

KIQ ep2.wav

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Rob: Hello and welcome to episode 2 of Keeping it Queer, I'm Rob, your LGBT+ officer, and my pronoun is they.

Sara: And I'm Sara, your NEC second place, and my pronouns are she/her.

Rob: This episode's topic is building anti-racist LGBT+ spaces, and this is for two main reasons. First is that it's October, although like hush-hush, we are actually recording this in September, sorry [laughs]

Sara: We're trying to be organised!

Rob: So, yeah, we're launching this as a part of Black History Month, but also we're launching this kind of in conjunction with a project that Sara has been leading on, which is really really cool, which is the Building Anti-racist LGBT+ Spaces Resource, and also training days, which are really exciting, and are coming up.

Sara: So the resource is - I mean the title is such a faff to say, Building Anti-racist LGBT+ Spaces, like there's so much in it, but it is a very complex topic, obviously. I guess like to state the obvious, people of colour face racism in LGBT+ spaces, and I think a lot of white people, in general, will kind of say that they're not racist, and, you know, to them that's it, cool, like the responsibility for racism and like living in a white supremacist society is not my responsibility any more, but I guess the resource talks about the fact that being not racist isn't enough, we have to be anti-racist, and I think especially so as queer people because colonialism and white supremacy has really shaped the world that we live in, probably more so for queer people than for anyone else, because colonial regimes, like white European colonial regimes, have completely decimated queer cultures and created cultures of homophobia and transphobia across the world where they didn't exist before. I think it's really important to acknowledge that history and understand the nuances of how racism takes shape in our community, in understanding that it's everyone's responsibility, including white queer people, to fight that, and to create fighting anti-fascist spaces. So that's like the logic behind the resource, and hopefully it can kind of give you some guidance as to how to make your LGBT+ spaces, like whether it's a uni society, or you know, any other space that you might run, into a anti-racist LGBT+ space.

Rob: Cool, so, yeah, I really recommend you check out the resource if you haven't already. It does a really good job of defining key concepts around the like common problems and experiences of QTPOC, but also kind of provides some really tangible, like things you can do, which I think is something that a lot of people are looking for. So I just wanted to like big that up and say Sara did a sick job with it.

Sara: Thank you. I love to have my ego stroked. [laughs] So I guess now, kind of drawing the attention onto someone else! [laughs] Yeah, so our guest for today's episode is Mwanso, who I will allow to introduce themselves.

Mwanso: Hi, I'm Mwanso. She/her pronouns, and I am the President of the QTPOC society at the University of Manchester. So to open up the discussion, I basically just wanted to ask, I guess Sara specifically, around kind of like what the main motivation behind creating the resource was, and what you want LGBTQ+ societies to be kind of like

doing with it, if that's OK

Sara: Yeah, sure. I guess like, beyond what I've said already, I can speak to my experience of being in my LGBT society, which is definitely, I guess what led me here, because, like, we both go to the University of Manchester, which has like one of if not the largest LGBT society in the country, and I think like I came to Manchester feeling super super excited about like having like the safe queer space, I was like coming out for the first time, and I was like 'I'm gonna find my tribe here' [laughs] and it's gonna be so great, and then I came to that space, and obviously experienced like these racist micro-aggressions, and I was like 'Ooh, actually, I'm not safe with this - this like group of white queers actually', and, like, they did have like at the time - like I haven't been involved with the society for years now, but like at the time they did have a BME rep on committee, and initially my thoughts were like 'oh, if I run for BME rep on committee, then I single-handedly, as the token brown person, can solve all of the society's problems', which I then couldn't, because -

Rob: It's a big job

Mwanso: Yeah! It's a lot of work for one person!

