

# Building Anti-Racist LGBT+ Spaces

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# Foreword

**This guide** offers insight into the context of the oppression faced by LGBT+ people of colour, highlights the forms of racism that uniquely materialise in modern LGBT+ spaces and provides direction on how we fight back.

In the UK today, LGBT+ spaces - from your local gay bar to your LGBT+ society - are overwhelmingly white. Increasing awareness of the issue (marked by recent cultural landmarks, such as the success of Barry Jenkins' 2016 film "Moonlight" and the broadcasting of FX's "Pose" on BBC Two) has called for more black and brown representation in queer art, but this is only the tip of the iceberg.

LGBT+ societies and groups can be incredibly cliquey, and can fail to acknowledge or empathise with the unique experiences of LGBT+ people of colour. Many white LGBT+ people will say (or imply) that if queer, trans and intersex people of colour (QTIPOC) are not out to our families, we are "not gay/trans/queer" enough. This kind of discrimination and exclusion results from a lack of understanding - or any attempt to understand - our specific communities, which often support us in important ways. Queer people of colour might not want to risk cutting their families or communities off by coming out to them, as in many cases this means forfeiting an important source of support against racism.

In order to create lasting change, we need to understand *why* LGBT+ spaces are so white (beyond the existence of queer people of colour as a "minority within a minority"). We need to understand that this whiteness is not only skin-deep: it is systematic, it is institutional, and - like all forms of racism - it is the direct legacy of European colonialism.

In this document, we hope to offer some insight into the social and historical context of the oppression faced by queer and trans people of colour; to highlight the forms that racism in LGBT+ spaces takes in the modern day; and to offer some guidance to fight back.

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## Decolonising Gender and Sexuality

In order to understand racism in the LGBT+ community as it exists today, we must step back a few hundred years. We must acknowledge and accept that contemporary British society is a product of its colonial past: our culture, our institutions, and our economy as they exist today are built on the exploitation, occupation and decimation of populations across the globe.

Historically, homophobia and transphobia were imposed on countless societies across the world by the European coloniser. There are pre-colonial records abound of queer relationships and of gender non-conforming identities in Indian, African, and indigenous societies across the world (including but not limited to: the South Asian “hijra” community, Native American “two-spirit” individuals, and “mudoko dako” of various Ugandan tribes). When QTPOC are told by our communities that being LGBT+ is a “white thing”, we must be armed with the knowledge that in fact, it is queerphobia that is a “white thing”.

To this day, racist border controls disproportionately affect LGBT+ asylum seekers from communities across the globe that have been culturally, environmentally and economically pillaged by the West. This includes the Home Office’s dehumanising need for LGBT+ asylum seekers to provide visual evidence of their gender or sexuality.

In this context, the fight to counter racism in the LGBT+ community in all its forms can -- and must -- be understood as a fight for reparative justice. There is a need to re-frame LGBT+ history so that we no longer understand it as exclusively European; to reframe gender and sexuality to not only accommodate for non-Western understandings of LGBT+ identity, but to centre them and study them in the depth that they deserve.

It is only right and only necessary that we fight racism in our communities in all the forms it takes. It is our hope that the information in these pages will help equip us all for this fight.

### Resources:

- Sandeep Bakshi, Suhraiya Jivraj, Silvia Posocco, “Decolonising Sexualities: Transnational Perspectives, Critical Interventions” (October 2016). <https://counterpress.org.uk/publication/s/decolonizing-sexualities/>
- b. binaohan, biyuti publishing, “decolonizing trans/gender 101” (January 2014). <https://publishbiyuti.org/decolonizingtransgender101/>
- Professor Raewyn Connell, London School of Economics (LSE) Public Events and Lectures, “Decolonising Gender” (May 2015). <http://www.lse.ac.uk/lse-player?id=3083>

## Discrimination

80% of Black men and 79% of Asian men have experienced racism within the LGBT+ community. This can involve street harassment, including slurs and physical violence, but also more pernicious forms of racism such as dating profiles that state “No Asians, no Blacks” (reminiscent of “No dogs, no Blacks, no Irish” signs that are now illegal to display). Sometimes, LGBT+ venues even turn Black and Asian people away because they “don’t look gay”.

