hermeneutic phenomenology, I cross-analyze, reflect upon and interpret participants' considerations of the

research areas alongside presuppositions that inform my research outlined within the literary review in Chapter 3 (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 272). Taking up hermeneutic phenomenology, or the study of lived experience, as a method (Van Manen, 1997, p. 29) ultimately incites room for self-reflexive discussion on how my own thoughts may have shifted, alongside the opportunities that presents for subsequent research. In particular, the following reporting guidelines related to relevancy, interpretation, contextualization and the written style of the chosen quotations (Borum & Enderud, 1980, as cited in Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, pp. 313 – 315) helped to transform my critical transcription reading into meaningful analysis cushioned with well-anchored content.

It was also incredibly helpful to have parsed out nuanced meaning of participants' analyses while generating data from the focus group meeting. Applying "free floating attention" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 273) presented a helpful starting point for finding the appropriate quotes for well-anchored analysis. Rather than simply listening for responses to my overarching research questions, it was also generative to have closely read participants' perspectives as a means of attending to their analyses on their own terms. After having done so, it then meant reading and listening for the sake of following my own thoughts and interpretations of their analyses wherever they took me, which offered an alternative way of interpreting the data beyond my anchored research objectives. Finally, drawing on a set of coding principals outlined by Johnny Saldaña provided a clear pathway for making sense of my data. In particular, his reference to grounded theory and its coding canon - In Vivo, Process (/open), Initial, Focused, Axial, and Theoretic (/selective) Coding - were instructive toward my own researches transference from coding to theorizing (Saldaña, 2016, pp. 55-56).

An anchoring component of this thesis are its ties to Black community, and conversations with and between research participants are shared and analyzed in Chapter 4 – which helps to put the overarching themes outlined Chapter 3, into perspective. Participant questions were prepared in advance of the focus group meeting and in relation to the overarching research questions described in section 2.1. Moreover, participants were also invited to respond to their colleagues’ contributions to the discussion or to ask questions of their own. A semi-structured group interview encouraged organic dialogue and new outlook on tensions and opportunities for change. Narrative contributions took up the majority of the focus group discussion, while art-based activities were also incorporated into the meeting. It’s important to note that overarching themes organized across Chapter 4 on Data Analysis, are quite similar to overarching themes in Chapter 3. Additional concepts that were outside the scope of this research project are be briefly explored in Chapter 5.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Over the course of working toward this thesis, Harlem Underground, one of Toronto's most prolific Black-owned restaurants and community hubs, closed its business. I was stunned and heartbroken, yet unsurprised when I found out the news in September 2019, given how much Toronto's affordability crisis has impacted people, families and businesses over the last decade. My friends and I had celebrated birthdays, threw wedding engagement parties, and bore witness to an exhibit curated by some of the city's most notable Black activist groups of the 2010s (Da Silva, 2016) at the venue over the years. Places like Harlem reflect Black placemaking, creative practice, and a politic of unapologetic fullness. Unfortunately, given Toronto's unaffordability crisis, they are few and far between. While the restaurant owner described the closure as personal, people in the city, Black Torontonians in particular, still experienced a deep sense of loss (Manzocco, 2019). These experiences of loss speak to the urgency and need to better support the sustenance of historic and contemporary sites in which Black artists, cultural workers, activists and community members have and continue to resist experiences of unbelonging and unlivability.

Each key theme within the following review of literature stems out of identifiable and site-specific experiences like these – moments of resistance, of self-determination and of loss. This chapter is also chronologically organized. The first two sections are geographic and historic contexts, both of which help to better situate how Black life is experienced locally and nationally and better frame the ways in which geographies are made unlivable. The third and fourth sections narrate different kinds of responses to structural inequities that have and continue being led by Black people in the city. Meanwhile, the fifth and final section narrates directives for Black people; actions that can continue being taken in order to continue creating

more livable geographies within and beyond Toronto. There lies such empirical value in exploring these concepts through both primary and secondary research, which explains the usefulness of pairing theoretical engagement with narrative and creative analysis in Chapter 4.

This literature review provides the theoretical grounding of my own critical engagements with participants' stories, thoughts and discussions during the focus group meeting. Some of their reflections are supported by the literature, while other discussions during the focus group meeting demonstrate areas that may have been overlooked during the literature review phase. Nonetheless, bringing the narratives of participants in my research into conversation with the literature, offers an abundance of unique voices and perspectives from Black people who represent a range of distinct diasporic and geographic communities that my research is meant to serve.

Geographic Context: Tracing Place

The affordability of space and place underpins Torontonians' most prominent anxieties in this day and age. When we account for race and socio-economic status in our considerations of housing and other aspects of affordability, the experiences of Black-owned community hubs being shut down, and predominantly Black, low-income neighbourhoods experiencing gentrification while also being hyper-surveilled and over-policed are manifestations of what Cedric Robinson refers to as "racial capitalism," a social ideology in which capitalism is organized around and expanded through racial configurations (Robinson, 2000, pp. 2-3). In this moment of current social and economic uncertainty, it is pertinent to consider what housing and affordability crises mean for the future of this city, and more specifically for the future of Black Toronto. Theorists, residents, organizers and artists alike are all grappling with this uncertainty. For instance, in her documentary on displacement of Black diasporic youth in the city,

Scarborough-based director and writer Amani Bin Shikhan urgently asks her audience and those being interviewed: “where now?” (Bin Shikhan & Ali, 2018). With consideration of the multiplicity of ways in which Black people and Black families are pushed *into* this city – escaping other forms of violence, through forced migration, or other means – are they expected to continue experiencing ongoing dispossession and landlessness? Black people are always already imagined as re/movable - in the city, across the colonial state, and globally – which necessitates a discussion on movement within the context of placemaking.

It is important that demanding space for Black diasporic people in a quickly changing city-scape is pursued in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, with respect for established treaties, and most importantly through an anti-colonial lens. These geographies are bound by the Dish With One Spoon – a treaty between Nishnaabeg and Haudenosaunee people which functions as a relationship between all people and living things. It requires that all those living in Canada have rights and responsibilities to maintain peace through healthy collective relationships, and must only take as much as we each need. (Simpson, 2018, p. 37) While state actors have spent the latter half of the 2010s feigning solidarity and reconciliation with Indigenous communities, their actions have demonstrated active and blatant disregard of these commitments, denying Black and Indigenous people access to basic human rights (Diverlus et al., 2020; Elliott, 2019; Maynard, 2017; Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019). While lateral violence between and across Black and Indigenous communities shouldn’t be understated (Rushfort, 2014), there is always hope for co-constituted care. As Maynard and Simpson collectively write, “Black and Indigenous activist communities are showing the rest of us that with ethical relationship-building based on consent and accountability from within both our communities, we can be effective as co-resistors... [and have] relationships beyond retweeting” (2020, p. 82). Similarly, Sefanit Habtom and Megan Scribe contend with the ways that our interests and liberation are intrinsically connected,

particularly in the wake of 2020s doubly apocalyptic conditions of the COVID-19 global pandemic and an onslaught of police violence against Black, Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous people. Habtom and Scribe ultimately call for co-conspiracy as a means for breathing new life (2020).

Other ways of foregrounding the politics of place through an anti-colonial lens, is by intrinsically linking these priorities to an anti-capitalist ethic. More specifically, while Black and other groups experience structural inequities in Canada, it is crucial that any acts of resistance against injustice or inequities aren't fashioned at the expense of other groups who have already been made vulnerable. This often occurs in tangent with misunderstandings of 'taking only what you need,' and other values put forth by the Dish With One Spoon Treaty. For example, Bhandar reminds us that within the context of fourth-wave feminism, the rhetoric around the slogan, "Own it!" attempts to be grounded in the empowerment of women, while being simultaneously driven by the same need to asserting dominance over others within spaces. According to Bhandar, a poignant example of reinforcements of hegemonic power relations of this nature, are within gentrified urban spaces (2016, p. 184).

Misreading the notion of shared spaces also becomes relevant within the context of public art, particularly during instances that are read as invitations for the white gaze to stare upon formerly undesirable geographies. The initiation of *Nuit Blanche: Scarborough* in 2018 is a perfect example of how asserting mastery over these spaces – in this case, through a corporate-funded event within a suburban space with majority low and middle-income, migrant and urban Indigenous populations – actually reinforces inequities. The city's strategic investment in art and culture coincides with the steady development of renewal projects and condominiums in Scarborough, along with similar gentrification projects in other parts of Toronto and more

broadly, other urban centers in the United States like Oakland, California and H-Street, in Washington, D.C. (Summers, 2019). In *Digging into the creative city*, for example, Heather McLean illustrates the ways in which community art financed by Dupont Improvement Group (DIGIN) and Scotiabank Nuit Blanche facilitated pushing low-income families and sex workers out of the Bloordale neighbourhood in downtown Toronto in the mid-2000s. In the case of Bloordale, gentrification was rationalized through claims that space was being underutilized, and would be better off in the hands of developers. Maclean's article offers yet another example of how identifiers like 'community' and the logics of "Own It!" are taken up in ways that subsequently exclude the Other (Beaudry, 2014; Bhandar, 2016; McLean, 2014). In effect, misconstrued understandings of whose interests should be prioritized works to normalize what Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Wood consider "geographic desires bound up in conquest" (2007, p. 7). While there lies value in contemplating the significance of art along our journey toward Black liberation, it is equally as important to recognize the ways in which community art and logics of ownership in particular, are weaponized in processes of marginalization.

With further consideration of the colonial and capitalist "fever of possession" (Wright, 1941, as cited in Bhandar, 2018), the following passage is also particularly helpful in offering a starting place to consider what is at stake when land ownership is prioritized:

In this [settler colonial] system, land became the most important exchange commodity for the primitive accumulation of capital and building of the national treasury. In order to understand the apparently irrational policy of the U.S. [and Canadian] government towards [Indigenous peoples], the centrality of land sales in building the economic base of the U.S. [/Canadian] capitalist system must be the frame of reference (Dunbar-Ortiz, 1980, as cited in Bhandar, 2018).

It is important to note that economic systems of exchange transcend borders – the quote above therefore extends beyond the US - and are inherently tied to colonial exploitation. Therefore, validating Black experiences of being/feeling landless while maintaining a forthright rejection of fixations on possession, is a challenging but necessary tension to revisit – particularly within the context of Black placemaking and the anti-colonial project for Black liberation. For example, I was intentional about hosting the focus group meeting away from the academic institution for this study’s my primary research, in order to challenge even unintended hierarchies associated with and reproduced within the university. In effect, the value of facilitating a community dialogue outside of the university – and inside a Black-owned establishment – creates an opening in which Black people can begin to think of what livable conditions can be made possible within these geographies.

On the other hand, what El Jones describes as tracing “plantation mentality” (2016) is another way of considering how positionality is understood, as it pertains to ownership and in particular, being subject to social control. Since Black people have historically been denied the right to self-determine, it makes sense that the response could manifest as the desire for tangible reclamation as a politic: “Freedom for slaves meant coming into possession of an abstract legal personality defined by its capacities to alienate its labour in the market place” (Bhandar & Bhandar, 2016).

A more helpful way of understanding notions of ownership for Black diasporic people, is not limited to a recognition that our understandings of freedom have necessarily been shaped by and in relation to conditions of colonialism and enslavement, but also through a commitment to redefining new freedoms. With these tensions in mind, how do communities who have experienced dispossession work toward a pointed and political assertion of reclamation, while

simultaneously resisting desires to accumulate beyond necessary requirements (Bhandar & Bhandar, 2016)? A useful way of taking up these multiple truths, is through Glissant's analysis of the ways in which social constructs are malleable: This cultural relativism has not always come without a tinge of essentialism, which has colored even the concepts that contributed to challenging the domination of conquering cultures (Glissant, 1997, p. 135).

It is particularly useful to grapple with these layered tensions within the context of theorizing the conditions of Black life in a colonial state that is evershifting toward increasingly unlivable geographies. Katherine McKittrick offers up the notion of 'plantation geographies' as a conceptual framework to better understand contemporary cityscapes' time/ space connectiveness to geographies of dispossession. In turn, considerations of how histories of violence inform the present, necessarily complicates the tensions that come with imparting a politicization of place and intentionally setting forth radical shifts toward more livable futures. McKittrick writes:

The plantation therefore provides the context to put forth the following interconnected questions: What are some notable characteristics of plantation geographies and what is at stake in linking a plantation past to the present? What comes of positioning the plantation as a threshold to thinking through long-standing and contemporary practices of racial violence? If the plantation, at least in part, ushered in how and where we live now, and thus contributes to the racial contours of uneven geographies, how might we give it a different future? (McKittrick, 2013, p. 4)

Rather than pointing to a specific plantation - which were much more prominent in the southern US and the Caribbean - McKittrick emphasizes Black diasporic connectivity that transcend borders or bodies of water. In turn, Canada becomes a landscape of "plantation

geographies,” thereby granting an entry point through which this project’s overarching questions can be examined. McKittrick’s invitation to chart future geographies more ethically, leads us toward a vested interest in talking more openly and honestly about alternative imaginings of ownership and different political conceptions of place.

In thinking of ways to work toward creating spaces that defy white supremacist and colonial violence for our communities, Marc James Léger and David Tomas’ book documenting *Zapantera Negra* and *En Donde Era La Onu* (Where The United Nations Used To Be, or EDELO) in Mexico, provides critical examples of how art and activism simultaneously create those very futures through alternative cultural hubs. Inspired by the Zapatistas of 1994, over 100 Indigenous organizers occupied the former UN office in 2009, which led to UN bureaucrats eventually evacuating the building. From that point onward, it quickly became a space in which, “[d]epending on the time or the day you arrived at EDELO, you might think you had come to a literacy center for young Mayan street children; a support house for the hunger strikers camped in the main square... remarkably, the list goes on” (Léger & Tomas, 2017, p. 103). EDELO is a significant example of what happens when resistance leads to a redistribution of decision-making power back into hands of the people, opening up multipurpose space in which communities can create new programs, new art, and new possibilities. Discussions with research participants in Chapter 4 demonstrate additional examples of community spaces manifest within the Toronto context and in their own respective Black diasporic communities overseas.