Sara: And also like I guess we might like touch on it more later or something, but also like I was their token, like I know I said that jokingly, but I definitely was, because they didn't want to talk about race or racism, or like interrogate like themselves, so that work was like put on me, and, like, I feel very strongly that the labour of fighting racism is not just the labour of people of colour, and if you're forcing us to do more emotional and physical labour then you're not taking responsibility for racism, and I'm not here to be your token, and I don't have that much energy [laughs] actually. I'm very mentally ill [laughs], leave me alone. But yeah, so I guess that that experience really shaped it for me, and when I got involved with like NUS and stuff, I would meet other queer people of colour from like other unions, and they all like felt very similarly, like they would go to white LGBT spaces, and they would be made to feel like they didn't belong there, and if they talked about racism, or like being anti-capitalist, they were like 'killing the vibe', cause we just want to go on bar crawls and have a good time, because, don't you know, like cis white gay men with money are liberated, so obviously we have queer liberation, right? [laughs] So I guess, I hope that provides some insight.

Rob: In conclusion, you are salty! [laughs]

Sara: Yeah, so basically in a nutshell, I wrote this resource cause I'm salty. [laughs]

Rob: It's where the best resources are built, is - is cause people are just tired.

Sara: Yeah. No, for real, though.

Rob: Genuinely, like anger is a powerful fuel.

Sara: For sure

Rob: No, that's really useful, I think like, especially the stuff you touched on, just as your personal - in your personal experience as being like a token and stuff, is I think something like a lot of marginalised students can relate to, like especially I think in LGBT+ spaces, I think, because there's this idea that if you have like a rep on your committee, you've just

like tocked the box, and like that's it, and there's often very little acknowledgement of like 'OK, but do we pay attention to this rep? Do we give them adequate resources and support and stuff?' So it sounds like that is like a pretty common experience, at least from what I've heard, like chatting to students and stuff. I guess something that I'd kind of like to get both of your takes on, maybe, is this idea of kind of like diversification, so thinking back to like having - you know, having reps for everybody, and like, you know, better representation of people in the media, for example, etc. So this idea of like diversification versus like decolonisation, cause I know that increasingly there's a - [laughs] Sara's doing jazz hands again! [laughs] For those of you at home! So I'd like to get your - yeah, your take on kind of like decolonisation versus diversification, and why, at least within like NUS, I think we broadly place an emphasis on decolonisation, and like why that is, basically.

Mwanso: Diversification like in itself - it doesn't make sense, in terms of - so, like in a society, if the, you know, say the president and the executive committees are not representing, you know, the va - for example, with the LGBT society, like any society, if they're a white gay man, and that's not representative of the people who are coming to the society, it doesn't make sense to just have a BME rep for example, because of, the top is still not inclusive of the like vast sexualities and genders and, you know, disabilities, etc. So I think it's important for us to focus on decolonising, just because, like nothing can really improve if any kind of system similar to that, like, doesn't change. But yeah.

Sara: Yeah, I totally agree, and to sort of like touch on that last point, I guess for me the difference between diversifying and decolonising is that diversity is kind of about the surface of something, and decolonisation is about the root of something. Or it's in this case specifically the institution and the society that we live in. So like, if we're not decolonising the institution, we're not, you know, radically transforming the institution, and interrogating like actually - like why does racism exist, it's because of this like colonial past, and like the inherent colonialism in our - like the way we think, in every aspect of our lives, then putting like a black or a brown face on the institution doesn't change the nature of what it is.

Mwanso: Also it's like your - we're talking about like tokenism and just being a spokesperson for like every, you know, my case like every black queer woman. Like I don't have time for that. And that's like [laughs] you know, I've got my life to live, and like the reason why I decided to make this society was because I - I just didn't want to have to go through that path, of having to be the - just be the minority - like, I just wanted to be surrounded by people who shared the same experiences as me, and wouldn't judge me, you know, just based off like how I look like. Even though, you know, being LGBT, you'd think that that space would be inclusive, but it's not really inclusive of everyone, so I just thought, might as well just make my own society [laughs] and not have to deal with, just the like the isolation of just people not understanding me at uni, let alone in like a space that, you know, QTIPOC are supposed to feel safe in. But they aren't, so yeah.

