

“I HAVE A SENSE THAT GAY IS DILUTING SIGNIFICANTLY.” GAY NOSTALGIA IN A POST-GAY WORLD AND THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSITIONS OF TORONTO’S CHURCH-WELLESLEY VILLAGE (1973-2023)

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Gary Myers is a 3rd year PhD Candidate in History, who was a recipient of the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship (2021-2024) and Women's Canadian Historical Society of Toronto Graduate Scholarship (2021-2022). Gary was born in Toronto, and has had a lifelong interest in Toronto history, including an immense interest and passion in LGBTQ2+ history. He has witnessed changes in Toronto's development since the 1960s, along with changes in gay Toronto and Toronto's Church-Wellesley Village since the 1980s.

Tell us about your field, your professional experiences before starting your current studies?

I have been a graduate student in the department of History at the Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies at York University since 2019, where I completed my Master's in 2021. My Major Research Paper was entitled, "Exploring Gay Nostalgia (1950 to 2000) on the Vintage Gay Toronto Facebook Website: Intergenerational Differences Between Older Gay Men and Younger Post-Gay Queers, and the Future of Toronto's Church-Wellesley 2SLGBTQ+ Village." I am currently in the final stage of my PhD program, expecting to defend my oral history dissertation in early 2025.

I have a diverse background in research, writing, academic administration support, and knowledge mobilization. I was a community-based digital researcher and writer exploring the emerging field of knowledge mobilization (KMb), producing weekly articles over the course of five years on the website, KMbeing (<https://kmbeing.com/>). In the Canadian Knowledge Mobilization (KMb) Top 100, I was rated within the top ten by knowledge brokers as one of the most influential in their KMb practice in a survey by

the Institute for Knowledge Mobilization in 2011 and 2012.

I co-authored a book chapter, "Applying Social Sciences Research for Public Benefit Using Knowledge Mobilization and Social Media,"¹ and a peer-reviewed article, "Knowledge translation and strategic communications: Unpacking differences and similarities for scholarly and research communications."² I was also affiliated with the Institute for Knowledge Mobilization working on the planning and successful development of Canadian Knowledge Mobilization Forums and writing follow-up reports about the events.

My earlier careers were in broadcast journalism and, for a really interesting twist, I also worked as a flight attendant.

Tell us about your research, and how it relates to the study of Canada.

My oral history dissertation project explores perspectives about the past, present, and future of Toronto's Church-Wellesley Village (TCWV) through oral histories of 27 self-identified gay men and written narratives on *Vintage Gay Toronto* (VGT) Facebook website. The stories conveyed by interviewees and narratives map the changing social, political, cultural, and spatial environment of the neighbourhood and gay Toronto over the past 50 years. This work

presents experiences of older gay men before and after the area was reconceptualized from a ghetto of segregated and predominantly gay residential space in the 1970s, to a flourishing gay commercial, entertainment, and residential village by the late 1980s and 1990s, and now to a current transitional period in which many gay men feel a lost sense of community and identity.

This research is informed by a knowledge mobilization strategy of community engagement. My work includes a step-by-step outline of a Community Engagement Workshop that was held at the beginning of my research. Workshop participants provided feedback and research themes to prioritize questions for the project's oral history interviews.

In the context of Canadian Studies, this work focuses on an important geographic space in Toronto, as Canada's largest city, by presenting the unique Canadian historical and socio-political influences that have shaped this "gaybourhood" as it evolved and continues to evolve. This includes the Lesbian and Gay Liberation and Women's movements in Canada during the 1970s, the 1981 Toronto bathhouse raids, along with the Canadian fight for minority rights based on sexual orientation and same-sex marriage.

There is a diminishing of gay villages, spaces, and organizations across Canada, the United States, Western Europe and Australia. A post-gay period has emerged in these spaces with a recognition of greater fluidity in sexual and gendered identities. This includes Toronto's Church-Wellesley Village (TCWV). I argue that the social, cultural, and political experiences of an older generation of Canadian gay men differ from a younger queer generation in Canada (and other parts of the world) who no longer align themselves to gay identity, gay culture, or gay villages and see little need to sustain them.

Changes in the built and demographic environments in Canada, and particularly in Toronto, are also contributing to these concerns. My research looks at how the fears about such changes and concerns that the histories of older gay men might be lost are prompting some gay men to express nostalgia during this transitional period.

How did you come to choose this research topic?