Locally and Nationally Absented Narratives

Anti-Blackness weighs down upon the configurations through which Black people organize, create, and live in Toronto – limiting the opportunities for livelihood and producing the very conditions wherein the work of resisting injustices becomes necessary for survival. In

effect, while anti-Blackness overlaps other subject areas across this literature review, it is important that a section be dedicated to a direct examination of theories of anti-Blackness in Canada. For instance, Katherine McKittrick articulates that “black Canadian spaces and places speak to each other in ways that gesture to various historical, political, and social geographies inside and outside the Canadian nation-state, and inside and outside multiple black Canadian geographical locales” (2002, p. 31). Meaning, reframing geographies *beyond* any specific identifiable place on a map, and *toward* broader conceptualizations that transcend borders. Black geographies are connected to a local, national and global network of communities that are resolutely political in their resistance against the absencing of Black experiences of violence and triumph.

With further consideration of how Blackness is identified within the context of a local and national landscape, my research underscores previous theorizations of Blackness and Black people as an ‘absented presence’ (Brand, 1994, as cited in Walcott, 1997) in Canada, expected to navigate life under conditions that are “meant to be unlivable” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 22) unless and until Blackness is required for the purpose of exploitation (King, 2016; Maynard, 2017). Through the state’s definition, Blackness is confined by designations of dehumanization, silencing, exploitability, and other forms of violence that are mapped onto the body. The logic of this form of absence was first used by Sylvia Wynter, who observes silenced grounds that are occupied by Caribbean women, and Black American women (1990, p. 363). Wynter’s call for demonic grounds as models of cognition that challenge the function of Black women being silenced, helps us better understand social orders within and beyond Toronto. Said differently, Blackness is “situated on a continuum that runs from the invisible to the hypervisible” (Walcott, 1997, p. 44). Within the context of Toronto – which, in many ways, extends to national and global relations between Black diasporic people and state powers – Black people are treated as

disposable and (re/)movable, unless Blackness is required for the purpose of commodification. To put these preconceived assumptions into historic perspective, Tiffany Lethabo King identifies these exploitative practices while contemplating the multi-operative function of Black fungibility, which can be understood as “the treatment of the Black enslaved body as an open sign [or more accurately, as raw material] that can be arranged and rearranged for infinite kinds of use” (King, 2016, pp. 1024 - 1026). The dehumanization of Black people underpins structures that uphold the foundation of our society, and it is within this very context that white supremacist logics manifest within our day-to-day experiences. In all fairness, it is also useful to note the malleability of language, in that King is expanding on the ways that both Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman position ‘Black fungibility’ as a site of escape from and potential beyond entrapments of the human condition (1987; 1997). These forms of escape provide imaginative means through which livable conditions are mapped onto our surrounding geographies.

Spatial Violence

Adjacently, exploitative logics are reinforced by way of how Blackness is understood in a local context. For instance, in Toronto-based documentary *where now?*, Black political theorist Bedour Alagraa speaks to the troubling processes of cultural exploitation, wherein Jamaican patois, hip-hop, and other Black cultural practices are taken up, appropriated, and subsequently sold as part of the broader Torontonion identity (Bin Shikhan & Ali, 2018). Returning to ‘black aesthetic emplacement’ (Summers, 2019), Blackness is platformed in ways that work to serve broader economic interests, while practices of over-policing, hyper-surveillance and removal of Black people from their neighbourhoods are simultaneously reinforced (Browne, 2015; Fakhrashrafi et al., 2019; Samudzi & Anderson, 2018). As Zoe

Samudzi and William C. Anderson argue, Black communities have “an especially intimate relationship to being surveilled, experimented on, and treated as foreigners” (2018, p. 94) regardless of their citizenship status. While they are addressing challenges from a US standpoint, Black people are illegalized in ways that transcend borders, time and space.

Understanding how Blackness is exploited within urban, national, and transnational contexts is crucial in understanding how Black artists and activists curate, exhibit, and strategically organize spaces and places in which their stories about the everyday experiences of living in the afterlife of enslavement are shared (Hartman, 2007). Anti-Blackness is woven into the fabric of Canadian society, and these histories of violence play out in present time and inform futurities in a much broader sense. Hence, Michelle Wright reminds us to consider the ways Black people come to their place in time (Alagraa et al., 2018). Which, in turn, invites us to reconceptualize and unsettle our understanding of any one timeline, precisely because Black people are living within a post-apocalyptic timeframe, or in the afterlife. Wright’s invitation to reconceptualize time also speaks to the need for more instances in which “Black spatial imaginary” can be exercised (Lipsitz, 2011). While these histories can be disturbing, infuriating and in many cases immobilizing, we each have a responsibility to uphold transparency insofar as spatial logics of violence, in that Black peoples’ contemporary experiences are informed by a colonial construct that is reliant on our dehumanization and exploitation.

Be that as it may, the city and the state consistently attempt to downplay severity of anti-Blackness, precisely because those forces would much rather brand themselves under the guise of multiculturally benevolent Canadians. In other words, “eluding [histories of enslavement is] the prerequisite to belonging” (Hartman, 2007, p. 42). State powers are quick to reinforce false notions of a “Canadian Ethnic Mosaic”, relying on what Toni Morrison refers to as an

“economy of stereotypes” (as cited in Yon, 1995, p.481), rather than acknowledging violent histories and contemporary state practices toward Black communities on these lands. However, it’s important to make clear that the broader political project for Black liberation has never been to ‘belong’ to a colonial state. Dionne Brand says it best: “I am not nostalgic. Belonging does not interest me. I had once thought that it did. Until I examined its underpinnings. One is misled when one looks at the sails and majesty of tall ships instead of their cargo” (2001, p. 85). By contrast, the work toward Black liberation is predicated on creating spaces in which oppressed communities can bring their full selves into spaces that have been created by and for them.

Black Gifts

In *Blacklife*, Walcott and Abdillahi take up the particularly meaningful work of challenging the Canadian Ethnic Mosaic, through narrating moments in which Conservative and neoliberal attempts to “re-narrate Canadian history” (2019, p. 82) have been disrupted by radically political, social and artistic Black cultural interventions. By outwitting white supremacist logic that either flattens or makes absent the complexities of Black communities, Walcott and Abdillahi’s offerings throughout their text equip their readers with tools to challenge structural inequities. For instance, attention is drawn toward to the ways that moral panic is misdirected at street crime, “as opposed to the ethics of making life livable” (Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019, p. 41), which indicates the serious dangers of attending to the wrong issues in Black neighbourhoods and communities. Failing to tackle the barriers that may have led to criminal activity – insufficient opportunities for employment, inaccessibility of childcare services, and community surveillance, for example – misdirects attention away from state actors and toward individual responses. In turn, that misdirection reinforces misconceptions of Black people as inherently violent and criminal. Walcott and Abdillahi’s investigation of Black life in

Toronto between the late 1980s and 2019 makes possible new approaches to archiving Black life. For instance, I recognize the cruciality of contending with their interpretations of how “Black gifts” – notably, the Sir George Williams Affair, Africville and Caribana – have drawn national attention toward institutionalized anti-Blackness (Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019, p. 57). That being said, consideration of Black gifts also instigates an examination of how institutions reap the benefits of these gifts while at the same time, expropriating the very people who bore those gifts to begin with. In some ways, an alternative analysis of ‘Black gifts’ sheds light on the precursors to Black aesthetic emplacement (Summers, 2019), which are often aesthetics rooted in resistance and struggle. Graffiti culture is a perfect example of these hypocrisies, understood as “a predominantly working-class cultural expression informed by African diaspora sensibilities... situated within the broader hip-hop culture” (hampton et al., 2013, p. 52). Be that as it may, graffiti culture has come to signify a principal marker of gentrification.

State-Driven Gaslighting

Pointing toward some of the ways in which state sanctioned ahistoricization of Blackness is intentional, becomes a point of useful tension for understanding a more accurate depiction of Black life in Canada. For instance, in *Policing Black Lives*, Robyn Maynard makes clear the structural moments in which curriculum pertaining to Black people’s presence and experiences were erased from the Canadian educational system. Predictably, there had come a point at which Black Canadian history became unwritten - “by 1834, textbooks bore little allusion to any Black presence in Canada, erased two centuries of slavery, included no mention of segregated schools (an ongoing practice at the time) and alluded to the issue of racial discord only in the United States” (Winks, 1997, as cited in Maynard, 2017, p. 4). In making clear the multiplicity of ways in which the state enacts structural violence upon Black communities while

simultaneously upkeeping a brand of multicultural benevolence, Maynard's book makes an invaluable contribution to Black Canadian studies.

The logics of state-driven gaslighting becomes apparent through these simultaneous happenstances. Often discussed in the context of interpersonal relationships, gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which the legitimacy of someone subjected to abuse is questioned, challenged, or undermined. However, in *A Mind Spread Out On The Ground*, Tuscarora author Alicia Elliott writes about gaslighting within a much broader, political context, to describe the Canadian government's relationship with Indigenous people (Elliott, 2019). Driven by an ethic of interconnectedness between and across struggles, *Policing Black Lives* makes clear that understanding histories of violence and working toward livable futurities, are part of the same project for Black and Indigenous peoples in relation to one another. Ultimately, Maynard reminds us of the following: "we cannot truly understand the conditions of Black life in settler societies without examining the relationship of anti-Blackness and slavery to settler colonialism and genocide" (Maynard, 2017, p. 11).

Again, sharing these connections is not to conflate the very distinct ways in which structural violence is enacted upon Black and Indigenous communities. Rather, identifying co-constituted forces of oppression is essential in building solidarity across struggles. This creates opportunities to shape interconnected ways of working toward more livable futurities across communities.

Positionality and Archival Practices

With respect to challenging the many ways in which Black histories are absented, it is important to make clear that the overarching goal of true liberation is inherently intersectional.

By that, I mean that erasure, gaslighting, and other forms of state-sanctioned violence are experienced differently, depending on your positionality beyond your racial identity. As such, those who exist on the margins of the margins often offer the most meaningful insights and analysis regarding beneficial outcomes for collective wellness. This concept is by no means new – in *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois speaks of Black people being subjected to the veil, which serves as an orienting principal rooted in double-consciousness, through which interrogations on social order can be made (1903). Toward the end of the 20th century, bell hooks furthers this concept, using Black feminism to frame marginalization as site of place-based insight and radical openings (1984). With that in mind, more conscious decisions should then be made around who leads these resistances, and who becomes responsible for creating community archives (written archives, artistic archives, or other forms of memory-keeping), both while and after these histories are made. Said differently, Syrus Marcus Ware offers the following perspective: “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” (2020, p. 280).

Within the context of QTIBPOC² histories in Toronto, Ware shares that while very few tangible archives exist (which can be found in the basements of a few community leaders in the city), archives are also mapped onto the body, they are shared through storytelling, and exist between key street corners in The Village. Ultimately, These are examples of how attempts at

erasure can be and are subverted by Black communities through a wide range of creative interventions.

Black Radical Responses

When we talk about the Black Radical Tradition, we're talking a lineage of resistance through accounts of slave revolts, sit-ins, raids, rebellions, ground-up establishments of new communities, uprisings, community organizing, popular education, artist activism, student movements, coalition movements, and a wide range of other forms of protest over the course of more than 400 years (Biondi, 2012; Diverlus et al., 2020; hampton, 2020; Robinson, 2000; Samudzi & Anderson, 2019; Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019). Black radical praxis then, is to be thought of as an offshoot of these traditions, in that more seemingly mundane practices of love, joy, and care are how we "see life as possibility" (Kelley, 2002, p. 2).

Within the context of Toronto, organizers are a part of the Black radical tradition, insofar as demonstrating particularly effective interventions against structural inequities that have led to changes within schooling systems, police practices, alongside establishments of cultural celebrations of resistance over the past 50 years (Brand & Stikeman, 1991; Duke, 2017; Lewis, 1992). Drawing on how Cedric Robinson uses the Black radical tradition to trace the ways that our past informs the contemporary (2000), we can point to movements such as the maroon societies of Jamaica, slave uprisings in Brazil, and the Haitian Revolution as critical influences on more recent local, national and global uprisings for Black liberation.

The most acclaimed among the three examples is the Haitian Revolution between 1791 and 1804, which ended with Haiti becoming: "the second New World colony to achieve political independence from its European master and the first slave society to achieve the

permanent destruction of a slave system” (Robinson, 2000, p. 144). Within the span of thirteen years, formerly enslaved Black people were successful in defeating French, Spanish, and English military forces on the island, influencing subsequent uprisings across the Black diaspora into the nineteenth century (Robinson, 2000). Within the scope of radical traditions, 1804 serves as a North Star of sorts, acting as a lesson for what happens when Black people dream of new futurities out loud. The Haitian Revolution illuminates the ways in which the intergenerational, transnational movement for Black life has at its core a rejection of white supremacy, of capitalism, and of colonialism (Maynard & Simpson, 2020, p. 86).

This thesis situates the contemporary accounts of activism in Toronto shared by research participants in conversation with these traditions. Their experiences and storytelling are part of a lineage of resistance by the Black diasporic people across time and place. Black memory-keeping and storytelling aren’t only responses to oppression by larger structural forces, they help to build people-power within and across communities who are committed to fighting for justice. Providing a snapshot of the pulse of Toronto’s activism and community organizing between the 1960s – 2010s, not only serves to lay the foundational grounds through which research participants have shared their experiences, they also to challenge the social and political amnesia we so often experience within movements and in society.

Within the scope of politics, the 1960s was a time filled with promise of justice for oppressed people. Anti-war, women’s rights, civil rights and later, the Black Power movements were some of many vibrant and progressive causes around which marginalized communities and their allies were actively organizing. The Sir George Williams Affair was an Afro-Caribbean led protest in Montreal in 1969, initiated in response to racist treatment by a course instructor and subsequent inaction by University administration to hold the accused lecturer accountable.

