Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 62 Black Disabled Women in Media

Guests: Kym Oliver and Jay Abdullahi of The Triple Cripples

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

[lounge-esque electronica]

KYM OLIVER: It's a big dream to be able to change a culture from one that excludes you and erases you to make it see you and include you on a deep, structural level.

Introduction

[lounge music fades out, radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello, hello, hello! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. Today's episode is about Black disabled women in media. I'm in conversation with the goddesses behind Triple Cripples: Kym Oliver and Jay Abdullahi. Triple Cripples is a project created to highlight the narratives of Black & non-Black Women, Femmes & Non-Binary People of Colour, living with disabilities whose stories would otherwise remain hidden from view. You'll hear Kym and Jay talk about the origins of Triple Cripples, the lack of representation of Black Disabled women in media, the racism they face as Black disabled women in the UK, their vision for culture change, and the future of their platform.

Are you ready? Away. We. Go! [electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: So, welcome Kym and Jay. I'm so excited to have you on my podcast today!

KYM: Thank you for having us.

JAY: Hello, thank you for having us.

ALICE: So, why don't you two first introduce yourselves.

JAY ABDULLAHI: My name is Jay. That's a shortened version of Olajumoke. I was born in Nigeria, where I contracted polio before my first birthday. I moved to London by the time I was five and been living there ever since. I've got a big passion for traveling. And just last year, I reached out to the other member of Triple Cripples, the wonderful Kym, and we started on this whirlwind adventure. Yeah.

KYM: I'm Kym, and I am Jay's breast-half. [laughs] So, the reason I say that is just because of some trolls who love my breasts. Anyway! So, my background is, I don't know, as a human that travels the world trying to learn and be a better person. I used to be a musician. I used to do a lot of different things and studying. Then I got diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and my whole world changed. And so, one of the reasons why Jay and I met is through me trying to help the world around me to understand the ways in which my world had changed through MS. Things that I was experiencing that the people around me just didn't seem to understand. And so, I was like, oh! I'll put it online! Then, if they see it there, they'll look at it, and they'll understand it. And they'll listen because it's not me [laughing] talking to them. It was me being shady, essentially. [laughs] And Jay, we met through that.

We both write. Jay's a travel blogger, and she travels round the world telling everybody stories of what it's like to travel with a disability. I am an official sex, dating, and relationships aficionado from a disability perspective, and I'm a wheelchair user. Jay uses a caliper and crutches. And so, we've got different perspectives, but at the same time, an aligned goal.

[lounge-esque electronica music break]

Where the name, Triple Cripples, came from

ALICE: Well, you know, when I first saw you both, immediately the Twitter handle, @TripleCripples, I'm like, ok! Hang on! I wanna know kinda how the term "triple cripples" came up and also just how you both found each other and decided to create this.

KYM: It came out of how we met, really, through the Internet, which is a powerful tool, especially for people with disabilities. And so, Jay reached out to me 'cause she liked the baby girl, and she stalked me for a while, [laughs] through one of our mutual friends! She's gonna say it's not true. She's gonna deny it, but let it be known that Jay stalked me and slid in my DMs and was like, "Let's meet up. I've got this idea." We met up. We both had the same idea. We were both like, look. There's no representation.

I existed in a world by myself as someone who was newly disabled. I didn't know any disabled young people. People kept trying to introduce me to older people. I couldn't relate, and they couldn't necessarily relate to me. And the world around me couldn't relate to me because it was so unusual for them to see a young Black woman with a condition in the world. It's very isolating. So, the reason why I started my platform is 'cause I was like, there must be other people like me, so I'm gonna do this so other people aren't alone. And Jay had the same idea and got in contact with me and was like, "I've got this idea!" And when we both said our idea, it was the same thing. [laughs] And so, neither of us wanted to do it by ourselves.

JAY: As Kym rightly said, I deny all stalking allegations.

KYM: [chuckles]

JAY: I would like to put that out there first of all. I had actually first found out about Kym via Instagram, and I saw that she had been uploading some videos. And the fact that she was disabled as well, as she said, for both of us, the only disabled Black people we knew were ourselves. So, I decided to reach out to her.

KYM: [laughs]

JAY: And I said, "Hey, I've been thinking about doing this thing for a very, very long time. But I know that for such an undertaking and for something that is absolutely so important, I wouldn't want to do it by myself. This isn't something that we wanted to be a flash in the pan. This is something that we wanted to have for a very, very long time. We had met up trying to figure out the shape and form that what is now TC would take. And we were just going through a list of names, and then Kym, as an off-hand comment just came up with, “Oh, how about Triple Cripples?” I was like, first, I love things that rhyme first of all!

KYM: [laughs]

JAY: And it’s something that you remember. And for a lot of people, using “cripple,” using that particular c-word, it’s like, “Mm, actually? No.” So, because we knew that it’s just a way to jolt people awake to pay attention. And usually, the way that you can do that is by saying something as shocking as “cripple,” so.

KYM: Yeah. This is Kym. The things that joined us together were that we were Black, were that we were disabled, were that we were women. So, looking at those came out of looking at those three aspects of our identities and then kind of turning it on its head. We can chart individually for each of those marginalizations how they affect us. We have a story for every single one, but at the same time, we experience all of them all the time. And it’s like a flag, us waving a flag, being like, “Yes! We’re here! We exist! And we’re hilarious.” [laughs]

Kym and Jay’s sisterhood and emotions

ALICE: You two have a chemistry, and it’s very clear that you two love each other. And that’s what I love too: a great disability love story.

