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Style

Black, queer, ignored: Why the LGBT community is divided on Black Lives Matter

By Steven Petrow
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The long-standing schism between the black and white LGBT communities came into sharp focus at Toronto's Pride parade earlier this month. "We are calling you out!" shouted Alexandria Williams, co-founder of Toronto's Black Lives Matter chapter. With those words, the group's float abruptly stopped, halting the parade for 30 minutes. Williams accused white organizers of seething with "a historical and current culture of anti-blackness" in the Gay Star News. The backlash was immediate and harsh, with the BLM group accused of bullying, extortion and being anti-white.

Soon after, chapter co-founder Janaya Khan, who identifies as black and queer, wrote in Now: Toronto: "Since the action, I have received hate mail and death threats, primarily from gay-identifying men. I have been screamed at on the street. I have been called a "n-----" more times than I care to count. People have told me I'm no longer part of the queer community because my Blackness has no place there."

Both north and south of the border, criticism — rightful, in my view — is being leveled at the white LGBT community for not speaking up forcefully enough about the killings of black men by police in Baton Rouge and Minneapolis. In effect, too much #AllLivesMatter and not enough #BlackLivesMatter.

"I definitely think that there are a lot of white queer, trans folks who just don't get it," India Pierce, 27, who is black and queer, told me after the shootings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile last week. What does Pierce mean by "it?" To be black. To identify as LGBT and black.

As much as members of the white LGBT community understand bias and hate, all shades are not the same. "People think that because they identify with one marginalized group, LGBT, that they know and can identify with other marginalized groups, black," said Denzell Faison, a 24-year-old gay, African American law student. "But the marginalization is different and they have trouble seeing that it's different because gay white people are more closely aligned with straight white people than with black LGBT people."

Embarrassingly, I can draw on personal experience. Fifteen years ago I was living in Berkeley, Calif., and dating a black man who lived in San Francisco. Like many couples separated by the Bay Bridge, we constantly argued over whose "turn" it was to make the trek. Alonzo was unwavering that I be the one to drive. "The chances of my being pulled over for a trumped-up traffic charge, and that turning into a nightmare, is real,"

he would say. It wasn't until several years later that I understood how right Alonzo had been, verified again just this week when the New York Times reported that "San Francisco police disproportionately search African Americans." I didn't get "it" because Alonzo's fear was so far afield of my own experiences and understanding of race in America.

Meanwhile on Facebook, the Pink Pistols, a pro-gun LGBT organization, has seen its own surging numbers come to verbal fisticuffs over race and gun violence. A few days ago a member shared a link to a Washington Post investigation about the number of police shootings in the United States, claiming "it isn't a race issue [because] nearly twice as many white guys shot by police as black." In fact, the data showed that although blacks make up 13 percent of the population, they are 2 1 /2 times more likely to be shot and killed by police officers. After seeing that explanation, the original poster simply discounted the entire investigation. But here's another option: How about listening to either reason or math?

Rather than strengthening what could be a united LGBT front — or least an alliance of black, white and other LGBT communities — these fractious times are clearly tearing us further apart. Linda Villarosa, an African American, a lesbian and a journalist, sees things two ways: "The big picture in the LGBT community is that we as a group understand oppression better than overall American society. . . . The oppressor is often the same oppressor." But, she adds, "clearly parts of our community are racist and racist things happen in the LGBT community."

Where do we go from here? Villarosa quickly suggested that we need "to look beyond each incident and beyond the silos of our communities."

"So many of our conversations are scorched earth," she told me, with a heaviness in her voice. "We don't hear each other. . . . I have to force myself to say, 'Now is the time to listen.' "

I'll admit that it's exceedingly difficult to hear anything over the roar of the racial thunder right now. But that's no excuse. Nor is violence. Mychal Harrison, a financial consultant who identifies as gay and black, put it well: "There's a climate in this country that rewards people for demeaning those that don't look like them, think like them, or love like them. We must do better and we have to do better."

Harrison was talking not only about white people in general, but also white LGBT men and women, in particular. The question I'm left with is this: Why doesn't our unique LGBT experience of discrimination help us to have greater empathy for our queer brothers and sisters?

Email questions to Civilities at *stevenpetrow@gmail.com* (unfortunately, not all questions can be answered). You can reach him on Facebook at facebook.com/stevenpetrow and on Twitter @stevenpetrow. Join him for a chat at washingtonpost.com on Tuesday, July 19.

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Steven Petrow, a contributing columnist, is the author of “Steven Petrow’s Complete Gay & Lesbian Manners." Follow