Regarded as the largest student occupation in Canadian history (Quan, 2019), protestors' accounts of supporters, adversaries and infiltrators throughout the campaign speaks to the very real complexities and anxieties that come with putting oneself on the line in effort to seek justice (Forsythe, 1971).

Journalism, Publishing and Community News

The 1960s were filled with all kinds of activism, and a hunger for radical change - for Black people in Toronto, that political vibrancy translated into desires for educational justice and spatial justice. Public education was a critical area here, inspiring local writers and journalists to create Black community newspaper. Founded by Al Hamilton, *Contrast* newspaper served as a key platform between 1969 – 1986, in which diverse perspectives could be shared and heard (Duke, 2016). Roughly mid-way through *Contrast's* lifespan, *Share News* was established - a more locally-focused newspaper for the Afro-Caribbean diaspora was launched and still exists today. Finally, Black feminist literary publishing in Canada first emerged in 1984 with the inception of *Sister Visions*. While it shut its doors after 17 years of service, writers Whitney French and Alannah Johnson have since founded *Hush Harbour Press*, in effort to take up the mantle of reviving another iteration of Black feminist literary publishing in Canada (Hush Harbour Press, 2020). The literary landscape wherein Black writing lives, provides further examples of how Black communities have created our own alternatives to mainstream sources that don't attend to our perspectives.

Schooling Support

Also founded in the late 1960s, the Black Education Project (BEP) in Toronto provides an example of Black community organizing to meet our own collective needs. The BEP

engaged in advocacy work, helping Black caregivers and students navigate the schooling system and facilitating an after-school mentorship program (Braithwaite, 1987). Black educational activist Marlene Greene played an instrumental role in sustaining the grassroots initiative in the late 1960s (Duke, 2016).

Another initiative at this time was the establishment of a Transitional Year Program (TYP). While the TYP had different tactics for engaging in community education in comparison with the BEP, it was based on similar values and aims: to make education more relevant and accessible for Black youth. Founded by Keren Braithwaite, the TYP was piloted at York University as a bridging programme for Black students to gain the necessary skills and meet the requirements to access post-secondary education. The TYP became institutionalized at the University of Toronto in 1970, with its support measures extended to any student facing systemic barriers to education (Webb, 2002).

Black Bookstores

Founded in 1968, Third World Books and Crafts was a cultural hub in Toronto for more than three decades. The bookstore was owned by married couple Leonard Johnston – *Onyx Boys* band member and unionist - and Gwendolyn Johnston, who kept Third World running for two additional years after husband's passing in 1998 (Plummer, 2015). Third World Books provided a place where local authors could connect with their readers, Black Torontonians could convene and share experiences with racism, and where radical political education could occur – evidently speaking to the value local bookstores serve as alternative knowledge sites (Fisher, 2006).

Third World's value and popularity among non-white and activist-minded Torontonian readers, was evident in its necessary relocation to increasingly large spaces across its 32-year

lifespan (Plummer, 2015). Be that as it may, it's important to note here that its sustainability isn't always the case with Black people investing in Black place. More often than not, Black people in Toronto and other urban geographies – business-owners or otherwise - are expected to come to terms with the familiarity of being re/moved (Kirk & Fakhrashafi, 2019).

The role of Third World Books & Crafts as a site of popular cultural and political education has continued at A Different Booklist Cultural Centre. Established in 1995, A Different Booklist has never moved from Mirvish Village - a historically Black neighbourhood Toronto – and continues to act as an intergenerational and radical gathering place for knowledge sharing and event organizing. Similar to community journals like *Contrast* newspaper, we see here that Third World Books and A Different Booklist both create spaces in which radical and responsive political education, relevant to Black and other marginalized communities, can occur (Duke, 2016).

Caribana

Toronto's Caribana was founded in 1968, and is a festival that is firmly connected to Afro-Caribbean resistance. It is modeled after Trinidad and Tobago's Carnival, which was borne out of resistance against a French Catholic celebration of lent in which only white and free coloured people could participate (Boakye, 2018). In response, enslaved persons and descendants of enslaved people created Canboulay, a sugar cane harvest festival equipped with African rhythms, movement, and marching through the town with burnt cane. Canboulay was observed on August 1st, the anniversary of the abolition of slavery. Into the 1880s, clashes between Afro-Caribbeans and British colonial authorities led to what has become known as the Canboulay Riots, which was centered around an insistence on shutting down the celebration.

Ultimately, Canboulay in Trinidad and Tobago converged with the initial lent masquerade - now Carnival is hosted in February.

In addition to the original counter-festival, even the music played within the Afro-Caribbean festivals are rooted in resistance. Steel pan music, for example - which can be heard both at Carnival in Trinidad and Caribana in Toronto - was created in response to percussion instruments that were banned by British authorities around the same time of Carnival's in the late 1800s (Ramm, 2017).

In its 50+ years of existence, the Caribana parade has brought about insurmountable joy and pride for Afro-Caribbean people in Toronto. On the other hand, there continues to be tension due to disproportionate police presence in comparison with other street festivals (Migdal, 2016), and its displacement further and further from the downtown core. Nonetheless, there is assuredness in both knowing and retelling Caribana's many rhizomatic connections to resistance.

Black Action Defense Committee and Black Lives Matter

One of the founders of Caribana was Charles Roach, a lawyer, activist and owner of a Caribbean cultural club called *Little Trinidad* (Sealey, 2012). Roach was also among the co-founders of the Black Action Defence Committee (BADC) in 1988, alongside Akua Benjamin, Dudley Laws, Lennox Farrell and Sherona Hall (Duke, 2016). The BADC was established by these activists as a base from which to collectively organize against police violence in Toronto (Tomlinson, 2016). The dynamic nature of Roach's radicalism ranged from his work as a lawyer, to convening the Board of Governors of the Caribbean Cultural Committee that would establish Caribana, along with being a co-founder of an activist group challenging police

violence. BADC's activism in the city led to the implementation of the Special Investigations Unit (SIU) - a provincial body responsible for enforcing oversight of the police.

As others have observed, a direct lineage can be traced from the BADC to the recent formation of a Toronto chapter of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLMTO) (Tomlinson, 2016). In the after-math of a series of pivotal moments for the Movement for Black Life during the 2010s, members of BLMTO's steering committee edited an anthology of reflections on those five years of organizing. Understanding how it all began is a helpful starting point toward any interpretation of their cultural, political, and artistic impact:

On November 17, 2014, Sandy Hudson sent a message to a cluster of organizers within the city of Toronto:

Friends, a no-indictment decision for Darren Wilson in the murder of Mike Brown is expected any day now. I am wondering if anyone is aware of solidarity actions being planned in Toronto. If not, I think we should do what can to plan something. (Hudson & Diverlus, 2020, p.6)

BLM-TO co-founders went from reaching out to a small network of community organizers, to(re)building a movement that actively challenges police violence and other manifestations of anti-Blackness in the Toronto and from coast to coast. Continuing the legacy of former BADC members and other elder activists in the city has been instrumental in not only sustaining the movement, but in continuing to demand fundamental shifts across governments and institutions across this country.

The communal ethic upon which BLM-TO has been built, is a central tenet of Black radical traditions: "the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the

historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality” (Robinson, 2000, p. 171).

BLM-TO, along with all aforementioned spaces, places, initiatives and actions are connected through their commitment to lateral care and understanding of the collective responsibility for the wellbeing of others. All in all, engaging with foundational understandings of Black radical traditions is not only generative, but is also a critical aspect of contextualizing other contemporary moments shared by research participants.

Black Creative Responses

Janice Reid

In Summer of 2018, former City Councilor George Mammoliti embarked a campaign for re-election in Ward 7 Humber River-Black Creek, in North-West Toronto, home to a distinct balance of high-income home-owners and low-income families. Prior to his most recent - and unsuccessful - campaign, Mammoliti had a proven track-record of racist and anti-poor discourse and policy proposals throughout his 23 years as city councilor (Press Progress, 2018), and his attitude toward these communities was reinforced during an interview that summer. Mammoliti made the following remarks while speaking to the media about his commitment to tearing down social housing in Ward 7: "I see it like spraying down a building full of cockroaches" (Rieti, 2018). While Jane and Finch/ Black Creek community members were outraged by his comments, Janice Reid is one of many residents who enacted counterstorytelling as a responsive strategy (Baszile, 2014). In particular, Reid photographed a portrait series entitled *Real Love*, an implicit retaliation against Mammoliti’s distasteful misconceptions about her community (Alambo, 2018). Reid’s first solo exhibition was displayed at BAND Gallery and Cultural

Centre, and exhibited refreshing imagery of a woman surrounded by an urban green space. The exhibition offered an exploration of the Black female identity, and spoke to Reid's own vibrant experiences growing up in Jane and Finch.

Janice Reid's photographic retaliation serves as a testament to the power of creative practice within Black and other marginalized communities. For Reid and so many others, photography is both a tool and "a weapon to tackle the colonized lens, offering a counternarrative" (Neigh, 2017) to any prior misconceptions the viewer may have had about the artists' perspective, identity or experiences. Demanding that audiences see the world through their figurative and literal lens, the personal becomes political when Black photographers capture the everydayness of Black diasporic life. In *Reflections In Black: A History Of Black Photographs, 1840 to the present* Deborah Willis also emphasizes the timelessness of portraying societal conditions through critical examination of Black photographs and Black photography (Willis, 2000). This is of particular importance when doing the work of cross-referencing conditions of Black life across time – within the local, national and global contexts. A language, or better yet, "a vernacular practice mobilized by black people in diaspora, photography is an everyday strategy of affirmation and a confrontational practice of visibility" (Campt, 2017, p. 7). By capturing the beautifully ordinary through historic and contemporary Black portraiture, Reid and other Black photographers use counterstorytelling to share images other visual narratives that are deeply personal, educational, and inherently political.

Torkwase Dyson

Rather than drawing on life experiences for artistic inspiration, multidisciplinary artist Torkwase Dyson engages with Black theory through her own abstractive practice of creating space for critical dialogue and furthering direct interventions with possibilities of Black spatial

liberation. While in conversation with Christina Sharpe, Dyson describes her artistic practice as a place through which she is personally encouraged and encourages others to dream of getting elsewhere:

My relationship to abstraction... is understanding how different kinds of modes of abstraction work, and that is political, social, and economic. And my interest in abstraction as a painter is understanding that surviving those abstractions through painting is my form of search. So I believe in abstraction as a historical condition that gets to an otherwise. And for me, painting and making these forms sort of leads the way. (Graham Foundation, 2018)

Dyson goes on to share the ways in which her practice serves as an exercise of the imaginary, or what Christina Sharpe refers to as “critical fabulation” (Graham Foundation, 2018). Dyson’s work is influenced by her own environmental activism alongside Sharpe’s writing, reinforcing the value of cross-disciplinarity in any embarkation of “wake work”, which can be described as Black expressive mediations on getting elsewhere in the afterlife of enslavement (Sharpe, 2016, p. 13-18). Be that as it may, we also recognize the multiplicity of ways that Black creative practice can also occur without intentional engagement with Black radical theory, i.e. lived experience *as* theory.

Popular Music

Musician, educator, and organizer Fatimah Nyeema “Noname” Warner didn’t have to have read *Lose Your Mother*, to have incorporated her own expressive mediations on “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (Hartman, 2007, p. 6). After completing two projects and touring between

2016 and 2019, Noname has since withdrawn herself from the music industry in favour of running Noname's Book Club - an online/in real life (irl) community dedicated to uplifting racialized voices by highlighting books written by racialized authors. Nonetheless, songs like *Casket Pretty* and *Blaxploitation* incorporated references to structural manifestations of the afterlife of slavery long before the book club even launched (Noname, 2016; Noname, 2018). Her catalogue of popular music reinforces that environmental realities and lived experiences inform theoretical engagement on Black life without necessarily naming it as such.

Music has always been a platform through which Black people have narrated their experiences surviving colonialism, enslavement, and white supremacist violence. Before and after the Middle Passage, Black people have used music to call upon spirits, to celebrate life, to mourn loss, to coordinate escape routes from plantations, to lead in protest and pass the time, among other purposes. The delicate balance artists strike between creating playful work, subverting power structures, and caring for community illustrate the polymorphic nature of music-making. Delvina Bernard of Four the Moment, describes her experience as a Black Nova Scotian singer as such: "You have to dig your heels in because as singers we are cultural bearers, we have to be aware of not only our lives but the lives of people in our community" (Nolan, 1987). Admittedly, not all performing artists are as politically active as Four the Moment, whose first public appearance was at an anti-Klu Klux Klan rally in the early 1980s. Nonetheless, many musicians are still acutely aware of the power of their work and for better or worse, its seductively influential nature. As Richard Iton (2008) writes:

The ways popular culture can mobilize or demobilize—for instance, the way much of turn-of-the-century black pop (ranging from rapper Jay-Z's "Hard Knock Life [Ghetto Anthem]" to gospel vocalist Donnie McClurkin's "We Fall Down") naturalized

economic hardship and specifically black poverty—need to be integrated into any effective framework for understanding the development of black politics. If we are to understand black politics fully, from an empirical or academic perspective, we cannot overlook those spaces that generate difficult data. Similarly, those committed to progressive change must also engage with those arenas and voices that promote regressive and discomfoting narratives. (Iton, 2008, pp. 19-20)

Here, Iton makes visible the dangers of not attending to the many ways that pop culture influences societal understanding of Black politics. He does this by providing examples in which artists naturalize narratives about Black experiences of hardship, rather than contextualizing the ways in which economic hardship is linked to structural violence. Additionally, while there lies potential to mobilize progressive politics through Black creative practice, Iton assesses that more appropriately, there rests the capacity to develop “broader solidaristic sensibilities” within popular culture, which is a critical aspect of sustaining social movements (Iton, 2008, p. 20).