Rob: That's such a good point as well. We just want to live our lives.

Mwanso: Yeah

Sara: And like, the emotional like labour that people expect us to do by being - by representing all queer people of colour - what? [laughs] Like not -

Mwanso: I'm good

Sara: Yeah [laughs] Like no thank you. Like not only do I not have the time for that, but

like how could I possibly, like, understand what every other queer -

Mwanso: Yeah

Sara: Like I'm not - I'm not trans, I'm not black, like - and I could never understand those experiences. I'm not like an international student, I don't have like that language barrier, you know, how could I possibly like speak to those experiences?

Rob: And I guess like that is what you've kind of like succinctly explained there, it's kind of like almost the - one of the inherent problems of simply just having a rep and that being seen as like a tick-box thing, because like even just thinking about like the way we define a lot of things, so I'm just thinking as well like, in the context of like, when there's a trans rep on an LGBT+ committee, like that trans person, more often than not, won't be able to like speak to the experience of like transmisogyny, and like will usually be a person who, like myself, is AFAB, and like as a result of that, that means that those issues just aren't explored, because like - partially because people just probably - like you say, like you literally cannot really talk about those things effectively, but also because like - you'll just forget! It's a big responsibility, and I think it's entirely reasonable for you to just not have to take up a position. You like, you should be able to just go to a society social and not feel the need to run for the committee, like you know [laughs] Something that I think maybe we should - or at least I would like to chat about a little bit, is like the QTIPOC society, and kind of like what led you - you kind of talked about it, but what led you to like creating the society, what activities do you get up to, what the response has been like, etc. If you'd be OK to talk about that?

Mwanso: Of course. So the main reason was because, like of my past experiences within LGBT spaces, and obviously - can I say where I'm from?

Sara: Yeah

Mwanso: Just checking. [laughs] And because I'm from Sheffield, like the diversity is - you know, it's not as...

Sara: You can just say it's white! [laughs]

Mwanso: as much - it's so Manchester! It's not - yeah, like it's not as diverse as Manchester, and obviously when you get to like spaces that, such as like just being in the LGBT community within Sheffield, is not - you know, is pretty white. And so like from - and I've been engaging with the LGB - you know, my community, but with the LGBT community for quite - like for a lot of my childhood, and I just thought, like, just the emotional labour of having to usually be either the only black LGBT person there, or... or just like having a majority - having the spaces be majority white people and white LGBT people, and like maybe just like 3 or 4 like QTIPOC, like I just - I didn't fancy having that experience coming to uni, and I just thought - especially like, my last encounter, I was at an organisation which I will not name [laughs]

Rob: I love how that's a reoccurring theme in this episode!

Mwanso: And essentially the person who was reading - it was actually within Black History Month as well, and they had a little activity, and they were like - they were cis, but also a straight white woman - yeah, and so she read the statement out and she was like, should... like should people be allowed to say the N word, but obviously she said it, the

hard ER, in front of 5 of my fellow QTIPOC people, and it was - it was just like a really awkward experience, because it was obviously, like, us QTIPOC and then maybe, you know, like 20 other white LGBT people, but it was just quite a traumatising experience, cause in those situations, even though there's a cult - I had like my friends there, like what can you really say, because like, at the end of the day I was a minority in that space, and like I thought I couldn't really like state my opinion on, you know, things that affect me. So anyway, when I went to uni I was - I just didn't want to deal with any of that [laughs] like drama, so I decided to make the society. Also just because the university's such a big space, and it's so hard to come across QTIPOC students, let alone just black or Asian or any other ethnic minority. So I thought it'd be a good opportunity to just bring us together, and just - you know, just have a safe space for us to just - just talk about life and not always have to talk about the various forms of oppression that we have to deal with. But yeah, that was essentially it. I went to the society and - like one of the events, it was the bar crawl, and also just like my - or my bit, my thing is, a lot of - as Sara, you touched upon, it's like a lot of, you know, QTIPOC people will also have some form of religion that might not [laughs] mean that they wanna drink all the time, so I just thought about that as well, like - the space was just so - it just wasn't inclusive when I went there, and I just did - I just did not want to go through that experience. So that's mainly why I created the society. And you know, it's been - it's been relatively positive, what's the word? Feedback from people. I mean, if people are opposed to it they haven't said anything, but -

Rob: There is some drama!