There are many who will try to justify language such as “no Asians, no Blacks” on apps like Grindr by describing it as “just a preference”, but it is important to recognise that having “racial preferences” at all is racist. These “preferences” are based on racial stereotypes (e.g. East Asian people are submissive, Latinx people are more “passionate”, people with fairer skin are more attractive, and people with darker skin are more “animalistic” in bed). Whether conscious or unconscious, this *is* racism. The LGBT+ community, like broader society, perpetuates Eurocentric standards of beauty that seriously harm QTIPOC both mentally and physically (damaging our self-worth, and in some case physically damaging us, with “lightening creams” for example).

Many white LGBT+ people who discriminate against or stereotype people of colour will often claim that they simply “can’t be racist”, because they themselves are oppressed - but being LGBT+ does not erase your whiteness. It does not negate the fact that we are *all* socialised in a racist society, and must take responsibility for and unlearn this racism.

### Resources:

- Owen Jones, The Guardian Opinion, “No Asians, no black people. Why do gay people tolerate blatant racism?” (November 2016):  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/24/no-asians-no-blacks-gay-people-racism>
- Nick Duffy, Pink News, “80 percent of black gay men have experienced racism in the gay community” (June 2015)  
<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2015/06/11/80-percent-of-black-gay-men-have-experienced-racism-in-the-gay-community/>
- Ian Howley, FS magazine, “Dear white gay men...” (June 2015)  
<https://www.qmfa.org.uk/fs148-dear-white-gay-men>

**“Many white LGBT+ people who discriminate against or stereotype people of colour will often claim that they simply “can’t be racist”, because they themselves are oppressed - but being LGBT+ does not erase your whiteness.”**

## Fetishisation

"BBC (Big Black Cock)", "Spicy Latina", and more. As discussed earlier, "preference" based on race are (consciously or not) steeped in racial bias.

A "fetish" is defined by Merriam-Webster as an "object" of reverence, devotion or fixation. In a sexual context, it is "an object or bodily part" that is "psychologically necessary for sexual gratification". Definitions by the Oxford dictionary and others are very similar, revealing that "fetishisation" is defined by (a) regarding something or someone as "object", and (b) an "irrational", "excessive" or "abnormal" degree of fixation upon it. This necessarily means that "racial fetishism" is the act of regarding someone's race as an object, and being fixated upon the use of this person, because of their race, as a sexual object. It is a form of othering.

The fetishisation of black women in particular happens in a variety of different ways. In relation to sexual fetishisation specifically, black women's sexuality exists in a space where they are simultaneously treated as hyper-sexual beings and as fundamentally unattractive. This is especially the case for dark-skinned women. Importantly, this is as true within lesbian and bi women's communities as among men's communities. White women can fetishise black women just as much as white men.

The assumed hyper-sexuality of black women is used as justification for endemic sexual harassment. Their bodies are assumed to be open to public consumption in the form of verbal, sexual and physical and sexual harassment as opposed to black women being seen as people with bodily autonomy.

**Note:** This section is oriented around gay, bi and trans men of colour as the issue is more prevalent (or at least more researched) in the gay men's community. The issue pertains in more nuanced ways to lesbian, bi and trans women of colour, who are doubly fetishised by men (as LGBT+ women, and as women of colour), and to trans, non-binary and gender

non-conforming people of colour. The NUS LGBT+ campaign would be very keen to promote research and discussion in these areas.

### Resources:

- Naveen Kumar, Vice, "How Queer Men of Colour Deal with Being Fetishised" (October 2017): [https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/qvix4b/how-queer-men-of-color-deal-with-being-fetishised](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/qvix4b/how-queer-men-of-color-deal-with-being-fetishised)
- Brad Neathrey, Gay Times, "Queer men of colour are choosing to isolate themselves from mainstream gay culture, study finds" (January 2019): <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/community/117453/queer-men-of-colour-are-choosing-to-isolate-themselves-from-mainstream-gay-culture-new-study-finds/>

**"Definitions by the Oxford dictionary and others are very similar, revealing that "fetishisation" is defined by (a) regarding something or someone as "object", and (b) an "irrational", "excessive" or "abnormal" degree of fixation upon it."**

## Blackface, brownface and yellowface

Blackface is the act of a non-Black person “painting” themselves black, essentially wearing Blackness as a costume. “Yellowface” is a similar phenomenon, wherein white people will use makeup to approximate East Asian features, and “brownface” is when it is South Asian people that are being caricatured.