Contemporary Black Artist Organizations

Finding linkages between Black creative practice and Black radical theory also involves highlighting an important historic marker for Black art in Canada. In particular, Canadian Artists’ Network: Black Artists in Action (CAN:BAIA), the Black Arts of Canada Committee and Diasporic African Womyn’s Art (DAWA) are groups that existed between the 1989 until the late 1990s (Fatona, 2011; Parris, 2019), each of whom were insistent on collective support and platforming Black multidisciplinary artists. Not only have these groups paved the way for both formalized (Black Artists’ Network in Dialogue and NIA Centre for the Arts) and non-formalized (Black Wimmin Artists and Black Artists Union) Black artist spaces today, but the

Black cultural movement also led to policy creation and increased funding for Black, Indigenous and racialized artists within Canada Council for the Arts (Fatona, 2011; Parris, 2015; Parris, 2019). Black cultural activists, the majority of whom being Black women, have been instrumental in demanding more equitable conditions for Black and other marginalized artists to thrive. In turn, this has led to greater opportunities for creative platforms to shed light on political issues impacting Black communities, carrying the mantle of “mak[ing] the revolution irresistible” (Bonetti, 1987). The importance of centering a multilayered approach to fighting for Black liberation cannot be overstated, and with that comes paying homage to those who have and continue to show up for Black diasporic people.

Healing with the Imaginary

While some studies speak to the ways in which visual art speaks to its audience, I am also interested in learning about the *process* of art-making as a language in and of itself, that translates both the artist’s environmental surroundings and the worlds they’d like to see. What Torkwase Dyson calls “black compositional thought” (Graham Foundation, 2018), illuminates a world of possibility – how does Blackness influence creation and how, in turn, do creations shape the remaking of the Blackness?

In the spirit of tending to Black art that deeply attends to the imaginary, taking up an exercise of “what ifs” is also useful for processes of mourning. In particular, I’m thinking of Saidiya Hartman’s journey through Ghana in *Lose Your Mother*, wherein she calculates the time it would have taken to offer each captive a loving embrace before their departure, until eventually coming to terms with the impossibility of retribution:

I scanned the town, hungry for detail or trace of the hundreds of thousands of persons deported from the Gold Coast. I tried to imagine how many sacked villages and abandoned dwellings and destroyed families and orphaned children made up this number. But I was unable to translate a string of zeros into human figures or to hear the clamor of slaves assembled on the beach or to catch a whiff of their fear as they stood before the ocean. I tried to calculate how long it would have taken to embrace them all one by one and whisper good-bye. If each farewell took as long as a minute, it would have added up to seven hundred and seventy-seven days, a little over two years, which didn't seem like enough time. Besides, there had been no one to see them off and say I love you and we will never forget you. These words were of no use now. (Hartman, 2007, p. 54)

Using the imaginary in this way serves as both an effort at memorializing enslaved Black people and “amplifying the impossibility of its telling” (Hartman, 2008, p. 11). When these counternarratives are grounded in ethics and accurate historic representations, it creates a space in which Black people can tend to themselves and to others who come from lineages of apocalyptic conditions, with more attentiveness and care.

Narrating Black Futures: Toward Liberation

Political education and knowledge sharing are essential along the journey toward liberation. We need to share ideas with one another about the world we want to see, which can involve coming to clearer terms about what values are worth holding onto in order to access these futurities. Getting closer to freedom requires critical confrontation with not only the values to maintain or strengthen, but also by coming to terms with the values reinforced by the very conditions that have engendered inequities in the first place.

Extensive research has long demonstrated what Black communities already know based on daily lived experiences: that “our society is structured by a white spatial imaginary” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 7). In turn, the societal structures rooted in white supremacy put Black spatial imaginaries - and the people who make up those geographies - at risk of social and political upheavals. Throughout *How Racism Takes Place*, George Lipsitz confronts the dichotomies between Black and white spatial imaginaries by pointing to numeric and other data that reinforces spatially oppressive realities faced by Black and other communities of colour (2011). Spatial isolation from employment opportunities, disproportionate levels of police surveillance, lower likelihood of intergenerational wealth and being in closer proximity to environmental hazards are some of many inequities he outlines, emphasizing that white property and white vanity are “valued more highly than Black humanity” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 20). Learning about the particularities of social, political and moral injustices faced by Black communities, better positions folks to conceptualize effective solutions to create more meaningful Black spatial futurities.

While the material conditions of Black people’s lives in Canada and in the United States are shaped by financial hardship and disenfranchisement there are dangers in directing too much attention toward redressing economic harm, as this can serve to reinforce racial capitalist constructs. This caution is so well articulated in *Lose Your Mother*, where Hartman asserts: “I refuse to believe that the slave’s most capacious political claims or wildest imaginings are for back wages or debt relief” (Hartman, 2007, p. 234). Upward class mobility is not the solution to Black spatial inequities. Rather, we need a wealth of love, of care, a wealth of community knowledge and of community creativity. With these tools, it becomes easier to engage in collective, anti-capitalist exercises of the imaginary.

In *Freedom Dreams*, Robin D. G. Kelley points to these alternatives as well, defining surrealism as “the night to Marxism’s day: It breaks the chains of social realism and rationality, turning to poetry as a revolutionary mode of thought and practice” (Kelley, 2002, p. 192). Rather than working within the confines of the world we know in search of an economic remedy, in the spirit of Black radicalism Hartman and Kelley urge us to more boldly and critically examine the legitimacy of the of market in its entirety.

To Kelley’s point on poetry being a revolutionary mode of thought and practice, it’s helpful to extend the power of literary fluidity to other free-flowing forms of mediation. For example, wake work demands that attention be paid to the metaphorical and historic associations between Blackness and water here, because imagining potentiality is intrinsically connected to both historic and contemporary conditions (Sharpe, 2016). While there is no reckoning with the loss of ancestors who will remain nameless or have been forcibly forgotten amid the Middle Passage, the depth of our desire for collective freedom is what keeps us moving. In thinking about our communities are working toward, we are still inextricably in the wake. This idea allows a more nuanced evaluation of two very distinct realities – on one hand, the water points to the interminable potential of Black futures in the city. At the same time, the traumatic tension Black diasporic people have with the water is also evident in the dispossession and dislocations of the Atlantic Slave Trade, and refugees fleeing violence across the Mediterranean Sea.

Ultimately, there is no way forward without tension. Getting to a place wherein Black people are fully liberated has always been, and will continue to be laboursome. But nothing works unless we do, and “struggle is par for the course when our dreams go into action” (Kelley, 2002, p. 198). Kelley’s nod toward the value of consistent agitation reminds me of a

position renowned activist, intellectual, and writer Angela Davis has taken up in so many of her public appearances in the recent decade, which has been given new meaning in the wake of a resurgent resistance against anti-Black police violence and the movement for Black life³. Time and time again we are reminded that ultimately, the struggle continues (2020).

The work of building and sustaining a movement for liberation requires constant engagement about the issues within the communities to which we belong. Critical dialogue within neighbourhood nail salons, shisha lounges, living rooms and basketball courts are essential. Baszile (2014) reminds us that “education, not schooling, will transform the world. And as such, our energy, focus, and commitments to educational justice and wellbeing cannot be relegated to school improvement” (p. 209). In the case of moving toward Black liberation, education involves facilitating public interventions, producing content and creating spaces in which knowledge can be disseminated and shared.

³ It is important to note that a significant amount of this research took place between November 2019 and March 2020, during the dawn of doubly-unprecedented moments in history. Black people and allies have taken to the streets to protest incessant anti-Black murder by police, sacrificing their own health in the wake of a global health pandemic.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Participants⁴ and Context

***Dominique:** A Sudanese organizer, photographer, and former international student.*

***Jamila:** A first-generation Somali undergraduate film student, who was raised and still lives in Regent Park.*

***Jean:** A Nigerian immigrant who is interested in pursuing writing.*

***Kamau:** A writer, organizer, and Eritrean refugee raised in the Jane and Finch community.*

***Nalo:** A first-generation Jamaican artist pursuing their master's in teaching.*

***Whitney:** A Congolese queer francophone multidisciplinary artist and organizer.*

Conversations with these Black community members were a crucial, motivating force for this research - in that theoretical concepts from the review of literature covered in Chapter 3 are put into local context and relevant perspective through discussion. While each research participant has direct familiarity with living in Toronto, a city that disregards Black humanity through community surveillance, underemployment, and forced displacement, each Black artist, organizer and community member involved in the focus group brought forward unique experiences and perspectives on paths toward livability and Black liberation in the city.

⁴ While the descriptors and following quotes are consistent with each of their lived realities and experiences, pseudonyms have been used for each research participant.

Questions were prepared in advance of the focus group meeting, and participants were also invited to respond to their colleagues' contributions to the discussion and to ask questions of their own. A semi-structured group interview encouraged organic dialogue and generated new outlooks on tensions and opportunities for change.

Participants offer varying outlooks on each core theme addressed in the literature review and their contributions often connected to more than one theme at a time, which explains both the context behind and the value of returning to specific parts of the focus group meeting as I loosely return to each thematic section in the same order as Chapter 3: geographies and place; absented histories; Black radical thought; Black creative practice; Black futures and liberation. This chapter will provide a narrative summary of those discussions, and has been similarly organized around the same overarching themes. Subsequently, I will share my own analysis, emergent topics, and a conclusion in Chapter 5.

Findings

Geographies and Place

During the full-day focus group, participants were asked to discuss how their work responds to tensions between how Black life is lived in Toronto and what is demanded of Black people in the maintenance/ upholding of the city's social and economic structures. Their comments prompted discussion about challenges posed by “well-meaning white people” who are much more comfortable striking committees and advisory groups that discuss equity, diversity and inclusion, than working toward abolishing whiteness. Participants shared that white people who are unwilling to challenge the very systems that are upheld by white supremacy, are actually reinforcing social, economic, and spatial inequities:

Kamau: They need poor Finch or poor Scarborough, poor Black people working at these shit ass factory jobs or this temp work, that's all people that look like us. That exploitation is what makes downtown, that's what makes [Toronto] all this extra capital.

This is a helpful starting point for this chapter, as it points to the insidious workings of racial capitalism (Robinson, 2000), which was referenced in Chapter 3 within the context of predominantly Black and racialized communities being removed from their homes as a result of gentrification. Kamau has seen the ways in which spatial inequities in Toronto impact manual labourers and temporary workers in his community of Jane and Finch. Given what we know about systems of inequity being reinforced through exploitative labour, there won't ever be "no Black people in Downtown" in our lifetime precisely because they are essential workers within our society. Even though low-income downtown communities have and continue to undergo exponential gentrification, we can anticipate the ongoing necessity of their labour. As Kamau mentioned, Black people and other communities who are disproportionately low-income are forced to take up manual labour because of high unemployability, and in turn, they keep these geographies afloat.

At another point in the discussion, participants were asked to express their perspective on how Black people fit into the frame, within the context of Toronto's identity, and Canada's identity. The following quote succeeds Kamau sharing his frustration toward surface level tokens of appreciation toward Black people. Kamau argues that "despite—or in spite of" histories of enslavement and dispossession in Canada, "Black people still create." He shares his

frustration regarding tokenizing gestures of “appreciation” of Black people that do nothing to address structural violence toward Black communities:

Kamau: the powers that be pick one or two Black people to celebrate while they keep us down structurally and community wise. So when they talk about gun violence in Finch, I’m like you guys know you’re taking out a whole strip of public housing that y’all ain’t fixed for three decades. Don’t tell me about violence, that’s structural violence. You’re moving all these people out.

When they did that in Regent, what kind of shit popped up when all those Regent youth went all over and they got relocated, because they don’t care about our kids and stuff happened. I think about violence like that whenever someone tells me that one or two people did this or that. But y’all are out here in Queens Park in Downtown Toronto signing papers, and 300-500 people are moving. That’s traumatic, and you ain’t never cared about these people.

Building upon Kamau’s frustration toward housing, dislocation, and structural violence, Jamila shared her own grievances with spatial injustice by speaking to her personal experience living in a community undergoing forced dislocation:

Jamila: There’s no value for Black people in Toronto, and they’re pushing us out[...] I still live in community housing, and they continue to raise our rent[...] It’s always the

Black neighbors that are all being sent away to Scarborough and Brampton these different areas, and they're trying to push us out.

It makes me angry because I remember growing up and we all spoke like this Toronto slang, we all contribute to it. And now you go online and you see Lilly Singh saying these words like “that’s what Toronto means! Drake! The 6ix!”, but there’s no regard for the people who put in that culture, or [created] those words. And we continue to get pushed out[...]

But then in those neighborhoods, they’ll pick their one or two people that they think are up to their standards, [saying] “you’ll be the spokesperson, you’ll bring the culture, you’ll show us what they’re saying in their areas. You’ll bring that right here, and then we can steal that and say it’s Toronto.”

Jamila thus points to two key considerations – firstly, that there are working contradictions between Blackness being propped up while Black life continues to be disregarded. She narrates the experiences of her childhood neighbours being uprooted and relocated to new parts of the city that are far less familiar to her – attributing this forced movement to a disregard for Black people that exists in the city. Furthermore, she uses notable a person in popular media industry to gesture toward the ways in which non-Black communities perpetuate the same logics as the institutions and governments Kamau mentioned above, in that they welcome palatable Black *things* while Black histories continue being discarded.

At another point in our discussions on spatial injustice, participants discussed the assumptions that are been made about gun violence in predominantly Black, poor/working class,

im/migrant neighbourhoods, Dominique reinforces the importance of approaching these conversations with structural context:

Dominique: Yes, there are issues of like gun violence, and like gangs and whatnot in these communities. But the question no one ever asks why these issues are there. And when you sit down and look at why these issues are there, it goes back to Black people being forcefully segregated from dominant society. And you know, with gentrification, and our spaces constantly being policed and even shut down, you know, with the shisha ban – I remember when there was the exhibit on that – you know, having our spaces constantly taken away from us, you know, how can it fit?

