

TALKING QUEER

Archive, Activism, Creative Disruptions

Hosted by Caio Simões de Araújo

EPISODE 5: WRITING QUEER IN AFRICA: a conversation with Carl Collison

In today's episode, I'm speaking to Carl Collison. Carl is a freelance journalist, photographer and filmmaker. His work focuses on producing LGBTIQ-related content from across Africa. Prior to this, he was the Other Foundation's Rainbow Fellow at the Mail and Guardian. Amongst other things, in today's episode, we'll speak about his recent film, titled "COVID and Cape Town's Homeless Transgender Sex Workers".

Carl, welcome to the podcast.
Thanks for having me.

Let's start speaking a little bit about your trajectory. How did you start reporting on queer issues?

I've been writing for about 20 years now, I'd say. And I'd always focused on human interest and arts stories. But then in 2016, I was awarded the fellowship by the Other Foundation, the Rainbow Fellowship at the Mail and Guardian. And for this Fellowship, I was to report specifically on queer issues across the continent. And that's kind of how I got into writing on queer issues, focusing on it.

And you've been doing it for a few years now. So I wonder if you can tell us a bit about how do you see queer representation in South African media in general?

Look, it's not perfect, but we generally do better than other African countries, right? Given our Constitution, one would kind of expect that. So, there is that positive, but there are instances, there are publications, that still continue to use derogatory words for queer people. And these are obviously more tabloid-y type publications that do this for sensationalist reasons. But it is problematic given that these publications have a broad readership and broad listenership. But generally, I would say we fare relatively well.

What about in terms of queer presence in the institutions of journalism? Do you think that queer journalists find it more difficult to find a professional space, a professional voice? How is the situation?

There is definitely an issue with the lack of thorough queer journalism done by queer people in South Africa. I think, as cis-gendered queer people, we have a greater presence. But if you look at gender non-conforming queer journalists, or trans-journalists, I don't know of any, especially in the bigger publications, the more mainstream publications, and this is something that I really think needs to be addressed. We definitely need more gender non-conforming bodies in newsrooms across the country, because I could tell a trans-person's story, but I will not

do it as well as a trans- or gender non-conforming person, as well as I may try to write it. I think there is a definite lack in that regard.

What about when it turns to the intersections? In a society like South Africa and many others in the Global South, we are talking about intersectional spaces in which queerness overlaps with questions of race and class. Obviously, race is a major issue in South Africa. Can you speak a bit about this intersection between representations of sexuality and race in journalism? Are black queer bodies spoken about differently than white queer bodies?

Definitely, definitely, definitely. It's very problematic the way in which black queer bodies are spoken about. There are pockets in which there is praise for the black queer experience, especially black queer people who are economically disadvantaged, right? But this tends to be more, I would say, within the arts and culture sector. So, you have movements like the vogue balls, or you have artist expressions, or music or fashion, where the black queer experience is spoken of with a kind of reverence, in a way. But generally, I find that media, especially mainstream media, when we write about the experiences of black queer people, especially those who are economically disadvantaged, there's largely the victim trope, which is perpetuated. So, we, our experiences, won't make newspaper columns or inches, it won't make the news unless it has a horror story attached to it, a story of violence, a story of displacement or different kinds of violence. So, the black queer experience is not covered with respect, I would say, and it's not covered with nuance in news, in mainstream newspapers or publications generally.

Now that we are speaking about diversity in representation, something that has struck me as interesting in your work is the way in which you also try to look beyond South Africa. You've done work in Tunisia, and you've done work in other African countries. Why was that important to you, to think about these different locations?

I think I was frustrated with the way in which we were fed stories about other African countries. These usually came through bigger international newspapers, Western or American newspapers or European publications, online publications. And I found there was very little nuance in the reporting. It was sensationalist. We always get the: "so many people were arrested in Lagos, so many people were arrested at a Pride march in Addis Ababa, this bill has been passed in Uganda" or whatever. There wasn't a layered look at queer experiences in Africa, across African countries. So, I kind of decided to just take myself there. A lot of the time, in fact most of the time, publications that I would write for didn't have enough money to send me, so I would pay for myself to go. You know, pay for my own flights, pay for my own accommodation and stuff, just because I felt there was a kind of real need for an African journalist to tell African stories to an African audience in a respectful way, in a way that was nuanced and not sensationalist. And that really paid homage to people on the ground, who are kind of living their queer lives within very repressive environments, dangerous environments, often.

