Out of Many One People: Telling the Stories of Jamaican Gay Men and their Move to Canada

by

Warren Brown ©2012

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We accept the thesis as conforming to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

In Jamaica, sexual acts between men are still punishable by law. Numerous incidents of violence against gay men and lesbians have prompted human rights groups to distinguish it as one of the most homophobic places on earth. There are many cases of gay Jamaican men seeking resettlement and refuge in Canada. While any transition to a new country and culture can be challenging for immigrants, there is limited research that speaks to the experiences of the gay Jamaican men. This paper is based on stories gathered from four gay Jamaican men who came to Canada as refugees and highlights issues of acculturation related to connection with Canadian culture, letting go of the home culture, challenges in support systems and the inability to feel comfortable, confident and settled in the new Canadian environment. The project resulted in a compilation of visual stories and audio clips that were placed on a website (http://queeryingjamaica.tumblr.com/). Using the tools available through social media, the stories provide a source of representation.

Keywords: narrative, storytelling, LGBT, acculturation, immigration, refugees

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To Wendy and my dear parents, thank you for always believing in me. You *never* turned away.

To the Joes, you showed me *a way to be*.

To my extended family and friends that include me in their lives, thank you. I am very grateful.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Growing up in Jamaica, I never developed a connection with the popular social activities and spaces that my friends would revel in, mostly due to fear and discomfort when I was inside them. I was terrified that I would be called a "batty bwoy[1]" and be beaten mercilessly by an angry mob that would simply be doing what they were told to do by the more popular dance hall anthems that were constantly being blasted out at them. Bullying towards me started at St. Georges College, the all boys' high school that I attended. The perpetrators warned me that I shouldn't be seen at any parties, especially our legendary barbeque event. After attending the first barbeque event at age 12 (an annual tradition), I never returned out of fear.

Jamaica's national motto "Out of Many One People" is used to denote the nation's multi-ethnic roots. It gives the impression that the tiny island nation offers a very inclusive cultural environment although dispassionate observers have referred to the motto as "a conscious exercise in self-delusion" (Palmer, 1989, p. 111). On the island, sexual acts between men are still punishable by law and "its rampant violence against gays and lesbians has prompted human-rights groups to confer [the] ugly distinction: the most homophobic place on earth" (Padgett, 2006, para. 2). Many gay Jamaican men seek resettlement and refuge in Canada.

Relocation to Toronto

In 2001 I moved to Toronto. I applied under the skilled labourer program and went through the application exercise with the Canadian High Commission. Canada was seen as an opportunity to get off the rock[2] and gain exposure and experience in the first world, a decision that my parents supported. I was excited because I saw an opportunity to get away from the stigma that I experienced and explore social spaces that I felt comfortable in, such as the coffee shops of

[1] A derogatory term used in Jamaica to refer to homosexual men.
[2] A casual term to refer to the island of Jamaica.

Toronto's Downtown Core. There was much that I took for granted. At the time I knew I was "different" but never named myself as gay because I had no concept of how that could be. I had seen gay characters through satellite television but had never encountered ones that reflected how I saw myself or that of my cultural context. There was nothing that spoke to my experience as a Jamaican man socialized in the extremes of a homophobic environment.

Seeking Representation

In my year of moving to Toronto (2001), Canadians of Jamaican origin made up 1% of Canada's population with the majority residing in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2007, para. 1). Despite such a large presence, there is limited research that speaks to the experiences of gay Jamaican men residing in Canada. According to Wahab and Plaza (2009), gay Caribbean men are one of the most invisible and neglected areas in literature relating to mainstream migration as their presence is often regarded as a taboo topic to research (p. 1). Within a few years of moving to Toronto, I came out. As a gay man, I would eventually discover the opportunities that were available to me in terms of gay rights, safe and celebrated gay social spaces but I still faced difficulty in navigating and embracing a side of my person that I dared not consider while in my Caribbean 'closet'. I often wonder if I had seen images or learned of people like me sharing their stories, what would my life have looked like? Would I have come out sooner? Would it have been easier? Perhaps I would have come out to my family in Jamaica and not even have left. Ironically, after coming out, and realizing that I would likely make Canada my new country, it took time for me to understand that I was the 'other' in my chosen society. In Jamaica, I took for granted the upper middle class privileges that I enjoyed in Jamaica which I assumed would translate with my migration. But, traits such as my skin tone, accent and degree from the University of the West Indies announced my presence before I could. In many ways, this feeling has guided me to a graduate program in intercultural and international communication.

In conducting this research project, I'm driven by my interests to understand and enhance the acculturation experience for members of this group as well as reconcile my own journey. My primary research question asks, "What can we learn from the lived experience of gay Jamaican men about the process of adapting to life in Canada?"

Potential Audiences

Audiences such as settlement organizations will benefit from understanding more about the experiences that gay men from the Caribbean encounter in the acculturation to Canadian culture along with the identity challenges associated with the marginalizing forces of homophobia and racism of their home culture. O'Neill (2010) posits "LGB newcomers may not feel safe seeking help with [their sexuality] because previous experiences in their homelands have left them reluctant to [reveal such information]" (p. 28). Recent contributions from Crichlow (2004), Walcott (2006), Wahab and Plaza (2009), on the immigrant experience of gay Caribbean males to Canada provide encouragement and validation for exploring the topic. In their study looking at the mental health of immigrants and refugees, Pumariega, Rothe and Pumariega (2005) note that "the process of cultural transition is being recognized to be as much a psychological process as a sociological one, with significant implications for the mental health of immigrants" (p. 584).

Recently, when introducing my topic to a group of colleagues, one familiar with my orientation and background commented sarcastically that I clearly was doing "easy research." His feeling was that I should know the information since after all, as he sees me, I'm *just* a *black gay man* (personal communication, December 2012). Comments and perceptions such as his are exactly why this research needs to be undertaken and presented in a manner that has exposure and meaning. It is quite apparent that my research interest relates to my need to understand more about my own experience, a motivation that is shared by many researchers. As Ryan (2006) points out, researchers

work outwards from their own biographies. An autoethnographic approach will be used to reflect on my own experience and highlight my subjectivity in light of the stories of the participants.

It is my intention that findings from this study will improve understandings of identity negotiation and acculturation experiences for this and other cultural groups as well as inform and enhance the communication and cultural competence framework for other audiences such as settlement organizations both at the interpersonal and policy level. Through the documentation process and compilation of data into visual stories, the work will offer images and narratives that have the power to enhance the transitioning process of gay immigrants.

Providing Representation through Storytelling

In a study looking at the portrayals of gay and lesbian characters on prime time television, Raley and Lucas (2006) state that "minority social groups such as Blacks and other ethnic and racial minorities as well as gay males, lesbians, and bisexuals are…negatively affected by the absence of recognition and respect on TV" (p. 21). Reinforcing this is a recent conversation with an African refugee now living in Canada who is in the process of coming out as a gay man. He states that "there just aren't images of me out there and because of this, I don't feel that my family would know that gay [men of colour] exist and that it's okay and accepted here" (personal communication, February 2011). I'm hoping that these stories will offer representation for this group so that they can learn from each other while providing awareness to those who are unfamiliar or ignorant of the gay Jamaican man or for that matter any sexual minority group of colour.

Within a continually evolving technology environment, storytelling remains one of the oldest and most powerful forms of communication. For the presentation of the findings, visual storytelling is utilized to supplement the written research. Visual storytelling is an emerging and innovative communications technique where short media clips are produced through the combination of still images, video, and spoken narrative. This project blends the art of visual storytelling with social

media, an emerging resource of communication that is rapidly becoming an effective tool for social change.