Here, Dominique shares an important reflection on contextualizing gang violence within a broader scope of understanding how responses to systemic anti-Blackness can manifest. As noted by the similarities between Dominique’s analysis and Kamau’s prior thoughts, participants continued returning to what comes with failing to account for the structures that facilitate experiences of violence. Here, she also references *Habibiz*, a group exhibition on radical placemaking, geographic violence, and the ways already hyper-surveilled spaces are further criminalized across the GTA (Kirk & Fakhrashrafi, 2019). By redirecting the conversation away from gun violence and toward broader issues related to geographic violence, Dominique warns that when we fail to ask the right questions, we are left with obscure understandings of violence. Dominique later reassures the group that unpacking these tensions

weren't meant to justify violent actions - rather, Dominique and Kamau arrive at places that urge us to consider putting violence into systemic perspective.

With consideration of emergent grassroots work connected to Black geographies wherein Black art informs Black activism, Whitney introduced us to important work being taken up by Black women and Black non-binary people in the city:

Whitney: In the context of Toronto, I would say I think one defining moment has been being part of Mapping Black Futures, I'm not sure if people know about it. But it's a community collective full of artists and activists who are working to – well, in conjunction with technology, we're using it to map Black lived experiences in the city and across the Greater Toronto Area. So that's when the use of technology and art and community organizing. So that's something that I've been a part of that is wonderful.

Whitney had become involved with Black Futures Now (BFN) around the same time as the interview, in Fall 2019. Whitney explains that BFN's Mapping Black Futures project, involves facilitating community-run archival work, organizing lectures with their cohort, and hosting public events.

While it can be meaningful to create cartographies that “map Black lived experiences in the city,” other participants pointed to the ways that mapping Black place can also evoke hypervisibility – therein attracting a broader audience who may not understand the depths of its value. As another participant, Jean pointed out in relation to the formation of Black collectives

and places where we gather, “we should guard these spaces with our lives.” Jean’s values emerge out of his love and appreciation for Black expressive work. Exhibits, collectives, viral hashtags, and memes and few of many sites of curiosity and play that offer sense of groundedness in a city that otherwise thrives off of structural inequities. To him, protecting spaces that facilitate opportunities to engage with meaningful exercises of the imaginary, are always worth saving.

Finally, with consideration of other spaces worth saving, it’s worthwhile to close with a story shared by one of the research participants. When asked to share something that spoke to what it means to be Black in Toronto, Kamau chose to re-tell his experience during the Northeast blackout of 2003, in which fifty million people lost electricity across the province of Ontario as well as in eight U.S. states (Spears, 2013):

Kamau: On August 14 2003, the power across Northeast went out, and it was all dark. And I remember I was at York, I had to write an exam. The prof didn’t show up because he was stuck in the subway. I grew up in Jane and Finch, so I decided I might as well walk home. And literally what I saw blew my mind. There were bonfires, people playing music from their cars, people were giving strangers food. And I thought, like, for me that moment of thinking about like, that’s the kind of Black joy that I’ve always held onto. When the whole world didn’t know what was happening - nobody knew what had happened, I didn’t know what was happening in the suburbs, or downtown Toronto or even in those big houses where you don’t see your neighbors. But in this community where there’s supposed to be chaos, Black people and other people were just literally

having a party chillin'. So I was like listen, when the revolution comes, I'll be in Jane and Finch.

Because it was literally like that's what we do. We take care of each other we ride and everything else might be crazy and stressful and anti-Black but like, when we were supposed to be the chaos, it's like the power went out. Nobody else knew what was going on but it was just chill vibes, there was partying, there was eating, people were giving each other food because this shit's gonna go bad anyway.

In Toronto, we have to search so much to find those spaces sometimes, but there is still joy that we can create.

Kamau's story puts into perspective the ways in which predominantly Black neighbourhoods are misconceived. Like so many other stigmatized communities in Toronto, Kamau shares that the Jane and Finch community is made up of people who take care of their neighbours despite what little they may have for themselves. More often than not, the stigmatization is rooted in oppressive logics of anti-Black, anti-poor, Islamophobic or xenophobic ideologies. While these moments sometimes manifest amid unconventional circumstances, cultural practices like sharing food, playing music and gathering offer clarity and groundedness in the face of day to day experiences of oppression and in moments of chaos.

Notions and Experiences of Blackness in Toronto, Canada

In 2019, the Toronto Raptors made franchise and national history by being the first Canadian team to win the NBA Finals (Westoll, 2019). Within the context of Black community's relationship to the city and the state, Jean initiated a discussion about what the

victory meant for Black people in particular:

Jean: there are always two sides of like what it means to be Black in Toronto as well. Like ‘Look at us, we’re cool, the Raptors won the NBA, Black people are poppin’ now’. But there’s also the fact that like the city refuses to listen to recommendations on gun violence, poverty solutions writing policy that actually benefits our lives. And not just like, you know, surface level, like Drake, big millionaire things.

Here, we can see a continued pattern of hypocritical treatment toward Black people, much like earlier concerns that were raised by Jamila and Kamau. Jean is pointing to two sides to Blackness in Toronto – on one hand, Black cultural aesthetic and practices are marketable, and thereby hold hypervisible presence. Institutions, governments and everyday people in the city take pride in attaching themselves to moments and people that reify false notions of “Canadian Ethnic Mosaic” that are made possible through Black labour (athletes, rappers, etc.) and Black cultural production (basketball, hip hop, etc.). Meanwhile, disregard for Black life is maintained, along with any consideration of structural improvements that might tangibly increase livability.

Similarly, in 2018, the Bank of Canada and the national Ministry of Finance announced that the late activist Viola Desmond would replace John A. Macdonald on the Canadian \$10 bill (Williams, 2018). Jean and other participants rightfully took issue with the market doing Blackface:

Jean: Viola Desmond is on the 10\$ bill, Canada again is trying to do their whole benevolence thing. Like ‘look at us, we put a Black woman on our bill before the United States’[...] It’s another example of Canada doing this hypervisible thing, which is done to Indigenous folks as well.

Jean and other participants discuss this example as a particularly troubling gesture simultaneously tokenizing individual Black people, historicizing Black struggle as a thing of the distant past, and quite literally (re)attaching the value of Black people to money. When we think of the ways in which capital has been the driving force of exploitation since the inception of the Middle Passage, Jean shares that it becomes easy to see beyond the façade of these kinds of initiatives.

By generating representational celebrations, governments and other institutions are able to scapegoat real accountability and while ongoingly associating Blackness with negativity. Nalo bore the brunt of these negative associations at a young age:

Nalo: I remember there was a time when a student in the classroom said - I was in Grade 7, I believe - he was like, ‘You’re going to hell because you’re Black.’ And like, the [all-white] class just like erupted in laughter[...] I grew up with these kids, and I didn’t even know they understood [race jokes] at that age[...] or that this was something to laugh at.

Nalo goes on to say that she ultimately hid what had happened from her father, out of fear that he would address the experience with the child, their teacher, or the school - in her

words, “there would have been a protest.” Even though she went on to share that in retrospect, Nalo wished she hadn’t been so fearful about sharing that experience, her fear points to how people may shy away from confrontation. Not for lack of opposition or alternative knowledge, but out of a fear of repercussions such as being ostracised.

Not only do children face school experiences with non-Black peers and teachers having to do with negative associations attributed to Black people, but these perceptions are also learned through the media. Kamau raises how stereotypes can also be internalized by parents within Black communities:

Kamau: In the 90s, any news from Finch or Scarborough was always about Black people getting shot. Or CP24, saying ‘we’re looking for a Black person’. So [parents are] getting it from everywhere. It’s not necessarily other Black people telling them ‘Oh, we’re in gangs, by the way’ - it was the news and the media. And they’re just looking out for their kid. So it’s like, ‘just don’t be that one’. The shit that the media and the police want, but then there’s some internalized anti-Blackness too. But, I mean, they get that message and when you’re new in a place you’re like, ‘Well, I don’t want my kids with the next one on the screen.’

Because criminality is mapped onto Black people (Fakhrashrafi et al., 2019; Razack 2002), white settler assumptions about Black people and the spaces within which they live being inherently violent and unsafe are both perpetuated and internalized. Ultimately this impacts some families’ willingness to engage with their neighbours, even in instances wherein both residences are Black.

While Toronto is home to the largest Black population in Canada, Whitney notes the dangers in limiting understandings of Black presence in Canada solely to this city:

Whitney: Blackness is associated only with Toronto, it's like Black is Toronto. Whereas like, there's this complete disappearance of Black people across the country, as if we haven't existed in this in these spaces for a very, very long time.

When we think about Black presence, highlighting cultural celebrations (i.e. Caribana) and journeys northward through the Underground Railroad, it becomes fairly easy to maintain the myth of Canada as benevolent. Meanwhile, Black presence in other parts of the country are absented - for instance, the number of ways in which Black people migrated into this country isn't necessarily common knowledge. Black enslaved people arrived across the Maritimes (notably Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick) and other parts of the country (like Quebec) between the 17th - 19th century (Riddell, 1920; Cooper, 2006), Jamaican Maroons arrived in the 1790s after being deported for their involvement with uprisings against British colonial governments, while Black Loyalists began arriving 1812 (Chopra, 2017). In addition, when we think about the ways absenting Black histories reinforces unlivable geographies, Black residents of Africville, Halifax experienced forced removal after their entire community underwent demolition. In effect, Whitney shares with us that limiting our associations of Black place in Canada with Toronto serves as a divergent strategy that facilitates an erasure of extensive and complex Black histories and experiences across Canada.

In many ways, the moments in which Black cultural practices are acknowledged or celebrated are also often tied to their monetary benefit. Here, Kamau draws our attention to the value we have placed on internationally renowned artists, as opposed to giving our flowers to

other hip-hop artists with longstanding experience of doing work within their communities:

Kamau: Kardi talked about Fresh Arts and all these programs that helped creatives to be creative in the 90s. And people forget all about that as soon as Drake comes in, right.

Kardinal Offishall (also known as Kardi) is a Scarborough-raised hip-hop artist who has been supporting young creatives in the city for just under 30 years (Kothari, 2013). In this case, however, a key difference between him and Drake, is that Drake left the city during his rise to fame in effort to engage with a global market.

To further contribute to an earlier note on perceptions of benevolence that were raised by Whitney, she poignantly expands on the extent to which the myth of white Canadian benevolence and the ways it harms Black people across the diaspora and within the continent:

Whitney: And I think about[...] Canada's reputation in general, as someone who was forced from my home because of Canadian intervention and the whole peacekeeping thing[...] y'all are not peacekeepers, like at all.

Here, Whitney emphasizes that Canada has deployed a substantive amount of troops to Congo vis a vis the United Nation's peacekeeping missions since the 1960s, and that their interventions have led to violence and abuse (Larson & Dodds, 2017). Congo-Canada relations are far from an isolated incident, and it stands in as a placeholder to demonstrate the sheer extent to which Canada's pattern of gaslighting Black, Indigenous and racialized communities is in

itself, an act of violence.

Within the context of what happens when cultural knowledge is undervalued, Nalo points to ways that she has had to navigate having her artistic and theoretic mediations on her life experiences misunderstood:

Nalo: I think about[...] what you're told is real, what you're told is not real. Unlearning some things, and like sifting out[...] what this community has taught me to know that that's real, and this is not real[...]

And then when we were talking about that shock when we tell people our stories[...] How we kind of we know innately, it doesn't matter what we do, they'll never understand[...] I'm trying to think of it like, what if this is actually a protection of what we know? [...] [K]nowing that they'll never understand I think, is something we can use our advantage.

[...] I think the ancestors are giving us a tool. And I think we need to think about how to use that differently.

Black people in general, and Black women and nonbinary people in particular, are burdened with unparalleled levels of gaslighting when they retell their encounters with harassment, abuse, or any other form of violence. While this can have a harmful impact on our mental health, Nalo points to the potential of an art practice that strategically refocuses its affect in order to provide an opportunity to think differently about uninterpretable utterances.

Finally, we return to moments in which Toronto evades itself of any semblance of acknowledgement toward cultural or contextualized depth. Therein, self-appointed spokespeople for the city materially benefit from monopolizing Blackness:

Dominique: The thing that kind of popped into my mind when you brought up that point [about Drake as a quintessential emblem of Toronto], was that article, or I think it was a video of Toronto slang, and when they got Lilly Singh --

Whitney: She's also another one too --

Kamau: Brown people standing in for Black people. That's very Toronto.

In the Toronto slang tutorial referenced above, YouTuber and comedian Lilly Singh translates a series of words that she had learned from her neighbours and friends throughout her upbringing in Scarborough, Toronto, Canada (Vanity, 2019). While she makes reference to the intercultural nature of the exchange of expressions, a vast majority of words described in the video - waste/man, yute, ting, ahlie, etc. - derive from Jamaican Patois. Research participants are challenging the decontextualization of Black cultural production and calling for more accountability toward Black communities.

Black Radicalism, Community Organizing and Creative Praxis

On December 18, 2018, Sudanese activists took to the streets after years of growing tension between civilians and former President Omar al-Bashir. Support for the uprising

quickly grew beyond local protests in the city's capital, Khartoum, and solidarity movements began being cultivated by diasporic Sudanese youth across the globe, online and on the ground. In just under a year, the revolution in Sudan led to the removal and conviction of al-Bashir, the establishment of a transitional government, and the constitutional declaration of a new path forward ("12 defining moments", 2019). Dominique and other Sudanese youth in the city played critical roles in amplifying what was happening in Khartoum, so when she asked to speak to defining moments in which Black art has informed Black activism - and vice versa - she had this to say:

Dominique: During the revolution in Sudan, during one of the sit-ins, one of the big things that brought people together was art. You kind of had the murals at the sit-in, you even had an arts and crafts corner, you had a music corner... Art kind of became a form of protest.

Even after the massacre happened, art was a form of protest and also a form of healing. So when the army painted over the murals, people risked their lives *again*, and went back on the streets and repainted those murals. On top of that, they painted murals of the martyrs who were killed.