Well, speaking as a South African, as someone working in South African journalism, what have you learned in these various locations?

What have I learned? I've learned that despite it all, we get on with it, we live, and we do things. Like in Uganda, I lived in a village with a trans-man who goes through the most in terms of having to hide, and just really struggling. But he gets up every day and he helps his community. He helps people who are going through the same stuff with no money, with no resources. He continues to live in defiance of this repression. In Tunisia, too, there were people, young queer kids, who were just so inspirationally defiant, because it is such a repressive environment, very patriarchal and just really oppressive. But they blossom in this, they live. So, that is kind of what I've learned. And I think that this is where we as media fail, we go for "the everything is shit" stories, you know, "everything is terrible". Everything is "victim, victim, victim". But we're actually survivors. And this needs to come forward more in our in our writing and our covering of queer issues.

Journalism, as so many other areas of life, has been impacted by COVID. And you have specifically reported on how the queer community in South Africa was dealing with that. Can you talk about the work that you did in the context of COVID-19?

When we were hit with COVID, it threw me a bit as a writer, because I didn't want to write about COVID. I didn't want to write about this pandemic. But then, slowly, through making contacts with activists on the ground, I could see there was clearly a need to tell the stories of how queer people are affected by COVID. And I mean, as you know, COVID really exposed the fault lines in our societies, and queer people are, as usual, just like falling through the cracks, particularly trans-people and gender non-conforming people. It has been tough reporting on it. Just seeing that, how situations for trans-people in general in South Africa is not great. COVID has made it so much worse. So, yes, it's very tough.

Since you're mentioning issues that are difficult to write about, can you tell us a bit more about your work on queer refugees in South Africa? That seems to be quite a recurrent theme in your writing.

I write a lot about queer refugees. I've done quite a few stories on it. Obviously, when COVID hit you realise that we, as South African queer people, might be hardly affected. But for queer refugees, it's much tougher. So, the experiences of refugees, particularly queer refugees, is so fraught with multiple layers of discrimination. There's obviously the trauma that they go through in their home countries, which results in them having to flee. Then when they get here, they have the state, they are fighting for recognition, you know, for paperwork, basically. And they have to deal with homophobic South Africans and xenophobic South Africans, as well as homophobic people from their own countries who are now in South Africa. And then on top of that, there is poverty. So, for me, it's a no-brainer that this is something that has to be covered, again, with respect and with nuance, and with an aim to broaden our understanding of their experiences.

Hearing you talk about these multiple layers of inequality and discrimination and so on, what comes to mind is a recent project of yours, the film you made on homeless transgender women in Cape Town. How did that project come about?

I heard that there were pockets of homeless trans-women living across Cape Town, in various areas. So, they would be living under bridges or on fields, empty fields, or in caves sometimes, or in abandoned buildings. And I'd always wanted to write about these women. And then when COVID hit, GALA approached me saying that they had some funding available for COVID-related projects. And that's when I pitched the idea for a film on these women. And it took me a few months, you only see 10 minutes, but it took a good few months.

I'm sure. And the results are really beautiful. I'd like to hear more about the aesthetic choices that you made when you were thinking about the project, when you were shooting the film, anything in particular that comes to mind you would like to share?

The most important thing for me was to depict these women in a way that was dignified, and steered clear of tropes. So, whether it would be a sex worker trope, standing on the streets, or a homeless woman living in a shack or whatever, they were all shot as regally in a way, or as proudly in a way, as I could possibly shoot them. And also, what I did was I faded them into the background, faded into the space. That was very important for me, because I wanted them to occupy space. Spaces where they aren't allowed, right? Because they are at this intersection of discrimination, of class, race, gender, identity, all of those things. Now, also, while most of the film is black and white, I chose to have them shot in color, because I wanted them to be vibrant, and to really pop visually. Those were very, very, very important considerations for me, to treat them with, like, the utmost respect that I could, with my limited means. And I got feedback, they are really happy with the film. So that's all that matters, really, I think. Well, and that people get to hear these stories.

