THE VISIBILITY PARADOX IN BLACK CANADIAN LGBTQ2S+ COMMUNITIES

Cicely Belle Blain is an award-winning activist, writer and diversity and inclusion consultant based in Vancouver, BC. They are a founder of Black Lives Matter Vancouver, for which they were listed as one of Vancouver's 50 most powerful people and 150 Black women and non-binary people making change across Canada. Since founding their consulting business in 2018, they have been listed as one of BC's 30 under 30 business leaders and a finalist for the Canadian LGBTQ Chamber of Commerce Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award. Cicely Belle is also an instructor in Executive Leadership at Simon Fraser University, a board member with PuSh International Performing Arts Festival and a Dialogue Associate with the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue.

INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

Black people make up around 3.5% of the Canadian population[1] and although slightly harder to count due to variations in census questions and identification, LGBTQ2s+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Two Spirit) people make up around 3.2% of the population.

Marginalized groups are often posited against one another; seen by mainstream culture as two entirely separate communities, furthering differing agendas. This binary presents a false and harmful narrative, particularly for those who belong to both.

Those who live at the intersection of these two marginalized identities – those who are both Black and LGBTQ2S+, experience the compounding effects of systemic and interpersonal racism, anti-Blackness, homophobia, and transphobia.

I am a Black, queer, non-binary femme living on unceded Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh lands (also known as Vancouver, BC). My identity is shaped not by being each of these things individually, but by being all of them, all of the time. It is necessary to me, therefore, that when we explore Black Canadian identity and inclusion, that we understand those who exist outside of the cisnormative, heteropatriarchal mainstream. It is necessary that we apply a framework of intersectionality to celebrating the Decade for People of African Descent.

Intersectionality, as coined by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, shows us how discrimination is overlapping and cannot be examined separately for people who exist in multiple marginalized identities[2]. For myself, as a Black, queer, non-binary person, Crenshaw's framing of intersectionality perfectly draws attention to the missing link in many attempts at inclusion, justice and liberation. Namely,

1 Statistics Canada, "Census Profile, 2016 Census Vancouver [Population Centre], British Columbia and British Columbia [Province]," August 9, 2019.

2 Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics" University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989.

those who inhabit multiple oppressed identities experience unique challenges that can only be accommodated by intersectional liberation movements.

BLACK VISIBILITY IN VANCOUVER

Vancouver has a population of around 2.2 million people, around 1% of whom identify as Black or of African descent[3]. Being Black in Vancouver is an experience defined by the unique combination of invisibility and hypervisibility. Many Black Vancouverites can relate to the experience of being the only Black person in the room, receiving stares from passers-by and being tokenized to speak on behalf of their whole community. This is hypervisibility – an overwhelming experience of constantly being noticed, observed, interrogated, stereotyped, approached (or purposefully avoided).

In contrast, when we zoom out to our local government, organizational leadership, school curriculum, local media, decision-making entities, public dialogue – Blackness is almost completely absent. This is invisibility: a systematic erasure of Black people, Black voices, Black culture, and Black contributions to the shaping of our everyday lives.

Both the invisibility and visibility perpetuate the idea that Blackness does not belong in Vancouver – or even in Canada. The Black community are either 'exotic' and inherently foreign or too small to be significant. This specific framing of the Black experience can be linked back to systematic and intentional efforts to erase Black people from cities like Vancouver.

In the early 1970s, the Georgia Viaduct, a bridge connecting East Vancouver to Downtown finished construction. This City-led project forcibly evicted Vancouver's only Black settlement, known as Hogan's Alley, where approximately 800 Black people lived[4]. This monumental event in Canadian history is not unique; city planning has often been used as a tool to destroy Black communities in Canada, the most notable being Nova Scotia's Africville.[5]

The destruction of Hogan's Alley and the forceful displacement of Vancouver's Black community still hangs over Vancouver and its treatment of Black folks. This prominent historical example of erasure and anti-Blackness laid the foundation for a narrative where Black communities cannot thrive in Canadian cities. Contemporary Vancouver is not shy to invisibilizing Black people.

In contrast, the media we consume across North America is saturated with Black imagery. I know from personal experience attempting to enjoy Vancouver nightlife that the average Vancouverite can identify and regularly consumes more elements of Black culture than of any other culture and perhaps even their own. Rap, hip-hop, twerking, cornrows, gold chains, Beyonce lyrics, reggae, 'on fleek', jazz, blues, gospel – all staple consumables to any North American.

Watts and Orbe describe this as "spectacular consumption [that] arises in part out of the desire for white folk to reconstitute their identities through acts of black consumption"[6] or more concisely put by Amandla Stenberg, "What would [North] America be like if we loved Black people as much as we love Black culture?".[7]

THE DANGER OF THE VISIBILITY PARADOX

In the LGBTQ2S+ community the complexity of visibility also exists. Queer visibility is often referred to as a "double edged sword"[8]; the desire to be seen, heard, represented and validated in the fullness of one's identity after years of silencing or being closeted runs up against the dangers of being a target when visible.

For many who identify as LGBTQ2s+, image is important. Presentation and aesthetic considerations are more than superficial decisions; for many they are signals of deeply personal identity markers and life-affirmations. Particularly those who identify as non-binary, transgender or genderfluid, gender expression and presentation are key elements to a fulfilling life. Many people change their hair, clothes, make-up, hormones and bodies to feel and be seen as more like the gender they identify as.

When we look at these experiences through an intersectional lens, we can see the manifold challenges presented to those who identify as Black and LGBTQ2S+ in Canada. Black

3 Statistics Canada, "Census Profile, 2016 Census Vancouver [Population Centre], British Columbia and British Columbia [Province]," August 9, 2019,

4 *10 Video Stories about Vancouver's Black Community.* Black Strathcona.

5 Richard, Mallory. *The Story of Africville*. Canadian Museum of Human Rights.

6 Watts, Eric King, and Mark Orbe. *The Spectacular Consumption of 'True' African American Culture: 'Whassup' with the Budweiser Guys?"*Critical Studies in Media Communication 19, no. 1 (2002).

7 Aguirre, Abby. "Amandla Stenberg Is a Voice for the Future." *Vogue*, May 26, 2017.

8 Tensley, Brandon. "The Double-Edged Sword of Queer Visibility." *Pacific Standard*, June 28, 2017.

Canadians are, in most towns and cities, already hypervisible meaning that Black LGBTQ2s+ people have this experience exacerbated.

This heightened visibility brings with it a greater risk of violence. Black transgender women, being among the most visible, experience some of the highest rates of violence in North America.[9] The freedom to live one's life in its truest sense is not afforded to people whose identities are hypervisible.

Canada is often seen as a leader in LGBTQ2s+ rights and inclusion but it is possible to argue that those freedoms are only afforded to white, cisgender gay men and not to those who experience multiple layers of oppression. Canada lacks significant data to tell us the experiences of this community, which further invisibilizes the struggle.

In 1969, Marsha P. Johnson, a Black transgender woman, threw the first brick at police officers as they violently raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City.[10] This was the birth of the modern-day Pride movement. In 2017, I lay on the hot concrete at an intersection in Vancouver's gay neighbourhood, protesting the involvement of police in Canadian Pride parades. I remember closing my eyes, dreaming of Marsha P. Johnson and thinking 'the struggle is not over until every member of the community is safe'.

9 Ignacio Torres, ABC News (ABC News Network, November 20, 2019).

10 Brockell, Gillian. "The Transgender Women at Stonewall Were Pushed out of the Gay Rights Movement. Now They Are Getting a Statue in New York." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, June 27, 2019.