The raid Dominique makes reference to occurred on June 3, 2019, which ultimately became a pivotal turning point for the Sudanese revolution with respect to mobilizing international support through social media. We see here that art was - and has always been - much more than supplementary to Black liberation movements. Instead, time and time again we see the ways that art serves as a critical tool imbedded within the Black radical tradition.

In another capacity as a campus organizer, Dominique also reflects on using counterstorytelling as a key strategies during a campaign to implement a tuition levy to establish a racialized student centre:

Dominique: I think what really changed people’s minds, was a student’s testimony on how the services on campus saved their lives.

Similar to the spaces in which the Sudanese revolution picked up momentum, Dominique explains how social media platforms were instrumental during their levy campaign. Twitter posts by her co-organizer about their experiences in the racialized student collective went viral, which in turn strengthened support for the referendum on campus. On the other hand, Dominique provided context into the ways social media had opened up the floodgates for cyber-harassment and other forms of digital violence during the campaign – noting the Reddit threads that questioned its necessity and claiming that the centre is “segregationist”.

Dominique then went on to speak about the difficulties that have come with challenging misconceptions of what it means to be an immigrant organizer. For context, former Progressive Conservative (PC) leader Andrew Scheer committed to ‘cracking down on immigration’ and exploring ways to update the Safe Third Country Agreement during the most recent federal election in 2019 (Harris, 2019). She signals the very real risks of deportation that go along with positioning oneself as an activist:

Dominique: ‘Oh, what do you know? You have money, you made it!’ and I’m like, yeah, but at the same time, I’m an immigrant. I have fears of being deported. Like during

the election, my anxiety was at an all-time high. Because [I kept thinking: if] Scheer wins, I'm not coming back.

Each participant spoke to their own experiences navigating unique risks and challenges that come with resisting anti-Blackness within interpersonal or work relationships, in organizing spaces, and through different creative practices. Coming out of an exchange about the ways their art responds to social order within the city, Jamila had shared a deeply personal experience in which she was ridiculed by non-Black peers in her film program for writing a script that included vernacular used in her community. While she was proud to have intentionally prioritized writing a teen drama that centered Black coming-of-age stories, Jamila had to push back against moments in which her team tried to “to push [her] and [her] voice out” of a project that she had initially pitched. While sharing his own reflections on Jamila’s story that had led her to tears, Kamau articulated the following:

Kamau: I think the hardest thing to do, is tell the truth about Black life... Especially if you need equipment, infrastructure, space... [Filmmaking] sounds like it's a lot harder [than writing] for you guys.

As both a writer and someone who has been a creative practitioner for longer than Jamila, it seemed to have been meaningful for Kamau to engage with her negotiations and anxieties, particularly in ways that resonated with other organizers in the room. Beyond the considerations Kamau listed above, participants went on to discuss that economic precarity also presents a barrier that may deter Black people from challenging moments in which they are silenced.

One year after BLM-TO's Tent City in front of the TPS Headquarters, and roughly a month after a comment about Prime Minister Trudeau being a white supremacist sparked national dialogue (Otchere, 2017)⁵, the provincial government released the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan (Government of Ontario, 2017). Here, Kamau shares his insights and personal experiences with neoliberal institutions and governments co-opting the work of Black radical organizers:

Kamau: When we saw the province introduce their \$47 million Black action fund, the Liberals just erased BLM. So I think about that, and I think about like my role, as always letting people know how change happens. It is the disruption. It's the pushing, it's the frontline work. It's putting yourself out there. It's maybe calling Justin Trudeau a white supremacist terrorist. And then you know, two years later come to realize doing Blackface is his hobby⁶. It also means that we protect our people who go out there and take that step.

And we ride for them, even if it's not easy. Even if it means sometimes pushing the button. So I think about like, my role and then telling those stories about how change actually happens as much as the institution, or the state wants us to forget. And also taking care of the people that really put themselves out there because it's really not easy,

⁵ As of 2019, the organizer referenced most frequently in the article by Shantal Otchere is no longer affiliated with Black Lives Matter Toronto.

⁶ See Reiss, R., Almas, S. & Levenson, E. (2019), for information on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau wearing Blackface on three or more separate occasions.

and there's always a cost.

In addition to his contention with the depoliticization of Black radicality, Kamau also speaks to his own experience with campus organizing. He shares here that university administrators were quick to rave about their alleged accomplishments that were actually fought for by Black graduate students. In spite of their efforts to evade political progress of any attachment to grassroots efforts, Kamau reminds us that Black organizers must continue doing the work, while others should attend to and caring for those who put themselves on the frontline.

When asked to describe where and how Black people are responding to challenges within their community, Jamila had this to say:

Jamila: In the Somali community, a lot of people are coming together and vocalizing our issues and struggles, and I don't think it was like that when I was a kid[...] [For] a lot of us, our parents fled to Canada because of the Civil War. It was kind of just like, be quiet, do the best you can, go to school - that's [the mindset] our parents kind of raised us to be in... And it's understandable, because you want your kid to be safe[...]

Versus my generation now, where we're kind of like, we should have the space to try different things, and make artwork that speaks to our issues, our struggles, and that represents us so that we can have a voice and stuff. So now like I'm noticing that a lot more.

When there is something that goes on, or something bad happens to the community, people are speaking up. Whether it's on social media or like coming together and putting

together events[...] We're coming together and making sure our voices heard.

Here, Jamila is declaring that Somali youth want to do more than survive - within a similar context, Whitney echoed this sentiment and put things into perspective by affirming that "surviving is not living." Here, art, event organizing and social media campaigns are all ways in which Somali youth are speaking out against injustices they face in this city.

While some Black millennials are breaking traditions of older generations within their communities, as mentioned by Jamila, others are following Black elders' lead. Organizing at York University, for instance, has proven to be part in parcel of longstanding traditions of Black activism on campus. In thinking of defining moments within and around his organizing, Kamau shares the following:

Kamau: So when we were doing our stuff at York, a bunch of us Black graduate students were pushing the institutions to support Black students - Black graduates, especially.

I remember Anique [Jordan] being a part of the collective... And whenever we did a demo or a public-facing event, she would have these articles that were like, really big newspaper clippings of Black activism from back in the day. To show that there was a history or a trajectory to this work.

When we were doing that stuff at York, we started to hear from other people who came out the woodworks. They would tell us about stuff that they did when they were at York

back in the 70s and 80s... And hearing all those stories, you realize you're part of a tradition. And that storytelling part of it, is still part of the work that sustains those of us who were out there in those moments.

Here, another participant unpacks the family tension that has gone along with deciding to engage in activism. Whitney brings forward an attempt at sifting through the tension of putting into perspective their anxieties of risk and the lineage of radical work within among Congolese people:

Whitney: It's not just [my mother], it's also others in her generation as well, Who are like:

“Well, why do you have to be outside?”,

“Why do you have to do this?”, and

“Why do you have to put yourself in danger?”

And I'm like ‘Well.. People in your generation did the same thing as well.’ It's not like this is a new thing. Like, we wouldn't be where we are in the place now, if it wasn't for people that came before us who have been fighting, and we're just continuing that fight.

Both Whitney and Jamila thus speak to being taught to keep their heads down by their respective families. They both recognize the validity of this fear, in that it can sometimes be challenging to see the people you love and care about put themselves at risk of being personally harmed. Ultimately, Whitney, Kamau, and so many other thinkers, writers and theorists have all

proven the significance of making sacrifices for a greater collective purpose.

In other instances, people across the Black diaspora in Toronto continue to engage in radical practices through service-based community organizing. In our discussions, participants shared experiences with and reflections on the significance of support networks through community learning programs, each of them making references to the many unique ways these initiatives are at the helm of what makes this city livable. This is exemplified through Jamila's drawing in response to being asked to share their ideas of Black futures in the city through writing, an illustration, or a photograph (Figure 1). Significant to the drawing were the support measures she drew for some children, the reading material that offered comfort, and the film project being created by community and for community. In addition, Jamila mentioned that affordable housing was an important aspect of the city she wants to see, along with a full-stop of all surveillance measures.

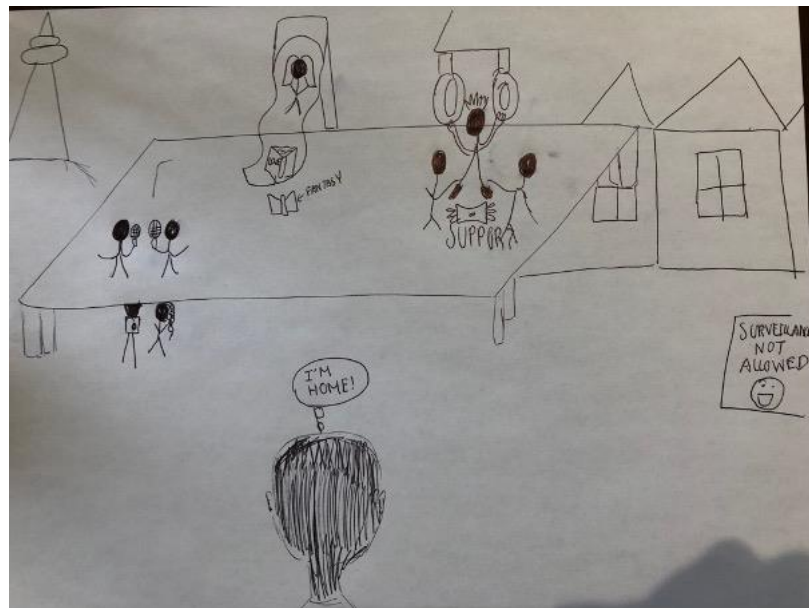


Figure 1: Jamila's drawing of a park, created when participants were asked to either draw or write the future they want for Toronto.

Nalo also spoke to the idea of creating support systems by reflecting on a moment in

which she came to realize the magnitude of care that had gone into her father's organizing within their community:

Nalo: I think about the people in my life who have been doing work, I think about the work my dad has done. He's always made weekend youth programs, and I didn't think much of it when I was a kid. And then growing up and hearing those labels, I was like, 'Oh, that's what that was?' My dad just would just you know, say that Black kids need space to do homework. So come.

After having spoken about the ways in which Black students were responding to anti-Blackness on campus, Kamau also took the time to share how his geographic and diasporic communities are responding to systemic barriers in the city:

Kamau: Since my earliest memories [in my building in Finch], we always had meetings about how we needed to be strong as a community, and fight the stigma of growing up in Jane and Finch in like the early 90s[...] We would meet, and like everybody was poor. We were broke, but we would still do community meals and potlucks and stuff like that. So I got to taste food from everywhere. I understand *that* as community, and it never felt like a lack. It never felt we were poor.

When we came here Eritrea wasn't independent yet, so it really made us stick together. We would see each other every week - do soccer programs, ball programs[...] Again, everybody was poor, but people would bring food and we had an abundance of food[...] We had a place to hide from the city, the racism at school, and all that. So I [also]

understand that as community - as that lateral care[...] Black people getting together and taking care of each other.

Here, Kamau and other participants describe community meetings, sports programs and potlucks, and other forms of local community organizing in the city as manifestations of lateral care. In his community, mutual aid is as pronounced as it is normalized, which has shaped his outlook on the ways community shows up for one another.

Besides these noted opportunities to both provide care and be cared for within these neighbourhoods, when Black radical traditions are enacted, they present pivotal openings to literally shift the paradigm of what is imaginable for community. Being raised around poverty in the ways Kamau describes, or being at the heart of a revolution as Dominique narrates below, are both moments in which these participants are offered particular forms of clarity and perspective on how livable geographies might look. Within the context of the Sudanese revolution, Dominique shares the following response when asked to describe where and how Black people are responding to challenges:

Dominique: When the revolution happened [in Sudan], you kind of saw the community come to life. And, you know, just building those connections with community that I never really had the chance to connect with being a child of the Diaspora my entire life. It was something that was very beautiful. And it really helped, you know, shape my identity as a Black woman because it helped me explore a different aspect of Blackness.

Here, Dominique reveals the ways that sustaining the revolution back home created an

introspective pathway through which she could also revolutionizing her understanding of self. Dominique and other participants' reflections demonstrate that movements are not only born out of necessity to support and fight with communities, they also establish, restore, and fortify our sense of community, and construct a landscape wherein self-actualization is also made possible.

Black Creative Practice

Participants were asked to speak about different ways in which Black artists are taking up the tension between the Toronto that is sold to the global investors, and Black peoples' lived experiences of being in the city. In response, Nalo pointedly drew our attention to speculative fiction writers as a site of inspiration for her own creative practice. Particularly, she is outlined the ways in which the worlds they imagine are so similar to some peoples' realities:

Nalo: [Dionne Brand, and other speculative fiction writers] often make me think about all the other people who are doing that imaginative work through their writing, and how it's so in tune with how we live our lives.

And part of the hard thing of being an artist is to actually say what is happening in our own lives. Because it fucking sounds like fiction.

It was agonizing to have sat across from Nalo as she frustratedly scrutinized the ways that Black peoples' realities are more easily understood through safeguards of particular genre-categories. Here, Nalo reflects on the worlds Black speculative fiction writers (re/)create through their writing. While similarities between their writing and her lived experience

sometimes leads to a point of frustration, Nalo professes how indebted she is to writers like Dionne Brand throughout the focus group meeting. She describes her admiration and appreciation of Brand, because of the ways she guides her readers through conditions that would have otherwise been inconceivable. Black speculative art forms do this masterfully: they offer avenues through which creative workers can speak through the dangerous realities of their everyday experiences. Finding ways to translate those experiences into creative practice is also an exercise of the imaginary, ultimately supplying a space through which Black artists can be deeply expressive within their creative practice. Nalo reminds us that Black speculative fiction writers in particular, are uniquely positioned to narrate conditions of Black life, alongside the kinds of worlds they would like to see for themselves and their surrounding community.

