6 BLACK QUEER YOUTH, UNSTABLE HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF FAMILY CONFLICT, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY-BASED VIOLENCE ON RACIALIZED LGBTQ2S YOUTH

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Introduction

LGBTQ2S youth face numerous challenges that make them particularly vulnerable to homelessness, such as:

- Alienation from families, school and peers. A national study of LGBT students in the United States found 61% and 38% felt unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation and gender presentation, respectively. Students experiencing victimization also exhibited more risky health behaviours, such as smoking, drug and alcohol use, unsafe sex, and suicide attempts (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014).
- Higher rates of physical, sexual and substance abuse from family members, as compared to heterosexual youth (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002).
- Psychological challenges and sexual risk-taking, with concordant health problems.

Research has also shown LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness experience higher rates of violence, HIV infection, substance abuse, suicide risk, and mental illness than heterosexual and cisgender youth experiencing homelessness (Cochran et al., 2002; Kruks, 1991). Additionally, anti-gay and anti-transgender stigma and internalized homophobia and transphobia can contribute to LGBTQ2S youth homelessness and exacerbate the risks queer and transgender youth face when experiencing homelessness (Cochran et al., 2002; Kruks, 1991).

Recently, while distributing a paper-and-pencil evaluation survey to participants in a drop-in program serving LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness in the Greater Toronto Area, I was struck by the seeming difference between White and non-White youth experiencing homelessness. For example, White youth discussed living on the streets of Toronto, while racialized youth I talked to never mentioned living on the streets. Some of the drop-in program staff I spoke with prior to distributing the survey wondered whether as many racialized LGBTQ2S youth as White youth experienced homelessness. This led me to think more deeply about the ways queer youth of colour[1] experience homelessness, and this chapter is the documentation of these thought processes.

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[1] Queer of color and queer youth of color are terms used primarily in the United States that describe LGBTQ2S people who are racialized or non-White. The Canadian spelling of 'colour' is used when these terms are used in a general sense in this chapter.

This chapter features the voices of gay, bisexual and transgender young Black men who are the subjects of much of my research and scholarly writing. Their stories offer important insights into the challenges facing LGBTQ2S youth who are unstably housed and experiencing homelessness, and the strengths and limitations of LGBTQ2S programs and services in meeting the needs of racialized youth. The first section of the chapter describes the conceptual framework I used to understand the lives of racialized LGBTQ2S youth: *queer of color analysis* (QOCA). The second section discusses academic literature on LGBTQ2S and racialized youth experiencing homelessness, which describes the prevalence of racialized youth experiencing homelessness and the general circumstances that lead to youth homelessness. The third section continues the discussion of academic research; however, it focuses on qualitative inquiry, including my study of the educational trajectories of young Black men, some of whom identify as gay, bisexual and/or transgender. This section contains important insights on the intersections of racial identity and homeless identity for racialized youth as compared with White youth. The concluding section discusses implications of research on the lives of racialized LGBTQ2S youth for LGBTQ2S youth community programs and services, and specifically on how these can better meet the needs of queer and trans youth of colour.

Queer of Color Analysis

A burgeoning body of work has attempted to disrupt the stigmatization of queers of colour by investigating their experiences of multiple forms of oppression and agency in responding to their marginalization across kindergarten to grade 12, and in postsecondary, alternative and community settings (Brockenbrough, 2013). This scholarship uses queer of colour epistemologies, such as ways of knowing that are rooted in queer of colour political struggles, cultural traditions and lived experiences, as lenses through which knowledge is produced in broadly defined education and youth studies (Brockenbrough, 2013). This scholarship also builds on scholarship that goes beyond education and youth studies, centring queer of colour epistemologies (Aguilar-San Juan, 1998; Decena, 2011, Ferguson, 2004; Gopinath, 2005; Manalansan, 2003; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Rodriguez, 2003). This body of scholarship is most often referred to as *queer of color critique* (QOCC).

The tensions between hegemony and resistance discussed in QOCC scholarship mirrors the relationship between intellectual work and lived experience in Indigenous studies (L. T. Smith, 1999), Black feminism (B. Smith, 1983), and other academic discourses grounded in the struggles of historically oppressed peoples. QOCC challenges dominant

scholarly and cultural narratives on power, identity and belonging by bringing queer of colour ontologies and epistemologies from the margins to the centre, and by making them the source and site of anti-oppressive knowledge production (Brockenbrough, 2013). QOCC names and puts into context the marginalization of queers of colour, and differentiates strategies of resistance to account for the shifting exigencies of the lives of queers of colour (McCready, 2013). This dual concern for the sociohistorical construction of queer of colour marginalization and the resistance strategies employed by queers of colour makes QOCC a compelling heuristic for investigating queer of colour encounters with and resistance to multiple systems of power in urban contexts (Brockenbrough, 2013; McCready, 2013). In this chapter, I use QOCC to put into context the academic literature on youth homelessness and the narratives of racialized LGBTQ2S youth who have experienced homelessness and housing instability.