Mwanso: Do tell!

Sara: Oh no, there was some drama, and - so, like, cause what you're saying is like so valid and so simple of like sometimes we just want a space to just be, but... some - certain people approached me saying that when they heard that a QTIPOC society was being set up, they were really concerned about queer people of colour segregating themselves from white queer people.

Mwanso: Someone said that to me actually.

Sara: And - yeah, and they said that they were disappointed because it made them feel bad about the fact that the society wasn't doing enough, and my - like I didn't say this to them, but my feeling was like 'well, it's because you're not, and maybe you should feel bad about that', and like I'm not here to assuage your guilt, like your white guilt. And yeah, cause like when you guys were doing that I was like 'back it, amazing' -

Mwanso: Thank you, thank you

Sara: and - but because I'm like the liberation officer full-time, like people came to me with their complaints, and I was like... No. [laughs] Stop right there. Just stop.

Mwanso: Yeah

Rob: People's like inability to acknowledge the difference between like people just self-organising, and like autonomy, and like literal segregation, is wild, like that is not the word for this thing.

Sara: It's funny as well, isn't it, because segregation is such a racialised word.

Mwanso: Yes!

Sara: So it - it definitely, yeah, rubs me the wrong way when white queers use segregation, like the term segregation to refer to this kind of phenomenon.

Mwanso: And I feel like - I don't really know if it comes from a sincere point of view, cause I feel like it's more the fact - or if you look at it, if there's a LGBT society and the QTIPOC one, people are probably gonna assume that - or obviously like what are - what aren't the LGBT society doing to, you know, be more inclusive or etc, etc. So it kind of makes them look bad to the people who wanna join the society, so I feel like it's - I can like - I feel like it's more in terms of - it could be seen as they just want to look - how this, you know, façade of 'Yeah, we love QTIPOC people, and we're all-inclusive', but you know, deep - obviously it's not the case most of the time.

Sara: But don't you know they did a screening of Moonlight? [laughs]

Mwanso: Wow! [laughs] That's great! And what's Moonlight got to do with it?

Sara: [laughs] I don't care, it's staying! That is the one that is 100% staying, I love it! I mean I hate it but I love it.

Mwanso: It's just - it doesn't make sense, like when they use - you know, just like snippets of - just things that don't really tackle the issue, and they're just like 'yeah, we're alright', you know, 'we love QTIPOC people' but not really, not really loving us at the end of the day, so yeah.

Rob: I feel like that segues kind of nicely into what like societies can do better tangibly

Mwanso: I would suggest some training. I'm not sure - I guess inclusivity training, I don't know what would be the formal name to it. But, just so - I do believe that some things can just come at a place of ignorance, and if your - if you're just not surrounded by like people who are different from you, like obviously you're gonna think in certain ways, so maybe some form of training. Just something similar to the resource essentially, that people can just access and see, and tell their com - executives, like this is what you shouldn't really be saying, or this is how you could actually try and dismantle like stereotypical views that some society members might have, or if you see that one of your executives thinks - is like transphobic for example, or like, you know, racist, maybe having actual conversations and maybe like disciplinaries, that actually, instead of just giving them a tap, you know, if you say sorry, and just ignoring it, but -

Sara: Yeah, I mean some LGBT societies have let literal Nazis, like, run them, you know. Don't let people get away with that, that's a good start.

