

CAN WE BE PROUD OF PRIDE?

A DISCUSSION ON INTERSECTIONALITY IN CURRENT CANADIAN PRIDE EVENTS

Grace Berit Marshall

Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada

INTRODUCTION

Pride emerged as a radical demonstration of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) civil rights movement. Over the years, its purpose and form have evolved. While Pride is a necessary source of LGBTQ representation, it often fails to observe the intersectionality within its community, resulting in racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and homonormativity. This essay explores this lack of intersectionality, drawing on Nanaimo Pride as a source of discussion, with references to celebrations in Edmonton, Toronto, and New York. It concludes by offering suggestions for making Pride more inclusive.

BACKGROUND

The LGBTQ civil rights movement in North America is largely attributed to the Stonewall riots, which were protestations of police surveillance and criminalization of LGBTQ bodies. Gay civil rights movements, groups, and demonstrations increased in frequency throughout North America after the Stonewall riots of 1969, and in 1972, Canada held its first Pride celebration in Toronto. This was not representative of a more tolerant general population, but rather a more vocal LGBTQ community (Rau). The LGBTQ community continued to face legalized discrimination and persecution into the early 2000s. Police raids of lesbian and gay bathhouses were common, with the last major raid taking place in Toronto, 2000 (Rau). It took until July 20th, 2004, for same-gender marriage to be legalized across Canada. It is important to note here that these social changes are not trailblazing initiatives, but rather echos of previous equity on this landscape—before the colonization of

Canada, cis- and heteronormative policing was not the norm. For instance, many Indigenous Nations celebrated individuals with two-spirit identities, which have been described as Indigenous people “born with masculine and feminine spirits in one body” (Sheppard 262). Indigenous Nations had many ways of conceptualizing gender and sexuality that were different from European cultures (Sheppard 262).

In 2016, the first formal Pride parade in Nanaimo, British Columbia, was held. Thousands of people showed up to observe the parade, and dozens of floats and walking groups participated. This was a major surprise to those of us participating in the parade, as Nanaimo does not have a history of being a queer-friendly city. The current Nanaimo Pride Society President, a Nanaimo-local gay man, says he moved away from Nanaimo in his youth because of the repressive atmosphere (Stern). This is something a lot of LGBTQ people who lived in Nanaimo in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s have said: not only were they likely to get assaulted outside of Spike, the only gay bar in town, but the city council often had very bigoted people in very respected positions. An example of this was that “in 2000, half of Nanaimo City Council walked out of a council meeting after being asked to sign a Gay Pride Day Proclamation,” including the then-mayor Gary Korpan (Stern). The Pride Day Proclamation was consistently shut down, until the major pride association of the time threatened Korpan with a human rights complaint (Christopher).

Given this history, the 2016 Nanaimo Pride parade meant an immense amount to many people. It didn't spring up from the ground, but was the direct result of the hardworking members of the community who fought for years to make this event happen. Pride represented not only a moving on from a

bigoted past, but also solidarity in the face of tragedy. Early that morning, on June 12th, the largest mass shooting in American history occurred at a gay bar in Orlando, Florida, with 49 people killed and 53 people injured. The Pulse nightclub shooting was and continues to be the largest mass shooting in American history, being so bloody that “[o]ne out of every three people in the club [were] wounded or killed” (Santora). This horrific hate crime sent ripples throughout the LGBTQ community, and its effects were felt acutely as Pride month went on. In Nanaimo, the Pride flag flew at half-mast. I would, then, describe the 2016 Nanaimo Pride parade as nothing less than necessary.

INTERSECTIONALITY

To understand this paper, one must have an understanding of intersectionality. Intersectionality, as defined in Kimberle Crenshaw’s formative essay on the topic, “Traffic at the Crossroads: Multiple Oppressions,” is the “interactive effects of discrimination” (43). This is visualized in her essay as a traffic intersection, wherein the roads represent the institutions of power in the world, and people with power held over them are trying to navigate the intersection. Crenshaw specifically wrote this paper to illuminate the experiences of black women, and the ways in which their gender and race interacted. The intersections with more roads are busier and more complicated, making them more dangerous to navigate. Crenshaw extends this metaphor to illustrate that the cars moving through the intersection represent the daily, seemingly mindless, actions that reify these power imbalances. Finally, ambulances called to these busy intersections have a difficult time getting there, and may in fact be too late to help. A crash or accident, in this case, would refer to the person navigating the intersection becoming harmed in some way. This could be a singular, spectacular incidence—a physical assault, or an eviction—or it could be a subtle erosion of autonomy, mental health, or self-worth. These micro and macro aggressions create a complex situation for people suffering from layered oppressions, posing a challenge for the figurative ambulances.