Social media are works of user-created video, audio, text or multimedia that are published and shared in a web based or mobile environment. Social media is part of a significant shift occurring with both the production and distribution of media content available today:

> Media, particularly the Internet, may now be serving as the primary information source for [LGBT] adolescents…[and] as adolescents navigate their sexuality online, they are in control of what they want to read, who they want to speak with, and how much personal information they wish to disclose (Bond, Hefner, & Drogos,2009, p. 34).

For example, the *It Gets Better Project* is a social media campaign focused on LGBT youth that has resulted in over 10,000 user created videos and 35,000,000 views (It Gets Better Project, 2011, para. 5). Bloustein (2003) discusses the use of visuals in research and encourages the use of media in the process, "photographs and film, of course, have long played a central role in contemporary life, becoming significant cultural symbols that epitomize particular ways in which real life experiences are framed, interpreted and represented" (p. 2).

Cultural Identity and Acculturation

I've framed this study in theory and research on cultural identity and acculturation to assist in understanding the adjustment process of immigrant/ethnic groups and the questions to be explored around this process. Acculturation potentially involves changes in both values and behaviors and it is an important consideration when looking at changes of values and behaviours related to identity (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Rodriguez & Wang, 2007). Scholarship on identity examines how one negotiates identities in intercultural interactions (Gudykunst, 2002, p. 191). Cultural identity is "the sense of self derived from formal or informal membership in groups that impart knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions, and ways of life" (Jameson, 2007, p. 200). According to Stuart Hall (2006), cultural identity is a matter of *becoming* as well as *being*. There are many traits that affect and

influence gay Caribbean men such as ethnic association, cultural and family beliefs, social stigmas, class, exposure and religion. In discussing the process regarding his identity management and coming out, singer Ricky Martin says "I am a minority twice…I am Hispanic and I am a gay man, and they both struggle" (Hicklin, Dec 2010, p. 86). In research on the lived experiences of *métisse* women in Britain, Ifekwunigwe (1997) reinforces that "experiences of multiple identities…demand new paradigms for looking at citizenship and belonging" (p. 126).

Acculturation is the process that an individual or group undergoes in order to modify itself to a new, dominant culture, ranging from rejection to full assimilation (Gbadomosi, 2012). In an ethnic context, acculturation refers to how immigrants deal with the division between the dominant culture they have to live in and their heritage culture, the latter being a minority culture within the dominant society (Cox, Vanden Berghe, Dewaele & Vincke, 2009). John Berry proposed a model that highlights four strategies of acculturation; these are assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization (Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008, p. 276). Berry (1997) positions his strategies in the following manner:

> From the point of view non-dominant groups, when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures, the *Assimilation* strategy is defined. [W]hen individuals place a value on holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with other, then *Separation* is defined. When there is an interest in both maintaining one's original culture, while in daily interactions with other groups, *Integration* is the option[.] [W]hen there is little possibility or interest in cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss), and little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination) then [*Marginalization*] is defined (p. 9).

THE PARTICIPANTS

At the onset of the project, my intention was to document the journey and experiences of at least ten Jamaican males residing in Canada who identified as gay. As the participant search began, it became quite apparent that recruiting would be no easy feat. Feedback from support organizations and specific individuals indicated that I would be hard pressed to find people from this cultural

context who would be willing to identify as gay much less speak on camera. In the end, the most effective channel was word of mouth through personal connections.

There were other challenges that I wasn't prepared for. It never occurred to me that I could be a hindrance to having people *want* to participate. While on a tour of the Black Coalition for Aids Prevention (BlackCap) in Toronto I was introduced to someone who was identified as a prime candidate for the study. During the introduction there was apparent discomfort towards me, a standoffishness that brought me right back to encounters that I'd had at home in Jamaica, usually in a situation where there was an expressed difference in class and trust. As I negotiated the conversation with this individual, I sensed defensiveness that became more apparent when he essentially asked me what right I had in wanting to tell such stories. Could I be trusted? In coming out to him in that moment as both Jamaican and gay, I realized that he didn't see me this way. To him I was an outsider. I had no knowledge of negotiating the underground world of gay black Canada. And despite us both being trapped in Toronto on a dark and dreary winter day, had we been in Jamaica, it is not likely that we would have interacted on the same social plane. He warned me that, "I better prepare myself for the stories that will come out as I have no idea what trauma has been faced" (personal communication, January 2012). He was right. For in all honesty, my experience was far different from his, at least on the surface. My assumption is that while I might have survived in Jamaica through the camouflage of socio-economic privilege, he might not have. In this encounter, I felt I was seen as an exploiter attempting to earn a degree. Despite agreeing to participate in the study, he never responded.

I originally hoped to work with ten participants; the four listed below became the final count.

- Andrew - the first to respond and be interviewed. I'd met Andrew a few years ago after he had moved to Toronto. Andrew is in his late twenties.

- Tony - contacted me after seeing the call for participants on a list service of a Rainbow support organization. His call came at the point that I was ready to give up on the project for lack of participants. Not only was there a willing participant, but he was adamant about being on video. Tony is in his early fifties.
- Omar –was a connection made through his work with a popular support organization in the Toronto LGBT community. Omar is in his early forties.
- Frantz – a late referral from a colleague with a non-profit organization and the last to be interviewed. Refreshingly Frantz had participated in a Canadian documentary on the refugee process and was not scared of further exposure. Frantz is in his late thirties.

The first names for Andrew and Omar have been changed as they declined to appear on video. The first names for Frantz and Tony are the ones used in their public life. No surnames are have been included due to the public nature of this information. All participants signed a research consent form agreeing to the use of their stories in the project.

The Interview Process

I met with Omar, Andrew and Tony individually and on different days a in a community workspace that allowed me to book a meeting room providing privacy for the interview and convenience of transit to the participant. I also felt that using a space such as this would allow me to appear more *official* and responsible. Due to schedules and convenience, I travelled to the home of Frantz for the interview. More than anything, it was important that the encounters be in a situation of comfort and trust. While I had a list of questions to go through, it was easier to remain open and allow the conversation to flow, often allowing responses to drive follow-up questions. Quite often I found that the conversation and stories coming out addressed the interview schedule and provided many avenues for exploration in learning about their personal narratives. Given the focus of the

study, the questions included: What did you encounter in your journey of coming out? Do you have to suppress your identity depending on situation? What would have aided (or aid) your adaptation to your current society? What do you need to see represented?

All interviews were recorded through an audio device, while two of the participants, Frantz and Tony, agreed to be on camera. Despite requests, none of the participants were willing to provide visuals to support their story. Just as significant as the uses of various types of media (still, video, etc.) are in the research process, such tools are also great for the presentation of the findings as they, "[media] represent an under utilized resource in the construction of personal narratives" (Ryan, 2006, p. 158).

THE STORIES

Andrew

Background

Andrew was an acquaintance that I'd met just after he moved here from Jamaica. We were introduced through his former partner, who still resides in Jamaica. Initially, I approached Andrew to assist with the participant search and as I became more aware of his story, I sheepishly asked him to participate. I refer to my invitation as sheepish as it occurred to me that for all the time that Andrew lived here and during his transition process, I *never* actively attempted to assist him. At no point did I introduce him to friends, offer to hang out or inquire as to how things were going. Although, I could use the excuse that communication is two-way, such an argument holds no water in this situation. I didn't exude the warmth and friendliness that a person needs at a point when they are trying to find their spot in a new space. I can only assume that "unfriendliness" would have shut down the idea that I'd be an ally.

How Could She Not Know?

Andrew, who is 28 years old moved to Toronto after growing up in the parish of St. Catherine with his grandparents. He describes his childhood as "mostly okay" despite being teased a bit for being perceived as gay. He first came out to his sister who he says, "already suspected and was accepting." When asked if his mother knows, he quickly summarizes that he lived with his boyfriend for five years and his mother would visit and at times would even bring them meals. From this he assumes that she knows, "how could she not know? Is she headless?"