Blackface can be traced back to performances of “Othello” and “Oroonoko” in 17th century England, but gained particular popularity in America in the 19th century with the development of the “minstrel show”. These performances and skits existed purely to ridicule African-Americans, spreading stereotypes of Black people as lazy, dim-witted and superstitious, and were performed by white people in blackface. Minstrel shows were even broadcast on television as late as the 1970s, and the practice continues to exist.

In the LGBT+ community today, blackface, brownface and yellowface are perhaps even more prevalent than in mainstream society, with performers on the queer scene excusing it as “shock art”. Many popular white drag queens still enjoy a lucrative international careers, despite being known to practice blackface. Blackface, yellowface and brownface are acts that dehumanise, degrade and exploit people of colour, turning our bodies into costumes that can be worn. Meanwhile, white acts that blackface continue to be successful while costing QTPOC out of work.

### Resources:

- Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff, Dazed, “A gay pride march has decided Beyonce blackface is okay” (May 2017)  
<http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/36096/1/a-gay-pride-march-has-decided-beyonce-blackface-is-okay>
- UK Black Pride, “100’s sign an open letter to reject ‘blackface’ performance at UK Prides June 2017”  
<https://www.ukblackpride.org.uk/100-sign-open-letter-to-reject-blackface-performance-at-uk-prides/>

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## Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation can be broken down into three areas: erasure, exploitation and denigration. Cultural appropriation: (a) removes important cultural history and waters it down, (b) exploits the work of POC and prices them out, making cultural practices inaccessible for the very people who created them, and (c) shows a stark contrast in responses to POC practicing their own cultures (negative) and white people "practicing" POC cultures (positive). Pride parades are awash with white people in Native American headdress, dreadlocks, and more; meanwhile Black and brown people are increasingly unable to attend these expensive "marches", and are derided when we are seen celebrating our own cultures. The historical significance of such practices are erased, reducing our cultures to "costumes" and "aesthetics".

Perhaps the most widespread example of cultural appropriation in the LGBT+ community is white LGBT+ people's insistent use of AAVE (African American Vernacular English). When Black people use this form of English -- heavily influenced by Caribbean patois -- it is seen as an indicator of lesser intelligence, derided as being "aggressive"; meanwhile, when white LGBT+ people use it, it's "cool" and "fierce". Herein lies the racism: white drag queens being "ghetto" generates comedy at the expense of

"lesser" Black queens, and white LGBT+ people get all the "fun" of POC cultures with none of the reprimand. White gay men get to act like "angry Black women" and are praised for it, while actual Black women and femmes (e.g.

Sierra Mannie and The Vixen, see resources) face abuse and exclusion. And not only do these white LGBT+ people not face reprimand, they often refuse to engage with or even acknowledge the existence of our struggle for liberation.

### Resources:

- Nick Duffy, Pink News, "Activists call for ban on 'cultural appropriation' at Pride parades" (June 2018)  
<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/06/08/cultural-appropriation-pride-parades/>
- Sierra Mannie, Time, "Dear White Gays: Stop Stealing Black Female Culture" (July 2014)  
<http://time.com/2969951/dear-white-gays-stop-stealing-black-female-culture/>
- Jaun Paul Brammer, them., "How The Vixen Exposed the Racism of RuPaul's Drag Race" (June 2018).  
<https://www.them.us/story/the-vixen-racism-drag-race>



## Pinkwashing

Pinkwashing is defined as “the practice of a state or company presenting itself as gay-friendly and progressive in order to downplay their negative behavior”. Perhaps the most widely debated example is the Israel’s self-promotion as an LGBT+ friendly tourist destination (the country is often referred to as the “most LGBT+ friendly” in the Middle East) in order to garner support from Western liberals and progressives, and to distract from the state’s policy of ethnic cleansing and apartheid. It also directs away from the oppression faced by LGBT+ Palestinians.

Here in the UK, we encounter pinkwashing daily. Businesses and political parties want our money and our votes — they don rainbow packaging, and insist that they care about “LGBT+ rights”, to attract liberal and (notably white, middle class) LGBT+ voters. This is especially the case for businesses, for whom the sponsorship of a Pride parade is not a genuine act of solidarity, but a calculated and targeted act of advertising aimed at the “pink pound”. Who can blame them for trying when being the biggest sponsor at a Pride will get you a float and a position at the front of a parade?