As an "older" cisgender male who self-identifies as gay, and who has continued to live and socialize in TCWV for over 40 years, I have a personal connection to this research. This work is both an historic account and a personal story. I use an autoethnographic approach to explore gay nostalgia about gay Toronto and TCWV to augment these sources. By engaging directly with my self-identified gay peers, I knew this research topic would be well situated to examine the social and cultural mechanisms at work in the construction of historical memories while also understanding the intergenerational transitions that have occurred in Toronto's LGBTQ2+ spaces.

What are the key takeaways you want others to come away with?

1) Tensions have arisen with gay being increasingly substituted with queer. This is particularly relevant when overlaying the term to describe historical experiences of those who did not self-identify with this previously derogatory term of the past. We must consider how this contemporary replacement may ignore or erase past histories of gay identity, gay culture and gay community that may potentially be forgotten by a more fluid generation.

2) A historical gay identity still exists for many older gay men who continue to self-identify as

gay but who grew up influenced by a more binary world that influenced their understanding of being gay. Identity is a dynamic construct that changes over time while retaining core elements which provide continuity and stability in our personalities. We have learned from a fluid generation that how we wish to self-identify is a personal decision to be respected. Automatically replacing gay with queer overlooks this.

3) The intergenerational transitions occurring between older gays and younger queers – along with changes in the neighbourhood's built and demographic environment, have initiated a new phase of Toronto's Church-Wellesley Village.

How did you come to choose this research topic?

In my search for gay men who could share their histories of gay Toronto, I was committed to find narrators to counterbalance the history of 'whiteness' in Toronto's historical gaybourhood. I found it challenging to find more non-white gay men who could share their memories of being gay in Toronto in the 1970s due to the predominantly white population in Toronto between 1971-1981, ranging from 85% to 95%.³ I looked more specifically for racialized gay narrators who experienced gay Toronto starting between the 1980s and 1990s yet was still challenged despite archival materials from this period indicating the existence of several racialized gay groups.

After an extensive search, I used a snowball technique for referrals and was fortunate that approximately 25% of the gay men interviewed were non-white and able to speak to their experiences within these organizations, gay Toronto and TCWV.

These gay men identify as Afro/Caribbean-Canadian, Indo-Caribbean Canadian or Indo-Canadian, Chinese-Canadian, Arab-Canadian,

Latino, and Indigenous, with most Euro-Canadian.

Tell us about what you enjoy the most about the work you do.

I have a curiosity about the past and enjoy uncovering new information, piecing together events, and discovering my own connection to the experiences these narrators shared in the oral history interviews. It also provided me with insights into current issues, while contributing to academic discourse. I also enjoy the opportunity to leave a lasting legacy through my research.

What advice do you have for those starting their academic journey?

My advice to those starting their academic journey is to set clear goals and define what you want to achieve. Also, apply for as many scholarships as you can. It can be financially worth it to support the time you dedicate to your academic life. Finally, once you start the writing process for either your Master's or Doctoral research, stay organized. I used both an 'Activity Journal' to track what I did and wrote about each day, along with an 'Ideas Journal' to jot down any idea that came to mind at any time. I didn't use all the ideas, but it was extremely helpful in the process.

What are the next steps in your research?

I see potential for future papers, conferences or public presentations, heritage walking tours or podcasts describing the process and sharing these stories. I also hope this work encourages future use of community engagement workshops as part of oral history research. After I finish defending my dissertation, I hope to have my work published as a book that I think will be of interest to not only future Canadian historians, but also the general public. The original scope of this

research was to provide an important reflective opportunity for gay men themselves to personally address the criticized history of TCWV as predominantly a gay, middle-class, white, male, cisgender space. It is with this in mind that future research can hopefully draw from this current project to broaden, address and respond to these reflective narratives by including the voices of trans, lesbian, bisexual, and further racialized gay and queer histories of both older and younger generations as a follow-up to this project.

Notes

1. Phipps, David J., Krista E. Jensen, J. Gary Myers, "Applying Social Sciences Research for Public Benefit Using Knowledge Mobilization and Social Media," in *Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to Social Sciences and Knowledge Management*, ed. Asunción López-Vareda Azcárate (Rijeka, Croatia: In-TechOpen, 2012), Chapter 9, 179-208.
2. "Knowledge translation and strategic communications: Unpacking differences and similarities for scholarly and research communications," *Scholarly and Research Communication*, 5(3): 0305175, 2014.
3. *Ethno-Racial Composition of the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) based on Censuses data 1971-2001*. Source: Michael Ornstein, *Ethno-Racial Groups in Toronto, 1971-2001: A Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile* (Toronto: Institute for Social Research, York University, 2006), Table 1.1.