High school for Andrew was the most difficult time that he can think of thus far. It is here that he felt he had to "hide" much of his personality with the added pressure of conforming. In line with adolescence and sexual development, high school for all participants, including myself, was certainly the most challenging period of dealing with the awareness of sexuality and sexual orientation – both from others and one's self. One of the challenges was not seeing any positive images of gay people. Andrew remembers "that one guy who died [Brian Williamson[3]] in 2004…and didn't know anyone else at the time." He only started meeting people after high school primarily through online channels, a benefit that he would have access to since the early 2000s.

Freeing to Be Himself

His decision to leave came in 2006 as he "thought it would be better to live in a country where you don't have to be afraid of being gay…or scared of people teasing you." He notes that such laws are not available to homosexuals in Jamaica. Initially, he didn't even realize there was a refugee process and did much of the groundwork on his own, starting the process in July 2008 and landing in Toronto in December of that same year. Apart from the shock of the cold air, he recalls a feeling of happiness and safety upon arrival, later declaring to his friends that he'd "never come back

[3] Brian Williamson was a Jamaican gay rights activist who was violently murdered in Jamaican 2004. He co-founded the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians and Gays (J-Flag).

to Jamaica" as it is very freeing to "be himself." In discussing the trade-offs of leaving Jamaica, Andrew acknowledges the benefits of living in a first world country such as, the social system, access to health care and reiterates the benefit of being able to be himself and not hiding aspects of his life. He describes this as having a "problem that's finally resolved" and knowing that it will never have to be dealt with again.

As Andrew had visited North America on previous occasions, he notes that adjusting wasn't a total shock in terms of simple items like food and clothing. However, he does note that there are a few things that he has resigned to living with. He first mentions having to take public transit as opposed to driving, which he'd enjoyed at home. With regards to the weather, Andrew remembers standing at the airport in a temperature of -15 degrees Celsius wondering what the "hell was I doing." After a year, he realized, if he was going to stay, he had better get used to it, jokingly saying that now he finds Canadians complain more about the weather than he does. Apart from the weather, Andrew also offers that even if he is not able to get the type of job that he would like or be at the level that he could achieve in Jamaica, he won't go back there. He is very matter of fact in his approach to life; there isn't much wavering or doubt, once he has made a decision, that's it. I envy his steadfastness as I continue to complain about the weather all the time and question whether or not I'd have done better in Jamaica from a quality of life perspective. This fuels frequent doubt about my desire to remain in Canada.

More Connected to North America

In the three years that Andrew's been here, he notes that the cultural item he has picked up on is not wishing everyone "Merry Christmas" but rather "Happy Holidays", since he is not sure who celebrates. He also says that he is more connected to North American culture, perhaps because he didn't identify with Jamaican culture as much to begin with. It is here that Andrew mentions that he is uncomfortable in Jamaican or Caribbean situations even in Toronto, which is why he "hates

going up to [the] Eglinton [West][4] [area]….[it is] a feeling of going back into the closet." This also happens when going to places like the barbershop when in need of a haircut as he encounters many Caribbean men and even though he knows he shouldn't be afraid it "automatically happens."

When Andrew arrived here, he credits two friends from Jamiaca (now living here) that he stayed with for their support as well as the Supporting Our Youth (SOY)[5] program. Without his two friends to stay with for the initial year, he says that he probably wouldn't have been able to afford to come as he wouldn't have been able to work for the first six months of arriving as a refugee. Luckily, Government assistance helped with income for the initial period. His first Pride was overwhelming, noting that he'd "never seen so much gay in [his] life" and it was very fulfilling. It made him feel that being so free was worth "giving up everything in Jamaica" as he wanted to be a part of the gay community in Toronto

You're Not a Born Canadian

When asked if he ever feels like the "other" he notes that you'll always be "considered an outsider because you're not a born Canadian, so even if living here for ten years, you'll still be looked at as an outsider because you weren't born here." Other places he considers living include Montreal and possibly Vancouver if he were to visit and like it.

Andrew had been with his partner for five years prior to coming to Canada and they had planned that his partner would join later. After coming here and not being together for almost a year, Andrew notes that it was challenging to focus on the move and maintain the long distance relationship.

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[4] Eglinton West– an area close to the intersection of Eglinton Avenue and Bathurst Street in Toronto where there's a strong representation of the Caribbean Community.

[5] Supporting Our Youth (SOY) is a community development program designed to improve the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgendered youth in Toronto through the active involvement of youth and adult communities (retrieved from http://www.soytoronto.org/about.html).

Omar

Totally Gay

Omar moved here from Kingston in mid-August of 2005. Initially, he recalls, he didn't know what to expect and had actually just come for a visit of ten days on the recommendation of a friend who was aware of the issues that he (Omar) had been experiencing. Although his arrival was a bit unnerving and lonely, things started to fall into place.

When asked how he identifies, he says "totally gay" and reflects that he didn't really have a coming out story as he was "out" the day he came out of his mother's womb. He is very comfortable with being what he calls "effeminate" but notes that even in the 1960s as a child, he got called names such as "sissy" and "batty bwoy." This had a significant impact on him as a child because he would be shunned; people would treat him as the odd one even though he says "I thought I was special." This "tarnishing" was a concern of his parents who took pride in the reputation that they held in their community in Westmoreland and notes that this did affect his family life. His parents did not treat him in the same manner as his siblings, as he says, "I was given less." For example, he'd have to do the menial chores and would often stay home from school, which was also at times a result of getting into fights there. This culminated in a decision to leave home at the age of twelve. He slept in the streets and, "felt liberated [and] didn't have to live up to the taunts of my parents and siblings." Despite the challenges of being a "wild child" and not having a support system, he notes that he was creating his own space.

Being Taken Advantage Of

Something happened during that period that Omar wasn't able to name until more recently. One day while Omar was bathing in the public area at the community taps[6], an older man with whom he was familiar struck up a conversation. The man steered the conversation to sex and offered to show Omar his penis; Omar accepted but was told that it couldn't be shown to him there so he should come around to the man's house after dark, which he did. There were multiple visits in which they "fooled around." In reflecting on the experience, he certainly attributes part of this to the desire for a father figure and an older influence. I'm unclear as to how long this lasted, but Omar acknowledged that he eventually realized that he was being taken advantage of, that he was "being molested" and he ceased visiting when he realized the experience just was not for him.

A change to the environment was prompted when Omar went (based on invitation) to live with a cousin and his family in Kingston, Jamaica. Omar describes this period as being "really cool" as he was living in luxury with food on the table and having access to clothes. "It was the life", he says, but there was a price to pay as he "became the servant" to the household, waking up at 5 a.m. to feed the kids before they went to school and keeping the house clean. He notes though that there was stability and community, a strong force for him to stay.

Be True to Yourself

During this time, Omar began a significant relationship with a man who owned a store in one of the popular plazas of Kingston and was also known to be gay. This information was later relayed to his cousin (whose religion is Jehovah's Witness) who confronted him. It is here that Omar came out for the first time, acknowledging that he is gay and had been in the relationship for almost a year. His cousin's reaction was dramatic, as he said "this would affect the household, the Kingdom

[6] Public showers.

Hall…and that [my] sons look up to you like a big brother…how can you influence them if you're gay?" Omar's defense was that he continued to be the same person who always had a positive impact, but now you "simply know something about me that you didn't know before." He knew there would be consequences to coming out and felt that "sometimes you have to put the consequences aside and deal with them [as] they come but [you must] be true to yourself." He felt as if he had won the first battle but by the weekend he was moved out of the main house to a room beside the kitchen where he was given his own utensils and items; he no longer sat at the table to eat with his family. Eventually Omar moved away, fueled by the realization that he was in an unhealthy situation.