Here, while sharing personal strategies on challenging self-censorship, Dominique describes having gone through a process of reflecting on her art. Ultimately, she speaks to how she accepted that maintaining art practice as something personal would take priority, particularly because she resorts to activism as a space for fostering collective betterment:

Dominique: I'm doing art for me. For me, art is a form of healing. It is something that I do when I'm feeling down when I'm feeling very low, and my heart is very heavy, and I need to let it out.

In addition to a therapeutic ritual, art also serves as a great opportunity for escape and introspection. When we were in conversation about Black place in the city, Nalo shared her experiences of consistently sketching during her commute from her home in Oakville into the city for work and school. While she expressed a 'mixed relationship' that she has with Toronto, listening to music while drawing on the transit line are what permits a space of refuge:

Nalo: Even though [public transit is a] really high stress environment[...] It's also that kind of place where I'm just sketching all the time. And I can find a little bit of peace with that.

Similar to Nalo finding sanctuary for art making in seemingly unconventional spaces, Whitney describes a favourite photograph of hers, which was taken the last time she returned home to Kinshasa:

Whitney: Just by the Congo River, there's this rock that says 'Stop' on it. It's always a place where you can just reflect ... I think Black people and our relationship with water is so complicated, but I also I think there's a lot of beauty that comes from water and Black people's relationship to water.

Like my own ethnic group, we're river people. So water is very important to me.



Figure 2: A photograph taken by Whitney in Kinshasa, Congo.

By ‘complicated relationship,’ Whitney is gesturing that bodies of water have been a site of trauma for Black people. Both those who come from lineages who have attempted to seeking asylum through water routes, and others who have been displaced through the Transatlantic Slave Trade. She holds space for nuance, in that water is also point of Indigenous connectivity for her ethnic tribe.

As mentioned across various contexts and discussion areas, we know that art can also be deeply political, and is necessary part of many social movements. Here, Kamau reflects upon the value of Black artistry being enmeshed with Black activism:

Kamau: Artists make the spaces where we’re really putting ourselves out on the line, cool. Sometimes they’re singing and dancing, someone’s organizing activities, or putting their artwork out there. It all makes being a part of the space organic and cool.

Kamau's reflections highlight how creative practice acts as an anchor that sustains movements by creating environments that are welcoming for people at different levels of familiarity or comfort with protests and other direct actions. This reminds me of my own appreciation for the beauty of Black Lives Matter Toronto's Tent City in March 2016, wherein the space was carved out for dance parties, freestyle cyphers and painting circles that worked toward sustaining a 15-day occupation in front of the Toronto police headquarters (Diverlus et al. 2020).

While it might be the case that some organizers recognize the value in establishing meaningful connections with artists, Nalo hasn't encountered that sense of collaboration in her experiences with activists:

Nalo: I am usually not asked to contribute through intellectual work or through making solutions... I don't know how to explain it.

But I think part of the tension is that, when I'm asked to come in as an artist, I don't feel like I'm asked to come in to think of how to live a better life with everyone. And it took me a couple of years to think about and sift out that tension[...] I'm not sure if it's everywhere, but that's definitely what I experienced.

Here, Nalo brings forward a meaningful intervention with how creative work is devalued and deintellectualized. While people who engage in the more visible work within organizing are celebrated – activists who hold the megaphones, organizers who take the interviews, and those

who speak on panels - Nalo walks us through the ways that hidden labour is undervalued within Black liberation movements. Her creative contributions are misunderstood as an afterthought to the broader goal-setting taken up within organizing spaces. Nonetheless, Nalo understands her work as a central tool for mapping livable geographies, rather than complementary.

In addition to art being part in parcel of the Black radical tradition, Black artists are also organizing within and particularly for artist communities. While attending a predominantly white teacher program at Laurier University Brantford, Nalo took part in establishing initiatives to support Black, Indigenous and racialized artists on campus:

Nalo: We would come together and we would create different hubs and communities to actually talk about what we were experiencing on campus. One of the ways was through art galleries and navigating other, specifically for me, Black artists on campus.

To have a space where we could share [and] talk about our art [...] [Those spaces] always attracted the right people. And I think at the heart of it was that [while] it was totally focused on the artists that were coming together, the community that it created in those spaces was how I was able to get through everything.

[...] Art keeps coming back in different ways in my life, in ways that I never thought of it as a kid, and it just changes all the time.

Nalo spoke earlier about her own art-making process as deeply personal; done in isolation amid often-crowded transit lines. Be that as it may, she also shares how meaningful it

was to have been involved in creating collective spaces for artist communities. This demonstrates that Black art isn't used for any single purpose. Rather, Black creative practice is multifaceted, and can be deeply personal, a way to connect with surrounding (geographic, diasporic, or institutional) communities, or with family.

With deeper consideration of the ways that art can be a conduit for being better connected to our surroundings, Nalo articulated the deep rootedness of art to her own upbringing in a Jamaican home:

Nalo: Both my parents came to Jamaica in the 80s, and my whole family - all of them - are artists, which was really incredible to grow up [around]. There's a lot of people who display their art in different ways. Some made storybook illustrations, some are tattoo artists, some are fashion designers, like my mom. But just being around a Caribbean family that totally embraced art as not even something that they just do on the side, but as like *an everything*. When I walk into my home the art is made by my family, and all the clothes I wore to school [growing up,] were made by my mom [...] [It's so much more than just] a passion that people take up in their lives.

When asked to describe where and how Black people are responding to challenges their communities face, Nalo described her profound attachment to art practice passed onto her by way of family ties. Here, her art is described as an aesthetic source of placemaking, a physical source of grounding, and an ideological grounding for her upbringing. These environments are what have helped Nalo understand Black creative practice as foundational to Black radical traditions, rather than supplementary.

With consideration of tangible ways in which Black artists are creating more livable conditions for Black people in Toronto, it was helpful to have traced some emergent work that research participants have encountered in the city:

Dominique: SISI Magazine is new, and the girl who manages it is a Nigerian journalist. It's literally like a website, by women for Black women. It's a blog type thing, but also there's also a journalistic aspect to it. I also came across Sisterhood Media recently, and that's been really cool.

For further context, Samah Ali is a Black Muslim filmmaker and founder of Sisterhood Media (<https://www.sisterhoodmedia.net/>), and created a streaming platform for young Black, Indigenous and racialized women and non-binary people interested in being more involved in media and entertainment. As for SISI Magazine, it is an independent lifestyle and culture magazine which creates content for Black women in the diaspora (<https://www.sisimag.com/>). Dominique referenced SISI at another point during the focus group meeting, wherein she informed us that after the vote, a fellow organizer turned to SISI to share their story about winning the referendum to establish a racialized student centre levy on their tuition fees (Worku, 2019). Here, we see the value of creating community publishing venues in which Black women and non-binary people can share their stories.

At one point during the focus group, dialogue opened up a space for vulnerability. Earlier in the conversation, Jamila had been comfortable enough sharing the whirlwind of emotions she experienced while screenwriting her Black teen drama. In that moment, she shared that she had hopes of showcasing the program for Black youth in the near future. Here's what

the co-participants had to say:

Kamau: When you have your screening at Finch, we're gonna sell out the whole theatre.

Jean: Or you can come to Scarborough.

Kamau: You have to start at Finch, then you can branch out.

Dominique: I can't even say anything, I'm a downtown bitch [...] East vs. West? Imma shut up.

Here, we can see the candid ways other participants commented on their investment in supporting Jamila's screenings and her creative work. There's something beautiful in thinking of how and where Black artists not only create art, but showcase it within their communities as well. Beyond the variety of possibilities for creation and showcasing, it was also incredibly refreshing to bear witness to everyone in the space offering to support an individual they had just met that day. Folks learned about each other's sets of values and their shared commitments to community. In turn, they committed to extending that care within and beyond the meeting - which speaks to the fortitude of community care.

This form of care among Black people should not be mistaken for always being in agreement with one another, or supporting one another's work. The community care that participants adhere to also involves meaningful critiques of the work of fellow artists and organizers. Within another context, Jean said the following before going on to share his distaste

toward the movie *Harriet* (Lemmons, 2019):

Jean: Permit me to say this, but art can be bad. We have some Black artists putting out bad art.

After the statement above, Jean went on to talk in depth about the pitfalls within the way Harriet Tubman's story was retold, in that it was re-interpreted through white saviour logics that glorified violence enacted on Black people. Ultimately, Jean brought forward his discomfort as a way to illustrate the responsibility that comes with using whatever platform you may be afforded, to share messages that uplift communities rather than reinforcing dehumanization or violence. His declaration becomes particularly useful for people who might be interested in sharing work that incorporates prominent figures within the Black community.

Toward Liberation

When asked to describe where and how Black people are responding to challenges within their community, Jamila insisted that establishing a meaningful sense of safety and warmth in this city needs to come from the ground up. She shares a clear distinction here between community-led and government-led youth programs that are "geared toward kids and youth" and keeping them from "going down a bad road":

Jamila: I noticed that when people outside of the [Black] community are coming in, sometimes it's not as good as when it's within the community and people are carving out spaces for ourselves. And like, maybe not being able to afford rent, but like everyone

pitching in so we can have programs and stuff. That's when I know it's really genuine, because they care about the kids and like, keeping them somewhere that they feel safe. Maybe home is not safe or maybe it is, but [the kids] actually feel like they can go and learn something or do something new.

Similar to earlier critiques shared by Nalo and Kamau, Jamila also uses her personal experiences to provide insight into how community-led organizing and ground-up solutions are proven to be both meaningful and effective.

Earlier on in the chapter, social media platforms were discussed within the context of digital spaces wherein global solidarity was forged by Sudanese organizers in the continent and across the diaspora. With further consideration of virtual communal spaces in which Black people can access cultural and political education, Whitney contends with a set of tensions regarding social media that she has been trying to make sense of:

Whitney: With Twitter, social media, and other ways of getting closer to Black folks, closer to our work and the ways that we organize[...] How do we guard our secrets in a space and in the world that is constantly connected, and what does that mean for our futures? I don't know.

Dominique's concern earlier on in the chapter had been the ease with which trolling, harassment and threats can occur on social media. Whitney, on the other hand, points to other dangers that go along with having too much access to information, particularly in the age of hyper-surveillance. To her point, it's worth remembering that not everything needs to be shared

on public platforms, and that while there is value in connectivity, Black communities also deserve the right to privacy.

Within the context of different manifestations of tension in the city, Whitney positioned herself as a starting point for her analysis:

Whitney: As a queer, Francophone, Black African, I always feel like I'm also not part of conversations on Blackness in the city. I'm constantly sort of on the fringes of and find myself forcing myself into conversations.

Then later on in our dialogue, she brought forward a compelling lateral critique against who's perspectives are more valued within the Black community:

Whitney: For those of us who are on the outskirts, it's like we're fighting for crumbs, and I don't want to fight for crumbs.

I don't just want to survive - I want to live, I want to create.

From the standpoint of a queer Francophone Black African, Whitney recognizes that particular voices are often privileged at the expense of people like her - namely men, those who are cisgender, straight, able-bodied and people who are classed. She identifies the importance of prioritizing Black people who exist on the margins, and the power in demanding more out of life in the city. Dismantling white supremacy and moving toward Black liberation is meaningless if it doesn't centre Black women, Black non-binary people, Black queer and trans folks, Black

Muslim people, Black disabled people, Black poor people and other identities who are most marginalized within Black communities.

Finally, Kamau put into perspective the value of directly confronting injustice as a path toward increased livability in the city:

Kamau: I remember when June Jordan said “Listen, if you give me a chance to speak, it’s gonna be ugly.” I’m not here for people who are going to try to gloss over that or to come translate for us. I’m saying, listen: this is what Black life in the city is for us. See who’s couch surfing, see who’s homeless. See who’s forced to do this kind of work and that kind of work. Tell me who’s working at UPS, with this hard ass labor, and minimum ass wage. Nobody’s seeing their resumes with their Black names, and they gotta change their postal codes[...] Fare evaders coming in, they know where Black people are, where to get the kids who can’t afford transit[...] This is how people try to live every day.

Having been raised to tell the truth, continue showing up for people, and to let the rest take care of itself has provided a guiding light for Kamau. With that in mind, his values put into perspective how seemingly discomfoting interventions are necessary as we move toward accessing more livable conditions for Black people in Toronto.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This thesis has examined relationships between Black diasporic artistic and curatorial practice, resistance, racial justice, and the conditions of Black life in Toronto. The focus group meeting was hosted at BAND, a Black-run organization in Toronto that supports, documents and promotes the work of Black artists and cultural workers. While the Gallery and Cultural Centre was not actively researched within the study, working through the research questions with participants in a Black community-run setting aligned with the discussions at hand. My study brought together a focus group consisting of local Black artists, Black activists and Black community members from Toronto who were neither activists nor artists, in order to have a dialogue about Black community organizing and Black creative practice, and theorize the tensions and possibilities of integrative work. In particular, my research questions were as follows:

- a) Where are geographies in which Black community organizing and Black art practice take place in Toronto?;
- b) How are Black community organizers, artists and cultural workers relating to and supporting one another's' work, and how does their work respond to historically and contemporarily absented issues concerning Black people in Toronto?

My thesis includes critical, interdisciplinary engagement with scholarly literature and primary qualitative research addressing five core themes that relate to my research questions: space and place; absented histories and experiences of Blackness, Black radicalism and community organizing; Black creative practice; and Black futures and liberation.

Black Space and Place

Questions about the spaces and places in which Black community organizing and Black art are happening, and about the context in which interrogations on local and national belonging are taking place, required deeper engagement with critical geography and anti-colonial literature. The literature review incorporated texts that speak to solidarity between Black and Indigenous people, gentrification, how present geographies are inherently connected to historic violence, and how space can be reconstituted on community's terms.