Academic Literature on Racialized LGBTQ2S Youth

What do we know from Surveys?

Some surveys of youth experiencing homelessness in the United States and Canada contain large samples of racialized LGBTQ2S youth, and thus can be used to discern how their experiences may differ from those of White LGBTQ2S youth. For example, according to a Congressional Research Center survey of youth homelessness in the United States, 32% of youth experiencing homelessness identify as Black (more than double the proportion of Black youth in the total population), 51% identify as White, 2% are American Indian or Alaska Native, 2% are Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and 4% are multiracial (cited in Diaz, 2013). However, survey research about race and youth experiencing homelessness can also be confounding or contradictory. For example, some studies indicate that youth experiencing homelessness reflect the racial makeup of their surrounding area, while other studies indicate people of colour, regardless of the area, are disproportionately represented (Diaz, 2013).

One of the reasons survey analyses may offer confounding findings related to the numbers of racialized youth who experience homelessness is that racialized youth, in order to avoid further stigmatization at the intersection of racial and housing discrimination, may avoid either identifying as homeless or engaging in activities that are typically associated with homelessness (e.g., panhandling or holding a sign that identifies them as homeless). Shahera Hyatt, project director for the California Homeless Youth Project, explains that,

"One of the challenges that researchers have had, is that a lot of times, even if youth of color are identifying as homeless, they aren't presenting as homeless. That might be why the numbers aren't catching them. They're presenting like other young teenagers, but I think people are expecting traveler kid with a backpack and dreadlocks" (cited in Diaz, 2013). I explore the idea of racialized LGBTQ2S youth identifying as homeless and embodying that identity differently than White youth in the qualitative research section of this chapter.

Racialized LGBTQ2S youth face additional challenges related to racism and stigma in health, safety and human service systems. The California Homeless Youth Project surveyed 54 young people experiencing homelessness and found that 61% of Black youth were in the foster care system compared to 23% of White youth. Additionally, Black youth who participated in this survey reported experiencing homelessness because of poverty-related housing instability and inadequate social services, as compared to White youth, who more frequently reported independently leaving home because of family problems. This may partially explain why Black youth who reported experiencing homelessness were more likely to be involved in sex work and survival sex as a way to mitigate the effects of poverty, as compared to White youth (cited in Diaz, 2013). The findings from this survey also showed that it is common for racialized youth suspected of being sex workers to be approached by police when they have broken no laws.

What do we know from Ethnographies and Interviews?

Qualitative research offers further insights into the ways queer youth of colour experience homelessness as compared to White youth (Castellanos, 2015; Hickler & Auerswald, 2009). Hickler and Auerswald's (2009) work, in particular, offers intriguing findings that explain why some racialized LGBTQ2S youth may embody a homeless identity differently than White youth do. The authors conducted participant observation and ethnographic interviews with 54 youth primarily recruited from street venues in San Francisco. They found that most White youth reported sleeping outside, but the housing status of African American youth was different. Because they often moved from place to place, it was common for them to say they had stayed with their parents or other family on recent nights; however, on further questioning, it was determined that most did not have a consistent place to sleep.

Additionally, both African American and White youth emphasized the importance of 'hustling' or 'having a good game' to survive on the streets. Both Black and White youth sold drugs, particularly marijuana; however, there were differences in the youths' survival strategies. Street survival strategies employed by White youth consisted of a wider range of

strategies for making money, getting food, or acquiring drugs and alcohol. These included panhandling and asking for leftovers on a busy commercial street, accessing services available in the area, selling crafts, selling drugs, survival sex, 'boosting' (stealing), 'dumpster diving' (scavenging garbage containers for food or items to re-sell), and 'ground scoring' (finding change or other valuables on the streets). Strategies for dealing with a night without shelter included staying up all night, walking the streets (sometimes with the help of drugs), riding public transportation, napping at fast food restaurants, finding sexual partners who would provide them with shelter, and hustling enough cash to rent a room in a single-room occupancy (Hickler & Auerswald, 2009).