We Don't Want Your Kind Here

Getting a better job helped his independence and confidence and he continued to improve his social status which included moving into an upscale neighbourhood; however, threats to his person escalated. One evening when returning home, he was held up at gunpoint. The assailant threatened him, "we know you're a batty bwoy and could kill you right now." Omar turned over money and items from inside the home with full expectation that the gunman would be back. He was held up again by knifepoint by two men but was able to fight back and call for help. Moving to a new neighbourhood further away didn't end the attacks. He returned home one evening to find his windows shattered and his home robbed. A stone was used to break the window and on the stone was a message to leave "as we don't want your kind here." That night, another stone was thrown through the window and the perimeter of his garden was doused with kerosene and lit on fire. The reaction from the police was less than comforting as they "started making faces [and used] an unsupportive tone," even inquiring as to whether or not he had a boyfriend. It was at this point that Omar decided that he had to leave the island.

Not Easy Learning the System

On his first night in Toronto, he went for a walk in the gay village and describes being so stunned that he couldn't speak when observing the gay scene for the first time. "There were men hugging each other [and] holding hands…the public display of affection was too much for me!"

For Omar, the process of seeking asylum was very challenging. He describes the period of waiting for his asylum hearing as being in limbo without the ability to go anywhere and earn income. He had grown accustomed to living a certain lifestyle in Jamaica and now couldn't afford the luxuries that he had worked hard for before. Another significant issue was not getting the reports from the police for the incidents that he had faced (despite the fact that he himself filed them in police station). Other challenges included difficulties with opening a bank account, dealing with financial situations and trying to find a place to rent. At times, he would throw his hands up in the air and exclaim "fuck this" in exasperation and with the thought that he should give up and return to Jamaica. However, he would consider the option of going back to Jamaica and the consequences that would be faced there. He offers that, "sometimes it is not easy learning the system here…there's not a lot of information and [more work is needed] to help with the transition." Some of these areas include referrals for doctors and lawyers as well as details that would seem very simple such as navigating aspects related to clothing, social assistance and finding the right settlement organizations.

Multiple Personas

It took Omar quite a while to become adjusted to the new way of life. Taking public transportation was anxiety provoking as he says that he "just didn't want to go out [as] somebody's going to be on the bus and want to beat me up and call me a 'batty bwoy' because I walk different." Overcoming such issues took him a while to feel secure. He recalls walking down Yonge Street recently and being teased by a group of people, whom he assumed to be Caribbean people. When this happens he says, he immediately "goes back into Jamaica." This type of experience and letting

go of anxiety in similar social situations seems to be a common theme among the participants, partly because there is uncertainty as to the personalities of the other people and lack of control and expectation in the situation.

Omar does feel that he has "multiple personas", from which he adapts to the situation as required. For example, when with a group of Caribbean or black people, the Jamaican persona would come out, where he feels that he has to conform to expectations of the group, "you know, you have to sort of act a little different…go on stage to be someone who they want you to be and for your own safety, you put on that persona."

Home

Omar says, "thank God for Black CAP" an organization that he came to through a stroke of luck. He met the executive director at a social event and while he didn't disclose his refugee situation to her, for fear of its association, he did disclose that he recently moved to Canada and was working to establish himself. She suggested that he volunteer with their organization which provides support and awareness for persons infected with HIV and AIDS. However, Omar chose not to, primarily because of the "stigma attached to it." He also opted not to disclose his HIV status to anyone after the horrific experience of disclosing to a friend in Jamaica that he was HIV positive. His trust was shattered when that friend spread the information compromising Omar's work environment, resulting in threats and comments such as, "we don't take orders from no AIDS boy." Thankfully, he eventually volunteered with Black CAP and later became a full-time employee, a situation which he refers to as "home." They've helped him overcome his fears and assist in the integration to the community.

Try to Remember Who You Are

In responding to the question of what should people be prepared for when moving to Canada, Omar states that "culture shock and stigma" are issues to be aware of. He also refers to the issue of "being objectified as a sex object" by other ethnic communities. In keeping with that theme, Omar says that "you often find other communities think that because you're black that you can fuck…that you have a big dick…that sort of thing" and "one has to be careful in not getting caught up in [the] fantasy [of others]." Omar's closing words are "one has to try to remember who you are and why you've come to the country, as one can really get lost in the system here." He also acknowledges that Canada is where he'll remain and he hopes that "sometimes in telling your story, you help somebody else."

Tony

Traumatic

"Traumatic" is how Tony describes his arrival in Toronto from Kingston. He relocated in 2008 at the age of 48 to the experience of moving into the Jane & Finch [7]neighbourhood in Toronto where he shared an apartment with an extremely homophobic Jamaican person. As Tony says, "the irony could not be [more] sharp" and to top it off, his roommate started inquiring about his social life. To Tony's horror, he now found himself lying to protect himself from questions such as "why doesn't he have women coming to [visit] him" as well as "why doesn't he [have] children", which as Tony says, "were the questions that I used to have to lie about in Jamaica in order to abide by that unwritten code of conduct." This situation reminded Tony so much of Jamaica that he says he wanted to kill himself. One Saturday afternoon, at a construction site that he worked at (a situation

[7] The Jane and Finch neighbourhood is located in North York, Toronto and is reported to have a high concentration of criminal gangs as well as a high concentration of refugees and immigrants. There is a strong Jamaican/Caribbean population in the area.

which in itself was horrifying to him), he seriously contemplated the prospect of jumping to his death, and "through some form of divine intervention" received a phone call from his aunt, who said to him, "whatever you're going to do now, don't do it" as she was coming to visit him.

Barbara

Like the other participants and myself, that nightmarish experience of being the "other" seems to take shape through the high school experience. Ironically, Tony went to the same high school that I did, St. Georges College, a Roman Catholic all boys high school in downtown Kingston. During his first few weeks at school he was given the nickname "Barbara" because he was said to throw like a girl. The name followed him throughout his school years and extended beyond the schoolyard to social spaces in the city where other Georgians[8] would be. Other harassment came from one particular schoolmate who directly associated Tony with homosexuality. This teasing impacted Tony's social environments significantly, for example, he wouldn't shower after the physical education class with the other boys, nor would he enter the urinals if there were other people in there, for this, Tony says, would rile the other boys up with statements that he was "following" them to look at someone's penis or body. When asked if he ever sought refuge with the teachers at school, Tony answers "no…because this was a Roman Catholic boys school and [I felt] that this was [my] personal shame and guilt and [that I had to] bare it." I had a very similar experience to Tony when it came to social life at Georges, primarily the George's Barbeque, an annual event that was a legend in the secondary school community. Tony relates that "once, [he] was brave enough to attend the event [and] it was a big mistake" because he and his friends were teased by other Georgians.

[8] A nickname given to alumni of St. Georges College.

Hold Our Heads Up High

Tony sought out another boy at school who was also being teased, and says, "if there was any teasing or mocking, we would hold our heads up high and walk through the gate." Tony describes his friend as being very comfortable with himself, despite having the nickname Christine. Though his friend couldn't fight physically, he could retaliate with words, and would argue with those teasing him. Following high school, Tony enrolled in Teachers College. After his first few months, Tony was forced to move out of the dorm because of homophobic comments and threats directed at him. At one point, there was an incident of teasing and name-calling prompted after Tony had shaved his head. This escalated to the "entire student body" gathering to throw stones and jeer at him. He was defended and rescued by two women whom he knew fairly well. On the brink of leaving the institution, the principal reassured Tony that he was a strong student and, should another incident occur, he should report it and appropriate action would be taken.