To give an example of intersectionality, there could be a homeless young woman, who is also lesbian and First Nations. She would be experiencing discrimination from multiple fronts: those of her gender, her race, and her sexuality. Her age would place her at a disadvantage, as she wouldn’t have the full independence of an adult.

She might experience outreach from programs centred on homeless LGBTQ youth, but they might not recognize the effect of the colonization of First Nations people that could play into her situation. The same thing could be said if she gained asylum at a women’s shelter; they could understand why she, as a young woman, might be in a precarious situation, but not be able to understand how her lesbianism affects her situation. In this way, these “ambulances” are rendered less effective to those who experience multiple marginalized social categories. In general, “it is difficult to talk about how one of [...] many identifiers may contribute to one phenomenon,” as “[i]dentities are interlocking” (Pastrana 101). In the hypothetical situation above, the intervention methods are failing because they are treating this person’s identities as “separate experiences rather than a complex and dynamic relationship” in which teasing apart the influences of each can be difficult or impossible (Fox 633).

Pride is an ambulance, as it resulted from the need of a marginalized community to be seen and heard for one day a year, if nothing else. The Stonewall riots resulted directly from the fact that an intersectional LGBTQ community had been pushed to the boiling point, by criminalization and discrimination from every angle (Born). These riots helped the LGBTQ communities to gain momentum to push for further demonstrations (Born). When a legal or policy shift occurs, such as the decriminalization of sex between gay men, the acceptance of gay men and women into the military, the option for same-gender couples to adopt children, or the legalization of same-gender marriage, it is not the master choosing to throw a bone to a well-behaved dog. The bone must be taken whether the master wants it or not. It is only through the unwanted, yet continual, vocal push from marginalized communities that such changes are made. This is evident in my home community of Nanaimo, where the local government had to be petitioned and argued with—sometimes even threatened with legal action—for several years before a Pride day could be officially recognized. Change is not easily won. Pride, then, should be an event to recognize and celebrate the diversity within its community, and to acknowledge the members that are most vulnerable.

HOMONORMATIVITY

Pride parades and events in their current forms fail to do this. While Pride started out as a series of riots and demonstrations, in urban areas, it is now a government- and corporate-funded, highly attended event. By accepting this sponsorship, Pride has become an institution, and has fallen prey to replicating the systems of power it is meant to expose and oppose. It is, “[i]ronically, our efforts to challenge one form of oppression [that] often unintentionally contribute to other forms of oppression, and our efforts to embrace one form of difference exclude and silence others” (Fox 631). One way Pride does this is in celebrating “the ideal queer person.” This person can be found centred on Pride parade posters, as the MC of events, and on any advertising for year-round functions. This hypothetical person is a white, able-bodied, upper-middle class, cisgender, neurotypical, and young gay man. There is a reason this description has become the poster for Pride, and it is because it appeals to straight mentality. A person like this is similar enough to a straight person that they can forget the “otherness” of queerness. They can comfortably watch shows that have this person as the token, tropic gay character, and they don’t have any problem with this gay man coming to their barbecue. In this way, they can be an “ally” without ever having to engage with the harsh realities of queer existence, or the idea that queer people might actually be different than them. Pride tends to indulge this idea, placing straight people’s sensibilities above the actual needs of LGBTQ people. When “[w]hite gay male sexualities and desires are privileged and normalized,” a concept known as homonormativity emerges (Greensmith 133). Homonormativity “upholds and sustains [heteronormativity] while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” for non-LGBTQ audiences (Greensmith 133). This homogenization of queer culture is one of the ways in which a faulty institution of Pride is created.