Mwanso: Yeah

Sara: Kick out the Nazis.

Mwanso: Yeah, I think that's a good start.

Sara: Yeah

Mwanso: That's definitely...

Sara: In all seriousness, I guess - I mean I've got a lot of thoughts on this.

Rob: Do some.

Sara: I guess like in addition to what Mwanzo said, which I absolutely agree with, I think that a lot of it has to do with - so I meet like a lot of white queer people who seem to think that their queerness absolves them of their whiteness, and when you confront them with their whiteness, they get almost more uncomfortable than some cis - like cis het white men I've encountered, and I think the first thing is to just acknowledge, like actually you are white and you do have white privilege, and your white guilt doesn't help anyone, so how about you take responsibility for the privilege that you have, and you actually like try and use it to help us. We touched upon it like in the last episode with regards to disabled people, but also it's really just as basic as like listening to us and acknowledging us as like human beings. I think a lot of white queer people, and I think we kind of alluded to it earlier, like have this homogeneous idea of queer people of colour means that you can have one BME rep and the problem is solved. You know what, we make up most of the - black and brown people make up most of the world, mate. And, as such, queer people of colour, like are incredibly diverse. We have a beautiful diverse range of identities and experiences, and languages, and - educate yourself on that, like educate yourself on like two-spirit and Hijra and, like, queerness in African communities, and the history of how colonialism have ruined our thriving queer cultures, like in the example that I use often, just cause obviously like I'm most acquainted like with my own history, like from my South Asian background, is that homosexuality was never illegal until the British made it illegal in the 1800s, and we like to talk about how like it's amazing that Indians finally decriminalised homosexuality, because look at these backward brown people, they've finally caught up with us, and it's like 'actually, this is your fault'. Acknowledge that. And, yeah, like that's what's at the root of all of this, right, because like I guess we didn't talk about - much about the fact that it's assumed by a lot of white people that people of colour are like more homophobic or more transphobic than white people, and a lot of the time our experiences are erased because they can't even perceive that like a queer person of colour can exist, because those like backwards people, they don't, you know, they don't do that, or they can't do that. Which is ridiculous, because actually your white Western concept of what queerness means is just different from ours, and the fact that our queerness doesn't use the same language as yours, or the same framework as yours, doesn't make it invalid. Like two-spirit is not the same as non-binary, don't try and equate the two, that kind of thing. I feel like I've rambled a bit, but it's just very much like about like educating yourself and, like, recognising that it's your responsibility as a white person to like educate yourself on these things. Yeah.

Rob: That was very articulate and stuff, so thank you for that. Something I'm increasingly seeing is white non-binary people using, like, non-Western gender identities as like [laughs] Sara's looking like so enraged right now!

Sara: It's cause I know exactly what you're talking about, it makes me so angry.

Rob: Using like non-Western, like quote-unquote non-binary, but in terms of like not binary, gender identities, as like explanations, or kind of like - almost like political footballs to explain their own gender identity - like this idea of like 'there's nothing new about being non-binary, this specific culture had a gender that was like a third gender or whatever', and that you - you explained it there, but like, stop doing that, like -

Sara: Yeah, cause that's racist!

Rob: It's racist as hell

Sara: Like taking something that isn't yours, that's cultural imperialism, mate. [laughs] And stop.

Rob: And also like it's often the only time that white non-binary people will ever mention, or like think about, like trans people of colour, or like non-Western gender identities as a whole. And I guess that was just a specific thing that I wanted to like draw upon that I've noticed like more and more and more happening that we could just - just stop, it's not hard, just stop that! [laughs]

Sara: So I guess one other thing that I wanted to touch on, cause we - we've been talking about like QTIPOC issues and racism in the LGBT community broadly, but I think it's really important, especially cause we mentioned that we're doing this episode partly for black History Month, that like we talk about how QTIPOC spaces aren't perfect either, and I did touch on earlier the fact that we don't wanna like homogenise this idea of 'queer person of colour', and, you know, sometimes there is transphobia, or anti-blackness, or misogyny, or all sorts of problems in our spaces, and in think specific - myself as like a cis woman and a South Asian person, like, cannot speak at all to the experiences of... being those people in those spaces, so, like Mwanso, I don't know if you want to talk a little bit about your experience as a black person, like a black queer person specifically, and like your experience in those spaces?