Heaven

Growing up, Tony says he thought of himself as different and as a sissy, but hadn't quite made the connection for himself to being gay. At age 19 he met a guy who he "immediately fell head over heels for" despite the belief of others that this man was straight because he had a girlfriend. The following Monday, Tony says he "made up [his] mind that [he] was going to die" because he was going to reveal his feelings to the man, which he did by professing his love for him. By Tuesday they were a couple, a relationship that lasted six years which Tony describes as being in "heaven…literal heaven."

One can imagine that navigating a same-sex relationship in Jamaica would be quite the challenge. As Crichlow (2004) states, "it is not always easy to theorize or explain how [Caribbean] men negotiate their same-sex practices" (p. 94). They approached meeting in public by going on walks and seeing movies all without displaying any form of physical affection. Tony would sneak his

lover into his home, a situation that quickly ended when his mother confronted them and made "quite the scene". This forced him to move out of the home immediately. Being sensitized to the issue of two men living together, Tony posits that when you're gay and living in Jamaica, "most of your money will go into rent because you need to live in a good area." At this point, Tony and his partner moved into a one bedroom flat in the Golden Triangle[9] of Kingston where they cohabitated and were "lucky" that their neighbours and even their landlord seemed to be very humble and tolerant. These neighbours didn't display any concern or hostility towards the nature of Tony's relationship. However, when they moved locations, their new neighbours were not as tolerant of them or their visiting friends. This forced Tony to move out and back to his mother's home. The relationship ended and Tony reflects that this was a first relationship for both of them; they were both adapting to responsibilities, paying bills and hadn't yet "sowed their oats."

Dumbstruck

Tony describes his mother as having a very Victorian approach to life, noting that the issue of his sexuality was not discussed. He also reveals that his sister did not speak to him for years, for what he feels is her need to disassociate with the speculation throughout her social networks of *his* sexual orientation. A surprising aspect of Tony's experience is that he discovered later in life that his father was a gay man. This was learned when his father's lover of almost "20 odd years", a man Tony referred to as "uncle", revealed this to him. This revelation came when the father married a woman in his church, an act that Tony refers to as a trap because the woman threatened to reveal the father's sexuality. When asked how he processed his father's sexuality, Tony says he was "dumbstruck." He didn't believe it. There's not much further information gathered or explored here as Tony says:

> When I was outed and went to my father for support and thought he would understand, I made the error of saying to him that 'I was told you're also gay' and he ran me out of his presence, took up a

[9] Golden Triangle – an upscale area in Kingston.

> chair to hit me down and a knife to stab me [with] and we have not spoken for the past 20 odd years [and now he is dead].

Tony says that everyone knew that his father was gay and they (the father and friend) were totally and thoroughly ostracized.

I Thought I Deserved This

Tony was working at an inner city school in a West Kingston constituency represented by the Rt. Honourable Edward Seaga, leader of the Jamaica Labour Party and the then Prime Minister of Jamaica. This garrison community had an unwritten rule protecting the teacher. Unfortunately, as Tony says, when Seaga was forced to resign, "Bruce Golding[10] took over with his homophobia." Tony refers to the infamous incident in which Bruce Golding declared on the May 20th, 2008 episode of BBC World News television program *HARDtalk* that he would not tolerate a homosexual in his parliament (retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9cQx-zmHgg8). Tony says that for him, this was the period in which "things exploded and it culminated with my being threatened by a gunman" to not return to the area as he'd be killed.

The stress became too much for Tony to the extent that he required treatment for serious depression. It became too difficult for him to gather the strength to teach amidst the taunts and clashes with residents of the community, and he says that "there were certain places I couldn't go into but then all along, I thought I deserved this." He was an outpatient of the Bellevue Hospital[11] and had missed over 80 days of the school year. He applied for special leave from the school, a visa and the rest, as he says, "is history."

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[10] Bruce Golding served as Prime Minister of Jamaica from 11 September 2007 to 23 October 2011

[11] Bellevue Hospital is Jamaica's primary mental care institution that provides services such as psychiatric, nursing and rehabilitative care.

Hey World, I Am Gay

While he does believe that homophobia exists here, what excites Tony about Canada is that he feels safe for the first time in his life. He doesn't have to hide anymore; he can be his authentic self. He raves about the "beautiful safe space" of the 519 Community Centre, where he has made a number of connections in the community. However, when asked if he would live here forever, Tony "hopes not" as he has concerns about the conservative values that are being pushed by the current Government and what that means. His worry is that many Canadians may feel that the openness of Canadian society has gone out of control and there may be additional threats to what has been attained thus far.

Another issue that Tony raises is that since he has been in Canada, he has not had a date or any form of sexual activity. He refers to a number of friends, all immigrants, all from an African or Caribbean background who have shared a similar experience. Tony relates this to being an outsider in the society, both for his race and country of origin. He highlights challenges faced in the clubs and even the 519 Community Centre as it is "so conservative" that he feels if he were to approach another person with regards to a date, he thinks he'd be asked to leave. In the "safe spaces" in Jamaica he reflects that it wouldn't be an issue, he'd just be able to approach someone and ask what their situation is and if they'd be interested. Tony acknowledges that he feels safe at Toronto's Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), and that the space is filled with mostly white men who do make overtures at him, however:

> Call me racist…white people really don't do it for me…I've never seen myself performing a physical activity whatsoever with a white man. I wouldn't be very comfortable around them because I don't know how to relate to them, I suspect, because they have a culture all their own.

On some level, I'm surprised and curious about Tony's reluctance to become familiar with the culture of his adopted country, thinking, perhaps that new immigrants *should* want to understand the Canadian culture to which they are now a part. In our discussion about this, Tony believes he should

leave well enough alone. However, I'm aware of the insecurity that some may hold when feeling like the other in a dominant culture, much like the mode of *separation*[12] as described within the context of acculturation.

Despite the challenges with his transition, Tony is resolved to have a positive experience in Canada. For him, the main thing is that finally, after over forty years, he can say, "hey world, I am gay!" Since his mother's death in late 2011, Tony says that he has no reason to go back to Jamaica. He knows that if he were to go back to Jamaica, he would die, because, if he were asked if he were a "batty man," he would answer truthfully and assertively. As a result, he says, "they would kill me!"

Frantz

As I drove outside of the downtown Toronto core towards Scarborough, I had a pang of anxiety about returning to an area that depresses me immensely. The flat and monotone landscape stimulates unhappy memories of my transition to Canada. I'm reminded of the guilt and doubt I experienced when I realized what I'd be missing out on back home due to my move to Canada. There was nothing pleasing about the Scarborough landscape and at that point the downtown core of Toronto was a foreign land to me.

Within the first few minutes of our discussion, Frantz refers to a number of issues that he has experienced both in Toronto and Jamaica that I had expected to be raised by the participants. Throughout the interview I had to show incredible restraint at not exclaiming with a "me too" or "you as well" as he reflected on his experiences.

This Place is Crazy

Frantz's transition to Toronto involved a one-month layover in Buffalo, New York where he sought assistance with Vive La Casa[13] as part of his refugee claim. Like the other participants, he

[12] In acculturation theory, separation is described as the person holding into their culture and not connecting with the host/dominant culture (Acker & Vanbeselaere, 2010)

acknowledges that he couldn't live in Jamaica because he was a gay man especially after seeing and experiencing violent acts. He refers to three murders that he witnessed, one of them occurring in front of his Manor Park[14] apartment complex, a situation that made him aware of how vulnerable he was:

> This place is crazy…it was a strain to keep yourself safe. It was just so much work. You had to have a car. You had to live in a gated community. You had to be in your house…locked up…behind the grill [by 9PM]. You had to be nice to security guards. It was just too much strain.