RACISM

In addition to the solidification of homonormativity, Pride contradicts its own purpose of inclusivity through the mistreatment of racial minorities within the community. One way this manifests is in the presence of police at Pride.

Queer people have a fraught history with the institution of police—one that continues today. The relationship of racial minorities with police is similarly, if not more, fraught. In “How a Black Lives Matter Toronto Co-Founder Sees Canada,” Janaya Khan says of her first day at Pride: “Having been [at Pride] for about 20 minutes I had my very first interaction with police at Pride. I have a history with interaction with police that hasn’t gone very well for me” (Khan). As a black person who identifies as “queer and as gender non-conforming,” Khan’s encounters with police were “very aggressive,” with the officer “demanding ID and wanting information about where [they were] going” (Khan). So, police have a history of being violent and discriminatory against queer people, and the same thing against people of colour (POC). As the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement shows us, we are also currently experiencing an epidemic of police brutality against black people (Wortley 53). What does it say of Pride’s priorities that police have their own honoured place among the festivities, often getting their own float? It speaks both to white supremacy and to an erasure of history. There are lovely police officers, and there are queer police officers. But there is no need to attend Pride in uniform, placing oneself in a position of power over the others attending. Read generously, this is an attempt to mend the relationship between the LGBTQ community and the police force. In actuality, having police at Pride does more harm than good to the POC in attendance.

Not everyone agrees that police should not march in Pride parades, however. A news article covering the same issue of BLM Toronto staging a peaceful sit-in at the Toronto Pride parade—the subject of Khan’s aforementioned interview—says that “[a]fter being given honorary status, it was shameful of Black Lives Matters to disrupt the parade and for Pride for agreeing to its terms” (Jamieson). The author goes on to say that “[he is] proud to be a gay black man in Canada,” and that he believes that “BLM has absolutely nothing to do with the gay, lesbian, transgendered community” (Jamieson). This is a viewpoint lacking an intersectional lens. Black people are part of the LGBTQ community; the author himself is a black, gay man. If members of the LGBTQ community are facing extreme police brutality, for whatever reason, it should be a concern for the community at large. In a study focusing on the intersectionality of POC and their queer

identities, two separate participants admitted that their identities alienated them from both the LGBTQ community and their racial communities. One participant says that: “Working within my racial community is a hindrance, as a LGBTQ-identified person [...] there is no support there,” while another says, “[s]ometimes, in the [gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender] GLBT community, I feel being Black may work against me because there is so much racism” (Pastrana 99). Clearly, there is a need for more acceptance of intersectionality between the LGBTQ and racial minority communities.

Aside from lacking an intersectional analysis, Jamieson, the author of the critical news piece, also argues that Pride has been apolitical regarding non-LGBTQ issues, stating that “[h]istorically, Pride has distanced itself from political issues not pertaining to members of the LGBTQ community” (Jamieson). In this regard, Jamieson’s assertion is incorrect. Firstly, if someone is queer, then that makes the other aspects of their identity important to LGBTQ activism. To assert the opposite seems unnecessarily divisive. Secondly, some of the most important figures in LGBTQ civil rights history were people of colour who fought for the rights of coloured queer people, such as Marsha P. Johnson. Pride is not a hobby: it is explicitly political in nature.

ABLEISM

As well as failing to understand the intersection of race, sexual orientation, and gender identity, Pride fails its members who are disabled. This happens both at Pride, a once-a-year event, and in the general community events which happen year-round. An example of ableism in Pride was at the 2011 Edmonton pride parade. An article covering this topic says this: “Edmonton Pride’s official slogan this year is ‘STAND UP.’ Although dismayed by the ableist language, we were hoping, at the very least that this slogan signalled a move towards a more political Pride” (Peers). The slogan, in fact, asked readers to “STAND UP” and dance, or to “STAND UP” and barbecue—far from overtly political activities. This erasure of disabled bodies is not unusual in Edmonton, or Canada at large. In most queer campaigning there “is the noticeable lack of fat, gender-queer, wheeling, scootering, ageing, small-statured, cane-wielding, pre-pubescent and dog-guided members of our queer communities” (Peers). When summer rolls around, “the Edmonton Pride Festival society rents one of the most accessible