Similarly, research participants each shared their unique contemplations with these subthemes. For example, Kamau's frustration with the attention paid toward gun violence in the city, while the structural violence remains unaddressed, is shared by many other Black artists and residents across Toronto. He makes reference to gentrification in Regent Park, a neighbourhood wherein its rapid changes directly illustrate developers, governments, and other institutions' lack of care and attentiveness toward community. In *Farewell Regent*, Christene Browne highlights these tensions and other reflections by former and current residents, including their experiences of removal and loss of community as a result of the largest housing redevelopment project in North America (Browne, 2019).

With consideration of reconstituted space, Kamau also shares his reflections on community-run sports programs and community potlucks in Jane and Finch, which he describes as opportunities to "hide from the city." His tactful language reinforces that Black communities "reimagine sanctuary," by actively redefining themselves outside the constraints of colonial parameters while simultaneously being on these land (Fakhrashrafi et al., 2019, p. 8). Kamau's statement demonstrates a particular form of rebellion, and in many ways speaks to Dionne Brand's assertion shared in Chapter 2: "Belonging does not interest me" (Brand, 2001, p. 85).

Instead, Kamau and other Black people in the city are much more invested in organizing and being a part of alternative spaces in which they can bring and be their full selves.

In other instances, Black artists seek refuge in unconventional spaces – Nalo shared that she resorts to her transit commute a place that offers a sense of grounding. As Nalo’s comments demonstrate, transit lines are repurposed into creative process for people from Black and marginalized communities, often in response to longer commutes due to residential segregation and spatial anti-Blackness (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 67). Filipino and Scarborough-rooted Adrian De Leon’s book of poetry is set across the Toronto Transit Commission subway and RT lines, wherein he makes sense of the structural conditions that enabled a mass shooting which occurred during a community block party on Danzig Street in 2012 (De Leon, 2018).

Black Presence and Culture

Attending to the histories of violence and erasure which facilitate the very foundation of structural anti-Blackness, provides critical means for attending to artistic and political resistance against historic and contemporary issues concerning Black people in the city. The review of literature explored mechanisms of exploitation vis a vis racial capitalism, state-sanctioned surveillance, living in the afterlife of slavery, histories of genocide in Canada and the usefulness of archiving our stories.

Jean, Jamila and Kamau each share their frustration with the ways that Blackness – i.e. Black aesthetic, Black cultures, Black languages - is made hypervisible, while Black life goes on disregarded. Their insights exemplify how Black people are expected to live under conditions that are “meant to be unlivable” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 22) unless and until Black people are required as labourers that serve broader economic or political purpose (King, 2016; Maynard, 2017).

While a variety of references were made, ‘Toronto slang’ stood in as a clear example of these mechanisms at play. The participants aren’t alone in their frustration – other Black writers and cultural workers have pushed back against a universalization of Toronto slang that fails to account for its predominantly Black diasporic roots which in turn, speaks to much broader challenges that coincide with Black aesthetic emplacement (Summers, 2019; Taylor, 2019).

Engaging with literature on Black radical thought has been generative, making evident the lineage of resistance across the Black diaspora. In particular, this theme connects to the question of how historic struggles connect to contemporary moments of resistance taken up within their geographic, diasporic, and sometimes institutional communities (in the case of campus organizing). The exploration of Black radical thought also serves as useful vantage point from which to consider integrative work between Black artists, Black organizers, and more generally, Black people in Toronto. Within the review of literature, histories of activism began with the Haitian Revolution, then made its way through to more local engagement with community newspapers, bridging education programs, Black bookstores, street festivals, Black organizing groups (BADC and BLM-TO, respectively).

Black Organizing and Activism

Participants’ mediations on activism touched upon lineage, frustration and anxieties, the hopefulness that comes with fighting Black futures. Nalo made reference to her parents being integral to her shaped understanding of activism – being raised in a household that ran an unofficial afterschool program by a father who was always willing to advocate for his children, demonstrates what it really means to show up for community. Nalo’s reflections on the moments during her childhood in which she was fearful of being judged by her parents’ radicality, made me think of the hopefulness that has come with the slight shift in attitudes

toward fighting for justice. Students, parents and caregivers in Toronto have illustrated their willingness to confront injustice in the classroom amid the resurgence of Black activism in the mid-to-late 2010s.

On the other hand, Kamau's contributions to the discussions have also illustrated the value in being attentive to the ways contemporary moments of radical organizing are informed by sacrifices made by previous generations of activists. It was interesting to have placed his commentary in conversation with Jamila's, who shared that she comes from a family who is keen on ensuring their children 'keep their heads down' rather than challenge injustice. Jamila described their worries as being rooted in their desire to keep their families safe after escaping war back home. Ultimately, learning about involvement with and anxieties toward activism through intergenerational exchange is central to honouring oral histories. These exchanges are foundational for building movements informed by collective knowledge accumulated over time.

Black Creative Practice

Black creative practice is a vital aspect of creating more livable futures for all Black people who are made vulnerable through structural inequities, which is what necessitated my engagement with the work of Black cultural workers and Black artists. Engaging with literary texts in conversation with the works of visual artists Janice Reid and Torkwase Dyson, musicians like Noname and contemporary Black artist (formal and informal) organizations, led toward a broader mediation on processes of healing through "critical fabulation" (Graham Foundation, 2018), or exercises of the imaginary. Richard Iton's theoretical engagement with Miriam Makeba, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin and so many other artists' work, were particularly useful to have read, in his research is reassuring after reflecting back on Nalo's noted frustration with the devaluation of creative practice organizing spaces. Iton he argues that

artists such as those who are mentioned above, each play a necessary role in radically educating society on Black liberation politics (2008).

While art is tied to Black radical praxis, it was helpful to have had Jean signal the dangers of thinking in absolutes through his critique of the movie *Harriet*. It should go without saying that content created by Black people doesn't make their content inherently progressive, or even meaningful for that matter. This idea of "rooting for everybody Black" (Variety, 2017) doesn't advance Black liberation as a politic. Rather, being beholden to representational politics runs the risk of platforming work that may serve to demobilize opportunities for progressive change (Iton, 2008).

Black Liberation and Prison Abolition

Finally, engaging with literature on political education and liberation is useful for defining the ways in which Black artists, Black organizers and Black people can generate clearer terms around the value systems that create better futurities within and around our communities. Challenging notions of upward class mobility as revolutionary, incessantly resisting unfreedoms, and practicing educational justice are each fundamental aspects of the literature and this study.

Jamila's analysis of the impact of community-led youth programs, which provide safety measures that are much more authentic and trustworthy than government-led initiatives, led me to think more critically about the hyper-attention on youth programming are organized to prevent them from "going down a bad road". In particular, extensive focus on youth programs made me think of the lack of attention or focus on programs for Black people who end up in adverse circumstances due to systemic anti-Blackness. In essence, those who *do* end up going

down the paths Jamila referenced, as well as those who are no longer youth. What supports are established for them? If there aren't already well-supported programs, then what ethical, community-led measures can be implemented to “build alternative forms of governance that are life-giving” (Kaba, 2018, p. xviii)? I am incredibly inspired by the participants' stories about alternative sites of care each research participant shared during our discussion, and am also interested in what safety, care and measures of protection can be offered to all Black people – which include formerly incarcerated people, sex workers, and any others who might be understood as undesirable.



Figure 3 (Minaya, 2017).

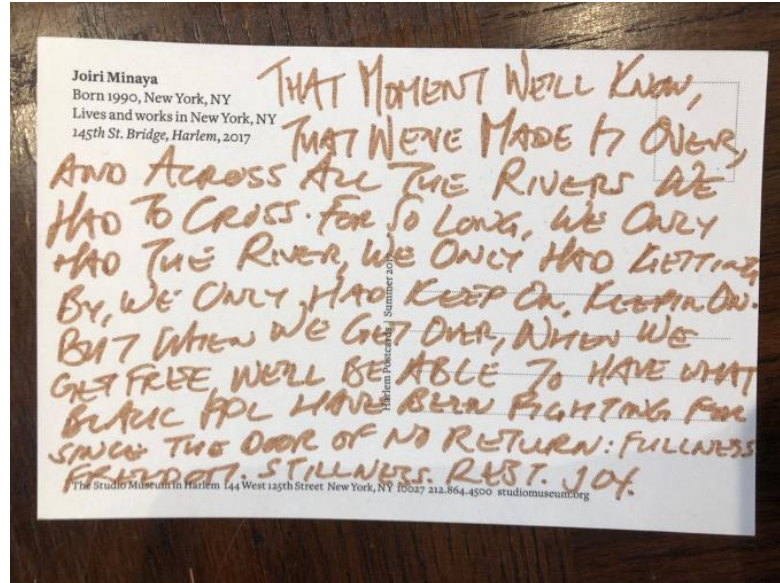


Figure 4: Writing by Kamau.

My own reflections on Jamila’s thoughts made me think of a happenstance amid the art-making exercise during our focus group meeting. Figure 3 is a photograph of a postcard image overlooking Harlem River, blocked by a fence with the following poem attached to it: “To the stranger/ who rasped his finger/ up the crook of my arm/ as I walked past him/ while crossing this bridge/ four years ago:/ You made it” (Minaya, 2017). Subsequently, Figure 4 is a photograph of prose written by Kamau when asked to create his own reflections on his ideas for Black futures in the city:

Kamau: *That moment we’ll know, that we’ve made it over, and across all the rivers we had to cross. For so long, we only had the river, we only had getting by, we only had keep on keeping on. But when we get over, when we get free, we’ll be able to have what Black people have been fighting for since the door of no return: Fullness. Freedom.*

Stillness. Rest. Joy.

When he initially walked us through his response, Kamau didn't express any direct deliberations on the notion that moving away from carceral feminisms - a form of feminism organized around the idea increased policing as a primary solution for gender-based violence - will bring us closer to Black liberation. However, having his written reflections on freedom and Joiri Minaya's poem on gender-based violence and restitution back-to-back, reinforce my own conviction that Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) abolition is a central component of moving toward a future in which we can all thrive. In an interview on prison abolition and environmental justice, Mariame Kaba reminds us that we must "interrupt the punishment mindset" and move toward more expansive understandings of safety, accountability, consequence and justice (Young, 2019).⁷

Conclusion

Black creative praxis – through organizing and art-making - is happening everywhere and all the time, both *within* and *beyond* the city. Black artists create work during transit commutes, in and for artist-run galleries, at political occupations, on campus grounds, in their homes and other community spaces, and take up creative expression independently and collaboratively. Black activists and community organizers also take up their work in a balance

⁷ In the wake of George Floyd, Tony McDade, Regis Korchinski-Paquet and so many other Black people being killed by the police, burgeoning calls for police abolition have been central to the resurging movement for Black life. Articles are being written (Kaba, 2020), panels of discussion are being organized (Haymark Books, 2020), studies guides are being developed (abolitionjournal, 2020), and radical demands are being put forth (Black Lives Matter Toronto, 2020) in effort to amplify and sustain the call for a future without policing or police.

expected and unexpected places in the city – meeting occur in coffee shops, family homes and shisha lounges and within their own particular diasporic and geographic communities, programming is facilitated in community basketball courts, soccer fields and classrooms, and protests are organized on campus grounds and in the streets.

My work engages with the Black radical tradition, mediating on Black organizing and Black artistry that have historically reflected and continue to actively reject celebratory myths of Canadian benevolence and Torontonians diversity. Rather than working toward a sense of belonging to a settler nation, the Black folks, Black artists and Black organizers I spoke with refuse the notion of belonging to a state founded on Black enslavement and Indigenous dispossession. Instead, they are using critical, cultural and communal practices to generate livable geographies rooted in care. Black people have always done this, in spite of attempts to erase Black histories of radical struggle, and experiences of pervasive violence toward and dislocation from historically Black neighbourhoods in Toronto.

Some of the challenges that come with experiences of Blackness in Toronto include erasure of Black radical organizing and Black cultural contributions, poorer health outcomes, fear of deportation among Black migrants, and intergenerational familial misunderstandings.

Like Black radical theorists and organizers Robin D.G. Kelly and Mariame Kaba demonstrate, moving toward more livable futures involves envisioning radical changes to the current order (Kelly, 2001; Young, 2019). Literature and discussions demonstrate that more sincere consideration for future generations should be made, rather than simply our own personal convenience. Black thinkers, Black artists and Black organizers have pointed toward a need to show up for one another in meaningful and radical ways. Some of the ways in which this radical work occurs, is through organizing protests that challenge injustice, establishing

online networks to forge local and international community, and creating alternative programming and cultural hubs within neighbourhoods.

Building on mixed methods to work through mediations on artistic political strategies being taken up to create more livable conditions for Black people in the city, it would be useful to revisit these ideas in a collective dedicating to further theorizing their implications and potential. For further research, Participatory Action Research may also generate a set of questions that more pointedly work toward tangible responses to Black community needs.

The impacts of surveillance on Black communities, critiques of neoliberal tokenisms and notions of ‘exceptional Black people’, and the potential of banner painting as a mediation on radical worlding are additional topics beyond the scope of this thesis that may serve as generative for future research. The first two topics resurfaced throughout the focus group meeting with research participants, while I posit the third as a useful focal point for furthering discussions on radical forms of expression. Banner painting is a common practice across activist organizing groups, often taken up in response to injustice and in preparation of rallies, protests, or other forms of direct action. As a practice, banner painting advances opportunities for communities to gather in mourning, in rage and in solidarity for particular causes, and directly paint the future they want to see. In many ways, banner painting serves as a healing agent and a tool for empowerment, encouraging community to reclaim any sense of power that may have felt lost prior to formulating any calls to action, and enact radical change.

The futures of Black Studies in Toronto and Canada are inherently interdisciplinary and responsive to the needs of Black diasporic communities. My thesis offers new insight and strategies for exploring liberation praxis.

After having researched Black lineage of resistance alongside contemporary practices of Black artists and organizers, I have no doubt that folks are responding to issues of gentrification, erasure, lack of social supports and other challenges in distinctive and dynamic ways. Black writers, Black thinkers, Black theorists, Black organizers, Black aunties, and Black artists have each taught me that the moment freedom, love, truth and care underscore your work, the possibilities for connective responses to injustice becomes limitless.

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