Mwanso: I think like the biggest issue, I guess, that I've encountered, is that often I just feel like... to just see black people in general will be at the front lines fighting for QTIPOC really - not QTIPOC, like non-black related issues, but when it's time for just non-black people to like fight behind a black issue, like where they're at, like they're not there. And - oh, just encountering like other communities that aren't black, I often find that - for example, the N word cause that's all I can think of right now, the non-black people might be like 'oh, I can say that, because you know', or like we're - we're both of a minority so it's cool to say, but obviously that's, no, that's not [laughs] that's not, we're not that type. But, it's just issues like regarding black people, I just find that sometimes just won't be taken seriously by other ethnic minorities, just as how - I just - I find it funny, just because we're all supposed to be in the same boat, but like there's not that level of just like communicating with each other and just trying to understand that, like ultimately we are both oppressed for the same reason, and like we should like both be, you know, trying to like work together and like find solutions instead of just this back and forward, just not understanding each other as communities, but that's - that should basically what, like, I seem to face really.

Rob: Thank you.

Sara: I would never ever ever say that I speak for a black person as like a QTIPOC rep, like, cause I don't. And any like non-black people listening to this, you don't do it either. [laughs]

Rob: Sara has pointed at the mic. [laughs]

Sara: Nice

Rob: And I guess like, to cheekily plug it into our campaign work, I guess like a final thing that we would suggest society members - like committee members, or generally like LGBTQ+ students who want to develop their anti-racist politics do, is come to our training days! So as a part of the launch of this resource and to kind of make sure that our membership gets the most out of it, we are going to be running two training days. One of them is gonna be at UOMSU in Manchester, and the other will be in London. The dates for these are currently TBC, but they should be around late October, early November. And what I'm gonna do, through the magic of audio editing, is after this - at the end of this episode I'm gonna include a little clip of me - of future Rob giving you the dates and how you can register for them, because by the time I've edited this [laughs] it will be booked. But yeah, basically, end of October, early November, they're free to attend for any like student, basically, who wants to come and develop their anti-racist LGBTQ+ politics. [music plays]

Sara: So, first off, I guess, thank you Mwanso so much for coming on this episode of the podcast, it was really, really great to have you, and I still like can't get over it how much I stan the fact that you're like a second-year baby, and you have done so much, and you are so cool.

Mwanso: Do you know that quote is like, if you walked so I could run [laughs]

Sara: I hope the mic picks that up!

Mwanso: It's because of people like you, that's basically what I'm saying, but thank you for the big-up. If people want to find out about the society, etc [a few words unclear 34:40-43] I'm so bad, I can't - I forgot to pick my handles! If you wanna join the society, and you're a University of Manchester student, a QTIPOC student obviously, you can just go on the website, but also follow us on Instagram at UOM underscore QTIPOC, and we also have a Facebook and Twitter where you can follow the same handle. We also have an exciting event, which is a talk on intersectionality, but it's based on the perspective of black LGBT folk, specifically activists, local activists within Manchester, but also student activists as well, from around the UK, and that's gonna be on the 16th of October.

Rob: Thank you everyone so much for listening, and for joining us for this month's episode. We will see you in about a month's time. We're doing pretty well so far in terms of staying on schedule, so I feel pretty confident we will speak to you in a month's time!

Sara: We will get an episode out a month!

Rob: Whether you like it or not!

Sara: We are keeping it queer! [laughs] See what I did there? Outro music!