venues in Edmonton, and, through great expense and logistical prowess, manages to transform it into an almost entirely inaccessible space” (Peers). Most year-round events aren’t any better: being held at the top of stairs, neglecting to accommodate walking assistance devices, and remaining unsuitable for people with non-normative hearing or sight (Peers). Another obvious example of this is that Pride parades themselves reinforce the ableist assumption that participants can walk: freely, easily, and without pain. All of this is indicative of an atmosphere within queer communities that doesn’t include people with disabilities. Even if there is no explicit sign—like a staircase—disabled people often feel excluded from the community at large. As stated earlier in this essay, “the ideal queer person” is able-bodied, to better appeal to the non-LGBTQ Canadian audience. The LGBTQ community itself has absorbed this attitude.

SEXISM

While the face of Pride is not one of the disabled body, the same can be said of women. This fact finds its origins in misogyny, of which Pride is not exempt. This cultural maligning of women reveals itself in Pride celebrating men’s sexuality over women’s sexuality. Women’s sexuality is often a source of anxiety in our culture—it is dark, unknowable, and utterly other (Creed 1). If this is so for women’s heterosexuality, it can only be doubly so for lesbianism or other sapphic orientations. This anxiety often manifests as an outright denial of queer female sexualities (Lamble 81). In Canadian history, sexually active gay men were perceived as defiant and immoral, and so the act was criminalized. In contrast, sex between women was almost never directly, legally addressed (Rau). In Canadian history and in the present, “lesbians appear as disembodied, desexualized legal subjects” (Lamble 81). An example of this in the modern world is the fact that the age of consent for oral or vaginal intercourse is 16, while the age of consent for anal intercourse is 18 (Rau). Currently, men and women who engage in same-gender sex face different levels of criminalization. This clearly shows the different ways in which queer sexualities are discriminated against based on gender. Gender and sexuality are extremely close concepts in patriarchal Canadian culture, where a seemingly intrinsic part of being a woman is desiring men.

Therefore, lesbianism is an act of subverting female gender roles in patriarchal culture. Deeply rooted cultural anxiety over female sexuality in Canadian society, combined with patriarchal expectations for female desire, culminate in the fact that male sexuality, even when it entitles men's attraction to other men, is often more palatable in our society than non-heterosexual female sexuality. This purposeful invisibility of female queer sexuality is a sign of Pride's homonormativity.



CLASSISM

Having discussed race, gender, and ability, the final way I will discuss the shortcomings of Pride and the LGBTQ community is in relation to class. Pride should accommodate those that do not have the financial means to live a comfortable economic existence. Examining Pride through a class lens is particularly important because of the correlation between LGBTQ youth and homelessness—LGBTQ youth are more likely to be homeless than almost any other demographic (Kirkup). In Canada there are startlingly few studies done to survey the amount of homeless youth who are LGBTQ, but some researchers say that around 40-50% of homeless youth are LGBTQ (Kirkup). Another study finds that 1 in 5 Toronto homeless youths identified as LGBTQ (“Facts & States”). This is extremely disproportionate. According to Statistics Canada, only 1-1.7% of the Canadian population identifies as LGBTQ (“Same-sex couples”). These statistics would only reflect the amount of LGBTQ people who were “out.” Even so, the number of homeless LGBTQ youths far outpaces the relative size of the national community. Pride does not factor this into event planning most of the time. Pride parades can be expensive affairs: from surcharges for simple attendance, expensive food vendors and merchandise, and travelling fees. I have struggled with this myself. Before Nanaimo overcame the discrimination in the city council and general population to have its first Pride parade, the only nearby major Pride event was held in Vancouver. I would have to pay for the ferry, food, and accommodations. This was expensive enough that I was never able to attend, so my first Pride was the one held in Nanaimo. One of the biggest offences related to pay-to-play culture is the Stonewall Pride march, which has been described

as “a commercial extravaganza of huge proportions” (Clare). The 25th anniversary of the Stonewall riots struck many as “not so much as a celebration of a powerful and life-changing uprising of queer people, led by trans people of color, by drag queens and butch dykes, fed up with the cops, but as a middle- and upper-class urban party that opened its doors only to those who could afford it” (Clare). I’m sure it’s very fun for those who can afford to go. It seems unfair, however, to limit one’s engagement in queer culture based on monetary wealth, when LGBTQ youth, women, people of colour, and disabled people face significant financial barriers to participation.