While the Tories congratulate themselves on legalising gay marriage, it is their austerity policies that drive LGBT+ youth into homelessness, and their racist border policies that turn QTIPOC asylum seekers away, essentially sentencing them to death. LGBT+ police have the audacity to march at Pride, while regularly getting away with the abuse ethnic minorities, and the military joins them to distract you from the bombs they drop on civilians in the Middle East. Even overtly right-wing groups, like the English Defence League (EDL) and UK Independence Party (UKIP), have “LGBT+ divisions”, dedicated to fighting the “ride of homophobic Sharia law”.

### Resources:

- Nora Barrows-Friedman, The Electronic Intifada, “Israel’s first trans officer helps with ethnic cleansing”, (April 2017)  
<https://electronicintifada.net/content/israels-first-trans-officer-helps-ethnic-cleansing/20171>
- Shon Faye, Dazed, “Pinkwashed: Are young gays selling out to capitalism?” (October 2015)  
<http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/27104/1/pinkwashed-are-young-gays-selling-out-to-capitalism>
- Stephan Dahl, The Conversation, “The rise of pride marketing and the curse of ‘pink washing’” (August 2014)  
<http://theconversation.com/the-rise-of-pride-marketing-and-the-curse-of-pink-washing-30925>

**“Pinkwashing is defined as “the practice of a state or company presenting itself as gay-friendly and progressive in order to downplay their negative behavior”.**

## Tokenism

For those who *are* trying to affect change within the community, we face the issue of discerning whether others -- who claim to have the same goals in mind — are in earnest, are ignorant of what is necessary to affect change, or simply seek to tick a box, with no real desire to see positive change for QTIPOC.

Tokenism is defined as “the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort [...] especially by recruiting a small number of people from under-represented groups in order to give the appearance of [...] equality within a workforce.” So what does tokenism look like in real time, as compared to genuine efforts to affect change?

The illusion of being valued can be perpetuated in various ways. Does your LGBT+ society have a QTIPOC or BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) rep? Great! Does the rest of the committee let them speak? If so, do they really *listen* to what they have to say? If they organise QTIPOC-focused events, do they take their input into account, or just whack on a screening of “Paris Is Burning”? Do they give their projects funding, a platform, a space? Do they have any other QTIPOC on committee, other than to fill this role?

Having a BME rep, an LGBT+ rep, or even a QTIPOC rep is not an end within itself. It is simply one tool amongst many that we can use to achieve liberation.

### Resources:

Lazy Raine, QTIPOC Narratives, “Resisting Tokenism and Assimilationist Practices” (2018)  
<https://stemmemagazine.com/2018/10/11/qtipoc-narratives-collective/>

**“Having a BME rep, an LGBT+ rep, or even a QTIPOC rep is not an end within itself. It is simply one tool amongst many that we can use to achieve liberation.**

## Recommendations

Having read all of this, you will (hopefully) be wondering what can be done to tackle these issues. Below are some recommendations from QTIPOC with experience existing and resisting on their campuses.

### Developing an anti-racist LGBT+ society

To quote the black lesbian feminist Angela Davis, *"In a racist society it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist."* This is what we must take to heart when facilitating LGBT+ spaces. We actively need to tackle racism when it occurs, especially if it causes discomfort for white LGBT+ people who need to confront it and deal with it.

- Enshrine QTIPOC representation into your society and Union democratic structures (see Appendix 1 for a model motion).
- Work with QTIPOC to create a policy on combating racism, both inter-personally and institutionally
  - This should include a zero-tolerance policy<sup>1</sup> on racism, with the starting point defined by the Macpherson principle.<sup>2</sup>
  - UK Black Pride has written an "Anti-Racism Code of Practice" that we strongly recommend taking to your local LGBT+ venues and organisations. It can be found here: <https://ukblackpride.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Anti-RacismCodeofPractice.pdf>
- When organising fancy dress parties and events for your society, consider what you are wearing. Educate your membership about cultural appropriation and create clear guidelines on what is appropriate to wear.
  - Be active allies in this! Reach out to your students' union and

other societies in implementing this recommendation

### QTIPOC self-organisation

In many cases, your LGBT+ society will be resistant to change (knowingly or otherwise). Even if they are not, creating QTIPOC-only spaces to build communities, organise and support one another is vital not only to build collective power, but to bolster your own wellbeing.