And would you say these are stories of endurance, of suffering, or of hope? Or all of it?

All, all of the above, exactly. All of the above. That was very important for me, because obviously, you want to tell the story of what they went through, or what they're going through. But you don't want to harp on that. You want to show that these are women who get up every morning, bust a gut to make things happen, to put food in their bellies and to stay alive, really. So that was very important, to have that combination that you spoke of now.

The movie is really powerful. When I was watching it, I was also thinking about your journalistic work. You

have many articles in which you write about queer strategies of homemaking, for instance, the vogue scene in Johannesburg, or a black queer collective squatting in a vacant house in Camps Bay, in Cape Town. And I was looking at these two elements together: on the one hand, you make a film about homelessness, and on the other hand, you're writing about queer homemaking. I was quite curious to know, why is this issue of home, or the lack of a home, so important in your work? Why does that resonate with you?

A lot of queer people are excommunicated from their homes once it is discovered that they are queer. So, this is obviously an issue for queer communities across the world, right? For me, it also possibly has a personal kind of connection, because when my parents discovered that I'm queer, I was thrown out of the house. And that led me to all manner of poor decisions, you know. Personal decisions that I made, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, you know. Because I was trying to fill that. I think, on some level, I was trying to fill that void, in a way. And I think this happens with a lot of queer people. So, the building of home or the finding of home or the need for home, is a huge thing for us as queer people. And I think maybe my kind of focus, as you say, on that has possibly to do with my own personal history. But also, certainly I see, as I am interviewing people, a lot of queer people were thrown out of home, they were rejected from home. And this often happens with people who, like me, do not come from wealthy backgrounds, and do not have very much to fall back on. So, this leads them down really problematic or dangerous or self-destructive paths. So, yes, home is a big theme, I suppose you could say, in my work. Well spotted, I never noticed that [laughs].

Yes, to me, that was quite a striking aspect of your work. And that led me to think about all the different experiences that you write about. Experiences and strategies of queer-making, from the vogue and ball scene in Johannesburg to people trying to create safe online spaces for the queer community. So, it seems that there are a lot of parallel projects going on at the same time. And I wonder when you look back, what are the similarities between all these ongoing projects?

Good question. I would say just trying to find a place, I think. That is just what all people really want, right? They want a place of their own, whether it is a physical space, or a recognition of them and of their lived experiences. A safe space, a judgment-free, love-filled space, I think that is what drives a lot of these kinds of initiatives, because we kind of have to build it for ourselves, right? Because we are denied it in so many other spaces. So, yes, I think it's that, it's a sense of a search for a space of our own.

That's great. As someone who has been working as a journalist, as a filmmaker, as a writer for some time in South Africa, I wonder what kind of advice would you give to young queer people who are also trying to find a voice?

I don't know. Just keep on. Just keep on doing it, just keep going at it. The results will come. I don't know [laughs]. It's very simple, it sounds very simplistic, but there is a lot to be said for persistence and fighting and continuing to fight. Like the trans-man in Uganda, who lives in a village, or like those queer Tunisian kids, you know. Just to fight for recognition and visibility, to fight for the sense of space, safe space, whether it is a brick and mortar house, or a more metaphoric safe space, we just have to keep on fighting for that, trying to create it. And not just for ourselves, but for other people, too. And not just for other people within our circles, but other people out, completely out of our worlds, people who live 1000s of miles away. We have to be cognisant of each other's pain and of how we can, in our own little way, try to alleviate that pain. So, the fight is important. Continuing to fight is important, I would say.

Beautifully put Carl, and such a beautiful way to conclude our chat. Thank you so much for joining us in the podcast.

My pleasure. Thank you for having me, nice chatting!