Another interesting difference Hickler and Auerswald (2009) found was how youth labelled their housing situation. Though White youth recognized that homelessness is stigmatized by society at large, they did not necessarily reject the label 'homeless.' In fact, many youth wore it as a badge of honour, even though they were not satisfied with their current housing situation. African American youth had a dramatically different set of priorities regarding self-presentation. Though they met the inclusion criteria for the study, they did not identify as homeless, seeing homelessness as shameful and something to be hidden at all costs. African American youth in the study not only rejected the homeless identity, they commonly asserted the importance of looking financially prosperous. Due to the stigma African American youth associated with the word 'homeless,' Hickler and Auerswald (2009) instructed their research assistants to remove it from the study's informed consent form and screening instruments. The term 'unstable housing,' was used instead, and seemed to resonate more positively with African American youth.

In my own study of the educational trajectories of young Black men in Toronto and Montreal, the young men I interviewed and with whom I conducted focus groups did not mention the word 'homeless,' but described several family and school incidents that served as precursors to their experiencing unstable housing. For example, Kat[2], a multigenerational Canadian who identified as a biracial and gay cisgender male, said:

> I actually ran away in grade 3 from my school. I just told my mom that we
> were having a naptime and whatever. I packed a blanket, a bunch of food
> because we were having a picnic also. And mom was like "oh, okay." She
> knew the school and they knew her, so it wasn't a problem, she'd just go with

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[2] I used pseudonyms for the young men I spoke with to protect their identities.

the flow. And I took one of my best friends, Ingus. He was going through some home family problems and he was the only person who could relate to my struggles, kind of, because he was having home problems. I was having the world problems. We were both getting picked on and so we ran away for, like, two and a half hours.

This quote suggests that as early as grade 3, Kat was thinking about leaving home because of the world of problems he was experiencing at home, and later at school:

Grade 9, I was, like, 'whatever.' I just didn't respond. People would push me, shove me. They'd try me in numerous ways. Even when I went to summer school, a group of 17 kids from the middle school, middle school while I was in high school, decided to try me. And I know they had bats because I got hit in the back of my left calf…

Most of the young men I interviewed experienced violence and marginalization in school, due to conflicts with teachers and peers over their racial identity or being gender-nonconforming, or both. Charles, a second-generation young transgender man of African and Caribbean descent, recounted how much he hated school:

I hated the other kids. I hated the fact that the teachers didn't care whether or not I learned. I hated being in special education. […]

I hated being at school. I hated being Black. I hated being me. I hated being African. I learned to hate my mother. I hated my dad. I just hated.

Later in the interview, Charles discussed how the marginalization he experienced in school and his parents' inability to intervene in the multiple prongs of violence he experienced as a racialized, gender-nonconforming young person led him to leave home and enter a prolonged period of unstable housing:

To a lot of people, when they see me, they probably think I have everything. But in reality, I'm probably in a deeper recession than most people are. It's just what, what keeps me every day is God and my faith and everything will work itself out somehow, some way. That's all I can go on. There are days when I don't know how I'm gonna eat, but that's not new to me. I've dealt with

*that before. I've been homeless, I've had no food, I've had nowhere to sleep.
I've slept in the streets, I've slept in bus shelters, stairwells, whatever. So that
doesn't really bother me. I'm used to walking around for hours delirious from
not eating because I haven't eaten in days and I have no money in my pocket
and nothing in my fridge. I'm used to that. I honestly don't even notice a lot
anymore because I'm just, like, I've been through it. It could be worse.*

Interestingly, just as Hickler and Auerswald (2009) witnessed in their study, Charles never
used the word 'homeless' to describe his experiences when he had nowhere to sleep and
slept on the streets. Hickler and Auerswald's (2009) findings and my own research raise
important questions about the ways queer youth of colour, who experience a particular
form of marginalization and discrimination at the intersection of race, class, gender and
sexual identity, make sense of, label and subsequently identify with the word 'homeless'.
If queer youth of colour experiencing homelessness are reluctant to label their experiences
as such, will they see themselves as the target of services for homeless youth? Though
rejecting a homeless identity may lead to being overlooked for services, can it also be
interpreted as a sign of resilience, a rejection of the objectification and negative self-image
that being a person experiencing homelessness can bring?