Members' Only Club

In 2000, about a year before I moved to Toronto, I learned of an underground gay club in New Kingston that was open on Friday nights. Though I would usually be hanging out with my cousins and playing the card game Kaluki (my safe social ritual), I would usually leave a bit early and instead of making the right turn towards my home, I would flick the left indicator and head towards New Kingston. The club was situated just off the main thoroughfare between the business district and popular Jamaican nightlife, so I would always check to make sure I didn't recognize any of the cars driving around me before turning up its street. I would circle the venue in my car, sometimes for periods up to an hour in the hopes of glimpsing some activity and insight into the workings of what to me was certainly taboo. However, I would never park my vehicle outside. The fear of being *outed* coupled with the anxiety of the unknown mixed in with a tinge of sexual energy was enough to keep me planted in the car seat. In fact, as the ritual continued I had my car windows tinted so that no one could easily recognize my face and prove that it was me driving should they recognize my car, although I knew even then that this would not keep me or my reputation safe.

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[13] Vive La Casa or Vive, Inc. is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing support and services for refugees from around the world.

[14] Manor Park is an upscale area in St. Andrew.

I am dumbfounded when Frantz tells me that he and another person opened the club together as an offering for a safe space since there weren't any at the time. He says that it was good for a while but reflects on its evolution:

> We opened and it was good for a while…it was a members' only club…[but]…gay people are from all walks of life and some are really self-destructive. The ones from really low economic circumstances…if I may say that…tend to be destructive. We were trying to keep it on the low. So [we would] only have people that have something to lose [as they would] conduct themselves properly.

Frantz elaborates by talking about stabbings that would occur and discoveries they would make when searching the patrons, at times finding weapons such as guns, knives and even acid. Frantz says that yes, the police would visit, but they were there to extort money, "the terrible things were the patrons…hating themselves." Frantz was very close to the other owner of the club, who made him aware of the potential for asylum and provided numerous links to getting established in Canada. After Frantz left Jamaica, this friend, the co-owner was brutally murdered in his own home, which was the location of the club.

Subtle Racism

Frantz confirms that although he does feel safe here, the hard part is having to overcome people's perceptions of what is third world. There are hurdles to overcome in this regard:

> They initially think that you're not going to be good…and you know, there's the subtle racism where the woman shifts her handbag or she comes off the elevator before her floor…because…you know…only you are in it…or the subway and bus are packed but no one's sitting beside you…I took an economic hit [coming here]…

Frantz notes that media's representation of black people has gotten better since he has been here but he raises an interesting observation in that he is thankful for not growing up here, noting that many of the black people that he has encountered here seem to have a chip on their shoulder "or they *whitify*." He defines this term as the act of people only speaking with white guys or dressing very preppy to distinguish themselves from the *urban look*.

It was difficult for Frantz to obtain employment in Toronto. "I was working as a yard boy [here] but [at home] I used to hire people to clean the yard for me…I would apply and apply and apply…and nothing would happen." His first substantial job came about through a documentary that he participated in about his experience moving here. As part of this job offer, he was *asked* to work a week free to prove he was capable of doing what was in his portfolio:

> And I did, because it was the first opportunity that I got where I was able to practice my craft, which I did in Jamaica. [It wasn't] even an alien concept because a lot of immigrants offer to work for free just to prove to that they can do it, just to get a job.

He notes that he was paid less than the others in the organization despite having strong experience. He left after accepting a contract with a non-government organization and has moved on to freelancing ever since, a choice that certainly agrees with him. He notes that most of his clients are not white which he feels is because they need someone to understand their way of thinking and perhaps also because they've been through a similar experience and may now want to hire their *own*.

As Out As Out Can Be

This isn't the first time that Frantz has shared his story. He appeared in the documentary film, *Gloriously Free*, a production about gay immigrant men to Toronto and their experiences. The experience of the documentary was very liberating for Frantz, noting that once you're seen by millions of people on TV, you're "as out as out can be." While I didn't explore how he was approached, he wanted to participate because he was a refugee and was very angry with "what was going on in Jamaica" and he wanted to expose that. He offers that "people, even though they're in Canada and they are refugees or whatever…are still scared to proclaim themselves as out. They're [just] not comfortable." Frantz acknowledges the positive experience of participating in the documentary and its visibility, noting that Jamaican mothers and even transit drivers would comment on his experience supportively.

In our discussions regarding adapting to the culture here, Frantz chuckles and immediately states that it is not something he identifies with:

> In terms of gay and this culture here, it's not me at all. I don't identify with it at all…you're some kind of exotic, big dicked oddity…which I am not. And I get [so many] surprised looks when they find out that I can actually read. Um…it's all about drugs and superficiality and every now and again you meet a nice person, who is white, but generally…I think they are racist.

It is interesting to me that he automatically generalizes to a white gay culture, an observation that I raise with him. He further adds that the black gay community that he has experienced here is a bit "bitchy" and "not healthy."

Get Used To It

While Frantz is not close to his family in Jamaica, they do know that he is gay. The relationship between his parents and himself "wasn't a good relationship to begin with and [telling them] just made it worse." We were unable to delve deeper into this, but his coming out to them occurred when he was 19 or 20, where he told them to "get used to it."

In terms of community, "most of my friends are like well educated black or Asian people who have come from other countries and are involved in some sort of activism…they're not all gay." For the past six years, he has been in a relationship with a Taiwanese man, whom he describes as an amazing person. Now in his late thirties, Frantz offers that he is happy he opened himself up to the idea of this person and that he didn't hold to the thought that he needed to have a black boyfriend.

It is Not the Best Situation

In discussing his introduction to Canada, Frantz is grateful for the support that he received from his late friend, the co-owner of the club. He is also grateful that Canada paid for his immigration lawyer and that when his funds ran out, there was the ability to go on welfare, though that's a scenario and feeling that he despises. What's interesting to me is that Frantz recognizes that

as an 'other', he has no birthright to Canada and that "you have to do what you have to do until you do it… it's not the best situation but what can you do?" What upsets him is:

> They tell you that Canada is, you know, all about equality, it's not racist…everybody can come here and do something…but what it is really…is they want migrant workers to do the menial jobs for less pay than a Canadian would take. You can come here with your degree…but you will end up cleaning yards or working in the factory and that's the reality of the situation. And there's the subtle racism…constant…you're always reminded that you're different, that you're Black, that you're Caribbean, that you're Black, that you're an 'other'….a visible minority….what you're sold on is not the reality…it would be wonderful if people's attitudes were different and that [they] didn't think that anything that wasn't [North American] or European was of no value.

For him it would have helped being able to understand what he was getting into and being able to get a job sooner through more people being open enough to interview. In addition hiring managers need to have an awareness and appreciation for non-Canadian experience with an ability to recognize and evaluate non-Canadian credentials.

LEARNINGS

The process of eliciting and constructing the stories of the participants has been informative in terms of communication processes and what it means to give voice to a significantly marginalized community. While any transition to a new country and culture may be challenging for any immigrant, the four participants had the shared experience of seeking asylum as a refugee, a process that for some can be wrought with anxiety and uncertainty.

LGBT refugees are persons who have left their homeland due to threat of persecution and violence, a trait that all participants share. They have left "behind friends, family, and loved ones in addition to careers, homes and material possessions" (Reading & Rubin, 2011, p. 86). Dane Lewis, Executive Director for the Jamaica Forum Lesbians & Gays (J-FLAG) says that the "refugee status almost seems to hang over your head…until you get your residency and I'm sure [that is] an issue for some people [even in the community]. Being tagged as a refugee is a label that's hard to shake" (personal communication, February 10, 2012).

