

#BLM_TO

Alexandria Williams stops traffic at Pride.



PRIDE AND PROGRESS

Critics who have used our action at Pride to attack Black Lives Matter and who focus on our demand that police not participate in future parades, are overlooking the reality of anti-Black racism and the privilege and power granted police By JANAYA KHAN

ETHAN EISENBERG

I remember my first Pride. I was newly out as queer and eager to experience entire city blocks full of people like me. Church Street was resplendent, and the colours screamed of possibility.

I looked around, saw the tents with big bank and corporate logos, the groups of largely white people, and shrugged. I was with my friends, who were Black like me, and we had come to have a good time.

But then, about 20 minutes later, we were accosted by police on the fringe of the celebration. One of them wanted to know who we were and where we were going. He became increasingly aggressive but eventually left us alone.

This was not the first time a police officer had been hostile to me. Some of my earliest childhood memories were of traumatic experiences with violent police officers.

We attempted to ignore the incident, to continue to celebrate, but it hung like a shadow over us, so we left.

Ten years later, on Sunday, July 3, I found myself standing in the sun with the rest of my Black Lives Matter – Toronto team as part of the “honoured group” at Pride 2016.

We brought the Pride parade to a full stop with a list of demands (see sidebar) reflecting the needs of some of Toronto’s most marginalized LGBTQ2SIAA community members. These demands challenged the erasure of Black infrastructure and called for the removal of police floats from the Pride parade and community fair, among other things.

And we were successful.

A co-chair and the executive director of Pride Toronto signed our document, and although recent interviews make it seem like they are backtracking, we intend to hold them accountable. They have committed to a more inclusive Pride – an inclusivity connected to the very first Pride, known as Stonewall, the riot led by transwomen and queer people of colour

against police brutality in 1969 New York.

Canada, too, has a long history of homophobia and transphobia. From the 1950s to the 90s, LGBTQ2SIAA people in Canada were surveilled, violated and brutalized by police forces, resulting in raids and incarceration.

The Toronto Police Service recently issued a formal statement saying it “regretted” the 1981 bathhouse raids but has made no statement on the Pussy Palace raid in 2000 or the attacks on entire trans and sex-working communities through TAVIS as recently as last year.

Our action was in the tradition of resistance that is Pride. We didn’t halt progress; we made progress.

We achieved a commitment to our demands despite intense push-back from a primarily gay white male community. The same people did not want Black Lives Matter involved in Pride at all, even going so far as to create a group on Facebook called No BLM in Pride. Gender and sexual diversity, it seems, does not preclude racism or white privilege.

The majority of the leadership of Black Lives Matter – Toronto and Black Lives Matter internationally identifies as queer or trans. Pride has always been for the most marginalized, and has always been for us.

Since the action, I have received hate mail and death threats, primarily from gay-identifying men. I have been screamed at on the street. I have been called a “nigger” more times than I care to count. People have told me I’m no longer part of the queer community because my Blackness has no place there.

People who are not under the LGBTQ2SIAA umbrella have used our action as an excuse to attack us with racist vitriol. Their actions are revealing the racism that prompted our intervention at Pride in the first place.

We are not all on a level playing field fighting for the same equality. Any such claim is absurd.

Some mainstream media have provided a plat-

form for racist assertions and chosen to focus more on our demand that police not participate in future Pride parades than on the reality of anti-Black racism.

They are fostering a narrative wherein calling for an end to police floats in Pride is considered “discriminatory,” completely overlooking the reality of privilege and power granted to police. Black people are one of the fastest-growing prison populations in Canada, and racial profiling and death continue to be the outcomes all too often when police interact with Black communities.

Black Lives Matter – Toronto led every major event in Pride, from the Dyke March to the Trans March.

We paused for a moment of silence for the lives lost in Orlando in all three marches. Orlando continues to devastate me and remind me that I have a responsibility to disrupt a system that continues to brutalize the LGBTQ2SIAA communities that look like me. Part of that work is creating more inclusivity in spaces like Pride. An increased police presence at Pride in the wake of the Orlando tragedy does not make the most marginalized among us feel safe. It did not in 1969, and it does not today.

The LGBTQ2SIAA community knows that labels do not devalue us; they help define us. And yet something about the words “Black lives matter” is making many people deeply uncomfortable. All lives matter in principle, but not in practice.

Until those two line up, Black Lives Matter will continue to exist.

As the first Dyke March did 20 years ago, we are calling upon Pride to change and grow to reflect the communities it represents. Twenty years ago there was push-back and negative attention for women asserting their right to celebrate themselves in their entirety.

Will it be another 20 years before Toronto realizes Black lives matter at Pride? ©

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BLACK LIVES MATTER'S DEMANDS OF PRIDE

- ▶ Continued space, including stage and tents, funding and logistical support for Black Queer Youth.
- ▶ Self-determination for all community spaces at Pride, allowing community groups full control over hiring, content and structure of their stages.
- ▶ Full and adequate funding for community stages, including logistical, technical and personnel support.
- ▶ Doubling of funding for Blockorama to \$13,000.
- ▶ Reinstatement of the South Asian stage.
- ▶ Prioritizing of the hiring of Black transwomen, Indigenous people and others from vulnerable communities at Pride Toronto.
- ▶ More Black deaf and hearing sign language interpreters for the festival.
- ▶ Removal of police floats in the Pride marches and parades.
- ▶ A town hall organized in conjunction with groups from marginalized communities, including but not limited to Black Lives Matter – Toronto, Blackness Yes and Black Queer Youth, in six months, where Pride Toronto will present an update and action plan on BLM-TO’s demands.