Another situation that emerged in my educational trajectories study that illustrates the
complicated ways queer youth of colour identify as homeless is when biological parents
who were born in another country decided to return 'back home' to their country of origin,
leaving the young men I spoke to with a difficult decision: return with their parents, stay
with relatives or other caregivers in the family, or live precariously, independent from
parents or caregivers. The parents' decision to undertake reverse migration was often
precipitated by family conflicts related to race, ethnicity and gender identity. For example,
Randall, a second-generation cisgender gay man of Caribbean descent, described the
moment when his mother tried to move the family to the US to give him another, more
pro-Black, heteronormative perspective on his identity:

*She [mother] found out that I was gay and she sort of like went crazy or
something, and she wanted to move to the States…and if one person moves,
everybody has to. (Laughs) That the way my family operates. (Laughs) […]
I decided to stay and tell Mom, "I'm not going to freakin' the States. I have
a job here at least, right. I've already left school. At least I have a job here,
I'm not going to the States to start all over." So, I stayed here. She was in*

*the States for like about eight months. I stayed here and I rented a room and
then stayed with my aunt. And she moved back, and then we all moved back
together and it was always the same thing, right.*

What I find both compelling and instructive, using QOCC as a heuristic for investigating
queer of colour encounters with and resistance to multiple systems of power in urban
contexts, are the ways Randall's narrative illustrate how queer youth of colour encounter
multiple forms of oppression in both school and family, and the ways these youth resist
such marginalization, which can lead to experiencing unstable housing. School-based
Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) may have difficulty addressing these complexities, in part
because teachers who serve as advisors to those groups view the needs of queer youth
of colour, stemming from the sociocultural contexts of their lives, as being beyond the
mechanisms of social support the groups regularly provide. Like Charles, Randall never
uses the word 'homeless' to describe his experiences of unstable housing while his
mother lived in the US. I speculate that Randall does not make sense of the situation
that led to his housing instability as being associated with common representations of
youth homelessness that revolve around living on the street. Both Charles' and Randall's
experiences raise important questions about the strengths and limitations of LGBTQ2S
community resources and spaces for youth experiencing homelessness, and how these are
addressing the immediate needs and future aspirations of racialized LGBTQ2S youth, who
may not label their experiences of housing instability as homelessness.

Conclusion

Academic literature on youth homelessness and QOCC narratives of gay and bisexual
young Black men in my study of educational trajectories suggest the ways racialized
LGBTQ2S youth describe the circumstances that lead to their homelessness, and the ways
they experience and label these circumstances are qualitatively different from how White
LGBTQ2S youth do. Access to supportive social networks through LGBTQ2S community
resources and spaces could help racialized LGBTQ2S youth form meaningful relationships
that could mediate or reduce the structural conditions leading to their housing vulnerability,
but can these organizations address the complex intersectionalities of their identities and
interactions with multiple health, human service and safety systems? For example, the
youth I interviewed for the educational trajectories study often faced the dual dilemma
of homophobia in their ethnic communities and racism in White gay communities. Many

describe demands from each community that they give primacy to one identity over the other. These factors contribute to their seeking supportive spaces that recognize the experience of living simultaneously as sexual and racial minorities. However, because young people experiencing homelessness have social identities that stigmatize them in dominant cultures, being young, urban, a member of a racial-ethnic minority, and poor, those who are racialized may continue to be stigmatized in LGBTQ2S community spaces.

Reck (2009) explored the difficulties LGBTQ2S youth of colour experiencing homelessness experience while navigating the Castro district in San Francisco, a global icon of LGBTQ2S rights and safety. In the Castro, LGBTQ2S youth of colour experiencing homelessness and youth who were unstably housed experienced acceptance of their sexual orientation and gender identity. But by virtue of being non-White, they experienced invisibility, police and community harassment, sexualization and commodification. Adult White men's dominance enabled them to be 'normal' and move freely within the Castro, while youth, trans people, and people of colour were shown they did not belong, a message affirmed by the lack of visible supports for their identities. Their experience of homelessness also placed them in a lower-status position than that of White gay men.

Overall, because LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness and unstable housing are not all the same, it seems that a one-size-fits-all model for services is doomed to fail. The narratives of racialized LGBTQ2S youth presented in this chapter show that these youth define their needs differently as compared to White LGBTQ2S youth. Service providers need to understand how youth view themselves, and the stigma associated with certain labels and practices, so that services can be devised in which youth recognize themselves as the target population. Some LGBTQ2S youth who are experiencing housing instability may reject the 'homeless' label, but still need services. In these situations, there may be additional opportunities for intervention to help change the life trajectories of racialized LGBTQ2S youth who are unstably housed, including more tailored approaches to interventions specific to the needs of distinct populations of youth experiencing homelessness.

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