While the participants had the shared experience of the refugee process, I did not. While I could relate to the issues of needing Canadian experience and the feeling of not fitting into society, my arrival in Canada was not faced with the same level of uncertainty that they encountered. I was granted permanent residency for Canada prior to my arrival and through the skilled labourer program. I could search for work and had taken enough time to prepare and save for the journey. Once I arrived, I was able to hit the ground running as opposed to being in the state of limbo that these participants experienced while awaiting the decision on their case. In addition, I could travel without restriction, allowing visits to Jamaica when feasible. Also, it should be noted, that I came out after arriving in Canada and have been lucky to have a family that is aware of my orientation and supportive of me. While I'm very careful about discussing my sexuality due to concern about the impact on my family back in Jamaica, I am not faced with the direct threats within the community that the participants all faced. Perhaps if I had fled my family or left the island on different circumstances, my personal adventure would have a different story.

Themes

Themes were identified by reviewing the audio clips and noting similarities of issues and experiences in the stories of each participant. The themes relate to acculturation, culture shock, homophobia, identity, socio-economic status, "othering[15]", obtaining employment (lack of Canadian experience), navigating support services, navigating social spaces as well as addressing racism, stereotyping and body image. The last two along with identity and acculturation will be explored in further detail below as these are significant factors that affect settlement and sense of self. Below, I'll discuss these issues in their context and how sharing these stories publicly might enhance this process for all involved.

[15] "Othering" in this context refers to the feeling of not being a part of the mainstream.

Racism, Stereotyping and Body Image

During this research process, I wrote an article for *Xtra!,* a Toronto, bi-weekly LGBT publication to explore issues that gay men of colour may experience. In the article I reflected on my early experiences of navigating gay social spaces at a time that I clung to being the other, at times thinking, "that I might even be considered a bit exotic*"* (Brown, 2012). As I became more comfortable in navigating the gay social scene, I began to hone that sense of "otherness" and found that not fitting the stereotypes and expectations of being a Jamaican man from a sexualized perspective to be as much of a liability as if I were to meet them. In doing research for the article, I spoke with Kenta Asakura, a Toronto based psychotherapist with a focus on the LGBT community who offered that:

> [In] my professional experience of working primarily with LGBT people as a therapist, I have a "sense" that our social environments (e.g., media, bar/club scenes that cater to gay men) have not particularly embraced a racially diverse representation of bodies (personal communication, February 23rd, 2012).

In my own experience, I withdrew from gay spaces (both online and in-person), as I felt undesirable and unable to meet the needs of another. I also became quite bitter at those that I perceived to be projecting stereotypes. Frantz refers to such a scenario when he says, "in terms of gay and this culture here, it's not me at all. I don't identify with it at all…you're some kind of exotic, big dicked oddity…which I am not."

In many gay personal ads and social meeting sites, people are making assumptions and requests surrounding a person's physical traits such as penis size and body size, role type and in some cases which ethnicities are preferred as a lover. This takes me back to Tony's comment of not having the experience of a date or a lover since arriving almost four years ago. Omar also referred to this with regards to his warnings and observations regarding youth who move to Canada from the Caribbean, where "you often find other communities thinking that because you're black that you can fuck…that you have a big dick…that sort of thing, [so one has to be careful to not get caught up in

[the] fantasy [of others].” According to David Brennan with the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto, “little is known about how this impacts someone’s health and well being [and that] racism is an ongoing and persistent experience for which people are actively trying to figure out and navigate” (Brown, 2012). Okazaki (2009) states that, “we know much more about the psychological processes of White individuals who hold varying levels of racial bias than about the psychological processes of non-White individuals who are directly or indirectly affected by racism” (p. 103).

Within gay visual culture, there are stereotypes of gay men that are not representative of the diverse community. Sonnekus (2009) who looked at the colonial representations of ‘homomasculinity’, states:

> [S]ince its inception, advertising aimed at, depicting or suggesting allegiance with the gay community has hinged on the model of white, domesticated and sanitised homosexuality that still defines much of what one sees when observing the images in mainstream and gay media

This suggests that gay content will need to evolve to represent the actual community so that there is tangible representation because “[g]ay men are not exclusively white and middle-class, yet [media] images rarely stray from this stereotypical view of gay masculinity and therefore constantly position white gay masculinity as that which is ideally desirable” (Sonnekus, 2009, p.42). Similarly, mistakes with regards to the “othering” of cultures within gay media based on factors such as ethnic background and/or HIV status are a significant risk for the generation of further harmful stereotypes. In the same vein that gay and lesbian characters in the media are not considered representational to the gay and lesbian members of the population (Raley & Lucas, 2006), care must be taken to ensure that when content is produced, it is first and foremost representative for the community and audience.

The Gap of Canadian Experience

According to settlement.org, "many newcomers face barriers to getting hired because they do not have 'Canadian experience' and in some cases, employers use this lack of experience as a convenient way to discriminate against newcomers" (Settlement,org, 2010, para. 3). The concept of Canadian experience refers to factors such as language and communication skills, knowledge of Canadian standards and even the ability to fit into the workplace culture. The article from settlement.org points out that some employers may not know how to evaluate education and work experience (para. 4). The stories from the participants echo the frustrations of many immigrants.

According to Petri (2009), "the main barrier new immigrants face when entering the Canadian work force is lack of Canadian credentials and Canadian experience." Petri reiterates a point from the Canadian Mental Health Association where they state "that a job is an important element of a person's self-esteem, and unemployment or underemployment can make people feel worthless—for new immigrants in a new environment, without strong social support networks, this can be even worse" (p. 11). Research (Hall, 2010) makes reference to Berry's model of acculturation which posits that the ability of the immigrant to adapt is significantly based on the willingness of the host society to be receptive. For hiring personnel, having an understanding of this likelihood and opening up to the thought that an individual may have a dynamic background could lead to less stereotyping and a more positive intercultural interaction. It might lead to more interest in the subject, leading to more education and understanding rather than a closed minded and less welcoming situation towards immigrants.

Acculturation

Marco Posadas, Bathhouse counselor and program coordinator with the Aids Committee of Toronto (ACT) reinforces that one of the issues gay and bisexual immigrant men from racialized groups face is a harder experience adjusting to the new environment (Brown, 2012). Acculturation of

immigrants is affected by factors such as the extent that immigrant groups maintain their original culture and the level of interaction they seek with other cultural groups (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2009).

Assimilation has deemed to be the most effective and healthy way to adapt to a new culture (Kim, 2002; Pumariega et al., 2005). However, for North American culture, "mainstream culture presents images that are untenable to most members of minority and immigrant groups" (Pumariega et al., 2005, p. 585). As the participants have pointed out, they feel like an "other" in this society, with Tony referring to his race and sexual orientation as signifiers. Theory however, can only go so far in explaining or predicting experience as many of the assumptions of current acculturization theory are based on non-LGBT experiences. It is worthy to reflect on the unique *culture shock* and "trauma" that Tony experienced when arriving and settling into an ethnic enclave in which he experienced the very homophobia from his culture that he was trying to escape.

Andrew commented on his lack of connection to Jamaica, noting that he never really felt that he belonged and was already familiar with North American culture prior to arriving. Tony on the other hand made the comment that he wouldn't really speak with or date *white* men as he feels, he doesn't really know how to relate to them because they have a culture all to their own. He continues by saying that he doesn't believe in multiculturalism.

An added layer of complexity in the experience of these participants relates to the experience of connecting to or being a part of the gay community in Toronto and in general. While each of the participants identified as gay and were comfortable in stating as such, each seems to be at a different level of involvement/comfort with *gay culture*. There are many factors here that affect this such as the desire to connect, a person's age, their time in Canada, social comfort, knowledge of spaces, and even disposable income, to name a few. Furthermore, "the full responsibility for acculturation does not lie with the immigrant only" (Hall, 2010, p. 125).