- Create QTIPOC-only safe spaces to meet other QTIPOC, vent, and build a community. This could be an sub-group of your LGBT+ society, an independent QTIPOC society with its own resources, or a group completely independent of your Union.
- Organise events that celebrate QTIPOC culture and history.
- Get organised: meet with your fellow QTIPOC to discuss your needs and how to lobby for them within your Union, LGBT+ society, and educational institution.

### QTIPOC in history, media and culture

As previously mentioned, popular queer media is overwhelmingly white, and even the academia about us doesn't seem to be written by us. When you look a little further, however, there is a wealth of existing media and scholarship written by QTIPOC, for QTIPOC. It is also necessary to tell QTIPOC stories throughout the year, not just during history months -- we continue to exist when Black History Month, Islamophobia Awareness Month and LGBT+ History Month end, and one screening of *Paris is Burning* is not enough!

- Platform and centre media that isn't just about QTIPOC, but created by us.
  - When you want to host a film screening or a reading group,

<sup>1</sup> Please note, "zero tolerance" doesn't mean that someone is removed from a space after a single racist incident. It is

about recognising that every racist incident will be dealt with.

<sup>2</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/285537.stm>

research the creative process. This is easier when choosing a book, but especially important regarding media such as film, which is created collaboratively by a vast number of people.

- Are actors, directors, screen-writers or producers QTPOC? Are QTPOC paid and treated fairly, or excluded and exploited in the production process? What research was done to inform the work?
- Platform and centre QTPOC in Black History Month, Islamophobia Awareness Month and LGBT History Month.
  - Invite (and pay) QTPOC to speak, educate and run workshops. *It is better to have fewer events overall where you're actually paying QTPOC for their work rather than lots of events where you're relying on the exploitation and sense of obligation many QTPOC have to educate white people.*
- Critically discuss the whiteness of mainstream LGBT+ culture.
  - Don't be afraid of being uncomfortable: this is the only way that constructive conversations can happen. Encourage your peers to the origin of words associated with the LGBT+ community -- like 'girl', 'tea' and 'shade' -- and their history. Talk about how everyone's favourites -- like RuPaul's Drag Race and Queer Eye -- perpetuate racism.
- Seek out and provide educational opportunities around the history of colonialism, homophobia and transphobia, as discussed in this document.

**“In many cases, your LGBT+ society will be resistant to change (knowingly or otherwise). Even if they are not, creating QTPOC-only spaces to build communities, organise and support one another is vital not only to build collective power, but to bolster your own wellbeing.”**

## Appendix 1: Model Motion

This Union notes:

1. That during Black History Month, Islamophobia Awareness Month and LGBT+ History Month, there tends to be a lack of outreach towards and inclusion of QTPOC (Queer, Trans, Intersex People Of Colour).
2. That QTPOC on campus frequently report feeling unsafe, unwelcome and/or under-represented in LGBT+ groups as well as culture and faith societies.
8. to provide LGBT+ groups on campus with BME inclusion and unconscious bias training.
9. To ringfence £X for QTPOC events and campaigns.
10. To ensure that, at all stages of planning, the safety and confidentiality of QTPOC students is taken into account, protected, and maintained, using various strategies, such as ensuring that social media events do not identify individuals attending.

This Union believes:

1. That no one should be made to feel unsafe on campus, especially not on the basis of their gender identity, sexuality, cultural background, faith or race.
2. That more work needs to be done to foster a safe environment for QTPOC in both LGBT+ and BME spaces, and on campus as a whole.

This Union resolves:

1. To establish connections with and collaborate with QTPOC groups, such as UK Black Pride and Hidayah LGBT, to incorporate QTPOC history into Black History Month, Islamophobia Awareness Month and LGBT+ History Month at the Students' Union.
2. To enshrine regular QTPOC conversation corners into Fresher's Week.
3. To include representation of, support for, and advocacy for QTPOC in our democratic structures.
4. To work with national and local QTPOC and LGBT+ organisations to provide LGBT+ inclusion and unconscious bias training to culture and faith society committees.
5. To develop QTPOC inclusion training for University and Union staff.
6. To work with culture and faith societies to host events, such as debates, panels, and discussions on QTPOC history and issues faced by QTPOC.
7. To work with race equality groups, such as the Runnymede Trust, in conjunction with LGBT+ and QTPOC organisations,