HOW TO BE PROUD OF PRIDE

Having identified a number of barriers to truly inclusive Pride events, I now turn to how we might make them more welcoming to everyone in the LGBTQ community. While making Canadian Pride completely inclusive of all its members would require making the wider Canadian culture free of prejudice, this is an undertaking too large for the scope of this essay. Instead, I will focus on more achievable goals. When it comes to racism in Pride, excluding police and honouring groups such as BLM is a straightforward step. It is also important to actually listen to marginalized groups when they say something is not right, or if they have suggestions for improvements to Pride: they know more about what they need than people who do not share their lived experiences.

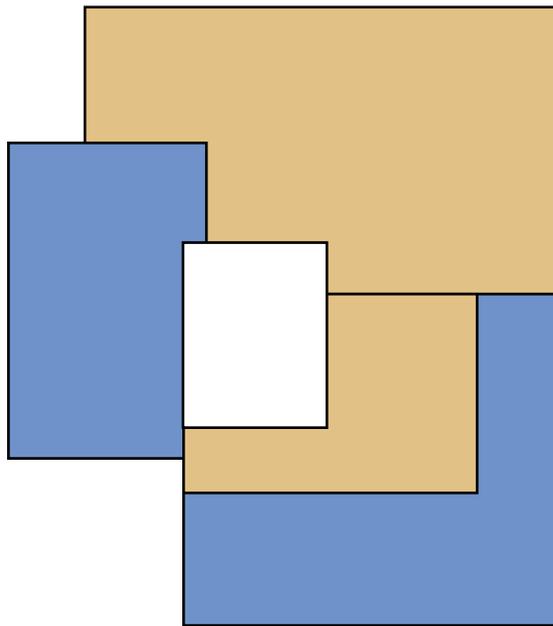
A way to combat ableism in Pride is to be aware of whether the venues one attends are disability-friendly or not. If they aren’t, bring attention to this fact and make a fuss about it, or join the organizing committee and make sure future venues are accessible. The only way for change to happen is to push for it. Again, listening to disabled LGBTQ communities is the best way to know how to move forward.

Misogyny can be incredibly insidious. When it comes to queer women, increased visibility would go a long way towards combating the combined effects of sexism and heterosexism. I would love to see more women’s events in my own community, and a greater platform for women’s groups at Pride. A shift of this kind would help Pride to be more inclusive of the queer women who attend.

As for classism, one shouldn’t need to be rich

to go to Pride. Surcharges for events such as Stonewall 25 should be done-away with. While I can see the need for some venues to charge for attendance if they do not otherwise have enough funds to continue offering them, a pay-as-much-as-you-can system would be incredibly beneficial. When it comes to Pride, a greater platform should be given to the homelessness epidemic the youth of the LGBTQ communities are facing. As well, more small towns and cities should have Pride events, so that people don't feel pressured to travel simply to engage in their own culture.

Pride has the potential to be an amazing source of affirmation in your own identity and community, as well as a platform for activism. However, aspects of racism, ableism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, as well as homonormativity have gained a foothold in the festivities. It is by continuing the dialogue of intersectionality within LGBTQ communities and allowing marginalized identities to have voice in these proceedings that prejudice within LGBTQ communities and the events of Pride can be combated. Only then, can we be proud of Pride.



WORKS CITED

Born, Tyler. "Marsha 'Pay it no Mind' Johnson." *Challenging Gender Boundaries: A Trans Biography Project*, Out History, outhistory.org/exhibits/show/tgi-bi-ros/marsha-p-johnson. Accessed 29 Oct. 2016.

Christopher, Nathaniel. "Nanaimo mayor won't proclaim Pride." *Xtra*, 20 Jun. 2007, www.dailyxtra.com/nanaimo-mayor-wont-proclaim-pride-18733. Accessed 27 Jun. 2017.

Clare, Eli. "Losing home." *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*. New York, 2015, pp. 31-49.

Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 15 Nov. 1993, p. 1.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Traffic at the Crossroads: Multiple Oppressions." *Sisterhood is Forever: the Women's Anthology for a New Millennium*, Toronto: Washington Square Press, editor Robin Morgan, 2003, p. 43.

"Facts & States." *Covenant House Toronto*, www.covenanthousetoronto.ca/homeless-youth/Facts-andStats. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016.

Fox, Catherine O., and Tracy E. Ore. "(Un) Covering Normalized Gender and Race Subjectivities in LGBT 'Safe Spaces.'" *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2010. pp. 631-633, www.jstor.org/stable/27919125. Accessed 6 Nov. 2016.

Greensmith, Cameron, and Sulaimon Giwa. "Challenging settler colonialism in contemporary queer politics: Settler homonationalism, pride toronto, and two-spirit subjectivities." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2013, p. 133, doi:10.17953/aicr.37.2.p4q2r84l12735117. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016.

Jamieson, Mark. "Shame on Pride and Black Lives Matter." *The Star*, 11 Jul. 2016, www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2016/07/11/shame-on-pride-and-black-lives-matter.html. Accessed 5 Nov. 2016.

- Khan, Janaya. "How a Black Lives Matter Toronto co-founder sees Canada." *Macleans*, interview by Zane Schwartz, 8 Jul. 2016, www.macleans.ca/news/canada/how-black-lives-matter-co-founder-janaya-khan-sees-canada/. Accessed 30 Oct. 2016.
- Kirkup, Kristy. "Half of homeless Ottawa youth identify as LGBTQ." *CBC*, 9 Sept. 2013, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/half-of-homeless-ottawa-youth-identify-as-lgbtq-1.1699604. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016.
- Lamble, Sarah. "Unknowable Bodies, Unthinkable Sexualities: Lesbian and Transgender Legal Invisibility in the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Raid." *Queerly Canadian*, edited by Maureen FitzGerald and Scott Rayter, Canadian Scholars Press Inc., Toronto, p. 81.
- Pastrana, Antonio J. "Trump(et)ing Identities: Racial Capital and Lesbian and Gay Organizing." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Jun. 2010, pp. 99-101, doi:10.1007/s13178-010-0013-2. Accessed 6 Nov. 2016.
- Peers, Danielle, and Lindsay Eales. "'Stand Up' for Exclusion?: Queer Pride, ableism and inequality." *Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7 Jul. 2011, www.ideas-idees.ca/blog/stand-up-for-exclusion-queer-pride-ableism-and-inequality. Accessed 5 Nov. 2016.
- Rau, Krinsha. "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights in Canada." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 16 Jun. 2014, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-rights-in-canada/. Accessed 29 Oct. 2016.
- "Same-sex couples and sexual orientation... by the numbers." *Statistics Canada*, www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/dai/smr08/2015/smr08_203_2015. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016.
- Santora, Marc. "Last Call at Pulse Nightclub, and Then Shots Rang Out." *The New York Times*, 12 Jun. 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/06/13/us/last-call-at-orlando-club-and-then-the-shots-rang-out.html?_r=0. Accessed 10 Nov. 2016.
- Sheppard, Maia, and J. B. Mayo, Jr. "The Social Construction of Gender and Sexuality: Learning from Two Spirit Traditions." *The Social Studies*, vol. 104, no. 6, 2013, p. 262. doi:10.1080/00377996.2013.788472
- Stern, Rachel. "Nanaimo Pride Society promotes inclusive community." *Nanaimo News Bulletin*, 12 May. 2016, www.nanaimobulletin.com/entertainment/379200571.html. Accessed 30 Oct 2016.
- "Stonewall Riots: The Beginning of the LGBT Movement." *The Leadership Conference*, 22 Jun. 2009, www.civilrights.org/archives/2009/06/449-stonewall.html *referrer=https://www.google.ca/*. Accessed 29 Oct. 2016.
- Wortley, Scot. "Police Use of Force in Ontario: An Examination of Data from the Special Investigations Unit." *Ipperwash Inquiry*, www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/inquiries/ipperwash/policy_part/projects/pdf/AfricanCanadianClinicIpperwashProject_SIU-StudybyScotWortley.pdf. Accessed 24 Jun. 2017.