Identity

There are numerous reflections related to cultural identity in this context. Jameson (2007) points out that nationality or ethnic background may not be the most obvious aspect in the overall sense of identity. For example, social class or socio-economic status plays a significant role in the lives of the participants in that they had to adjust to being perceived differently than they were used to. Frantz referred to this when he started working as a "yard boy" in Toronto whereas in Jamaica he had a "yard boy" working for him.

Given that a culture's own stereotypes can have a strong influence on how one perceives another cultural group, when these worlds intersect, it is paramount that one knows how to navigate. If they are a part of two conflicting identities, this can create an internal struggle. I'll refer to the theme of participants reconciling that they are gay, Jamaican and an immigrant to Canada. These cultural/group identifiers provide conflict in their lives. While we cannot generalize based on the experiences of the participants, the stories highlight the evolution and adjustment of their identities, which is an ongoing process. Not only are they navigating the process of being an immigrant, they are also adjusting to being openly gay. To add a further layer of complexity, all the participants are a person of colour, another marginalized group (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni & Soto, 2002).

Having an understanding of one's cultural identity, both from a cultural and group perspective can assist with integration. This is an additional area where communication tools and strategies could be employed to raise awareness about the concept of identity. An aware transferee would be assisted by having a head start in the process of adjustment and might be able to navigate obstacles and miscommunication (Wederspahn, 1995). Knowing your own cultural identity, [essentially knowing who you are and the traits/values that you identify with] can strongly aid an intercultural communication experience. The point here is that if you are able to appreciate the many

aspects that contribute to your identity, the more you may be able to appreciate that another individual may have multiple layers as well.

Toronto (where all the participants arrived and currently reside) has a few strong resources to support the LGBT community including the 519 Community Centre, Aids Committee of Toronto (ACT) and Black Coalition for Aids Prevention (Black Cap). However, these men's stories suggest that it is not just the responsibility of LGBT support systems to articulate the cultural competence to assist members with their journey, but all channels that are faced, including the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

How Can We Use the Stories?

Narratives are critical in understanding the experiences of others. Theoretical frameworks can only go so far in providing understanding and insight into the complex process of acculturation (Keshishian, 2000). Furthermore, an acculturation strategy isn't something that is chosen (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2009). As a result "research also needs a body of qualitative work such as autobiographical or experiential studies that would bring us the voices of the immigrants" (Keshishian, p. 94) as we are then better equipped to get an idea of the subtleties and unique situations faced. These stories highlight challenging factors such as discomfort in connecting with their home culture, challenges navigating support systems, frustrations with obtaining suitable employment and the inability to feel comfortable and confident in the new environment.

One of the important factors here is gaining visibility for the group. Crichlow (2008) emphasizes that the purpose of making the stories public is to provide reality to the existence of a same-sex community in the Caribbean. According to CBC Radio Host, Terry O'Reilly, "stories communicate value and meaning and make things tangible" (personal communication, April 24, 2012). Frantz noted that he wished he were aware of the "truth of what could be expected…to understand what exactly [he] was getting into". The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants

(OCASI) has launched the Positive Spaces Initiative (PSI) "to share resources and increase organizational capacity across the sector to more effectively serve LGBTQ newcomers" (OCASI, para. 5). The untold stories project is the first phase of the initiative:

> One of the most common misconceptions we heard throughout our provincial consultations was that LGBTQ newcomers do not exist, and there is therefore no need for LGBTQ-inclusive settlement services. From others, we were told there is little understanding about how settlement issues are experienced differently by LGBTQ newcomers. Finally, we heard that queer colleagues working in the settlement sector do not feel safe or fully supported in their workplaces. The invisibility and silencing of LGBTQ peoples daily lived experience was further bolstered by very little formal documentation of LGBTQ newcomers and settlement service providers in Ontario. It was in this context that the need for this research emerged (OCASI, para. 1). .

This is where storytelling enhanced through the tools[16] of social media could be utilized to provide greater representation and reference for the group as opposed to traditional media where these stories might not be hosted or transmitted.

Storytelling Through Social Media

In keeping with the goals of the project, a website has been setup with the visual stories and audio clips of the participants that speak to their experiences. The video clips are hosted on Vimeo and embedded in each post, while the audio clips are uploaded directly to the site. The stories highlight the situations that need to be communicated for the public to learn from. The site is located at http://queeryingjamaica.tumblr.com/. The website is in a blog format which means that each clip is posted as a separate entry. The blog can be searched and viewed in its entirety and the format of posting allows individual stories/clips to be referenced directly and/or posted to other platforms (or tweeted). The social media tools and blogging platform were all available and utilized free of charge.

To be effective, the tools of social media should be tailored to foster engagement, authenticity, empowerment and conflict tolerance (Liang, Commins & Duffy, 2010). "The internet is

[16] Social media tools for this purpose include blogging platforms, online video sites (YouTube, Vimeo), Twitter and Facebook.

becoming a global culture" (Kavoori & Chadha, 2009) and with this is the opportunity to also reach and access more stories among a variety of groups. Campaigns need to be carefully designed to ensure that the information is both valid and positive while providing a connection to the audience. From research into the use of traditional media for the advancement of minority groups (Acar, 2008; Bond, et al., 2009; Bonds-Raacke, et al., 2007), there is great opportunity to leverage the knowledge gained and apply such information to social media tools aimed at disseminating positive content for the LGBT community in general.

In addressing the issue of "losing high numbers of black LGBTQ youth to suicide" (Black Family & Friends (BFF), 2011, para. 1), BFF has launched the Love, Acceptance & Support campaign. BFF works to address the homophobia within families and communities of Black LGBTQ people. The campaign is aimed at showing "Black LGBTQ youth the levels of happiness, potential, and positivity their lives can reach" (BFF, 2011, para. 3). As part of the campaign, BFF collects and curates video stories using YouTube that allows them to both create and post their own video or allows them to link to ones created by other people. In the call to the public for stories on their website, BFF says:

> Everyday, thousands of people visit the support section of websites looking for answers and we know that you too can share in that support. The message of your stories can be the most powerful tools in helping parents, families and friends as well as members of the Black LGBTQ community as they work through the coming out process. We need your help in creating a story center in the support section of the website (BFF, 2011, para. 9).

Conclusion

What can one learn from the lived experiences of these four gay Jamaican men who have have come to Canada as refugees? Each participant has had a complex and unique journey. The participants' narratives offer insight into life events and decisions that have triggered a move to a new country. The participants talked about the leap of faith they have taken and the perseverance that they are working with so that they can be themselves. All stressed that having prior knowledge

about what the process might actually be like would greatly assist in the process of adjusting to the new environment, rather than the rainbow picture of harmony that's painted. Omar's belief is that "sometimes in telling your story, you help somebody else."

My hope is that the narratives and discussion prompt further reflection and research related to this group. In a study on the Jamaican transnational identity, the researcher posits that "the imbalance in power between developed and developing countries requires scholars [to] treat issues of migration and cultural adaptation as specific to differing cultural contexts (Hall, 2010, p.120). Additional areas to be explored could include aspects related to acculturation strategy and a person's comfort with their sexuality. Is the ability to connect to a group or community compromised by their level of comfort or reconciliation with their identity? Potential exists for more active research to monitor a group's ability to relate or learn from stories to determine changes in levels of anxiety and uncertainty would be of great value as well. Since the host culture plays an active role in welcoming newcomers, it would also be relevant to study how members of the host culture perceive their actions and processes.

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