KYM: Yeah!

ALICE: Because I think as both of you mentioned, it is.

KYM: [squeals] Aww! [laughs]

JAY: This is Jay. I will say absolutely, Alice, you’ve hit the nail on the head. There’s a sisterhood here. Because for both of us within our families, we are the only girl children, so we only ever had brothers. At least for me, it felt like you’re the sister that I was missing out on! OK. And it’s because of this kind of relationship that we have developed that people are really surprised that we’ve known each other for just coming up to a year. Like, we haven’t actually known each other that long. But because of the way that we have both gone through life, the need for disabled people to tell our stories, that there is joy in certain moments. There are some moments where all you can do is laugh. Being disabled at times can be very difficult. It can be very isolating. But at times, there’s a lot of humor that actually comes within that, and the way that you have to look at life being a disabled person. And that can only be authentically told by somebody that has this lived experience, I feel, you know.

KYM: There is an underlying belief that disabled people aren’t human, right?

ALICE: Mmhmm.

KYM: And so, I think it’s so important to have the representation of our relationships as humans and our interaction as humans. And we are multi-faceted. We’re not a monolith. I think sometimes there’s this propensity to feel that you have to be one thing at a time. And we’re not. Human beings aren’t. [laughs] You know? That’s just the nature of human beings. We have variety and color and complex, deeply complex emotions. And I think the important thing for me is that in people seeing us just being ourselves, they recognize that oh, they’re people! Oh, OK. So, this isn’t this scary thing, or this isn’t this weird thing that I have to kind of be tentative with or not treat the same way or treat— No.

Jay is a blessing. Anyone who meets her just loves her. So, it was important I had met someone that had that spirit and that energy when stuff got hard and when the world was trolling you and telling you that, “Actually, there’s no such thing as racism.” And, “We’re all disabled together, and you know, I’ve been really nice to you. You’ve had really good experiences with the NHS,” and kind of trying to silence what it is you’re trying to do. You needed someone who was on the same wavelength and who understood that this isn’t about the individuals who I met who are cruel. This is a bigger structural issue. And it’s OK; I’m here with you, sis. Let’s do this together. Let’s keep going. I feel blessed to have met her.

The Internet connects people in a way, especially disabled people. And disabled people of color, because we are so marginalized, it connects us in a way that we would’ve never, ever been connected. If it weren’t for the Internet, I’d have never met Jay. And so, I’m grateful for the Internet, and I’m grateful for Triple Cripples.

ALICE: This is where magic happens.

[bouncy music break]

Impacts on life when media representations of disability are overwhelmingly white

ALICE: The representation of disability, especially in media, in entertainment, it’s overwhelmingly white. That leaves out so many people that we never hear from.

JAY: Mm.

KYM: The healthcare providers, the policy makers, the people who are dealing with your housing, the people who are dealing with your social care, they only have this image of disability that looks white, right? So, when you as a person of color come before them or are trying to access services, they can’t see you. They can’t see your needs. They don’t see them as being as relevant or equal to those of your white counterparts, partly due to the fact that you’re not existent in the representation. But also because of the other racial biases, deep-rooted racial biases, unconscious and conscious, that exist. So, as a Black person trying to access a service, because of the programming that people have from media—and we’ll call it propaganda ‘cause that’s what it is. It’s negative propaganda that has been targeted and kind of disseminated over hundreds of years now of Black people being unworthy, of Black people being thieves and liars and murderers and all of these things—so, if I’m coming to access a service, they’re looking at me as someone who’s trying to take something that doesn’t belong to me. As someone who’s trying to abuse the system and get stuff for free and someone who doesn’t wanna work. ‘Cause Black people are lazy and someone who’s exaggerating ‘cause Black people don’t feel pain. ‘Cause a long time in the medical profession, they were taught scientifically that we are akin to animals and therefore don’t feel pain. That hasn’t disappeared, you know?

And so, you have no idea what you’re talking about any of the time, especially if you’re dealing with male professionals. Everything you open your mouth to say is emotional and therefore, invalid. And it’s not to say that there are not individual cases where people’s things go fine, but we’re talking, again, about structure in general.

JAY: When we consider the media, it’s not just the films, it’s not just the TV shows. It’s the radio programs. It’s the advertising. It’s everything that we consume without even realizing it. Now, for your average person, having to constantly justify yourself is tiring enough.

KYM: Mm.

JAY: But I barely had enough energy to come to you today in your doctor's office. I cannot now become an advocate every single time that I want to see you because I am in physical, literal pain, and I need for you to believe that.

KYM: Mm.

JAY: So, representation is absolutely very, very important because whether people realize or not, it informs every single decision that they make.

[mellow music break]

Racism in the UK

ALICE: Within the larger disability community in the UK, have either of you experience racism by disabled people? This is the stuff like, "How dare you bring up race?" Or, "How dare you bring up gender when we have more important things to talk about?"

JAY: This is Jay. For me personally, I haven't had, at least in recent memory, towards me directly anything racist. But I will say that when you are already part of a marginalized group—so, if we take disability—they try and lump you together. "Hey, we're all fighting the same fight." So, now if you bring up your gender, if you bring up your race, if you bring up your sexuality, if you bring up your religion, you're just trying to create a divide. Just because somebody is part of a marginalized group doesn't mean that they can not be any sort of -ism to people from other marginalized groups. So, it feels as though those that are essentially one step away from power, so if we take a disabled white man, it does not negate the fact that he is still a man. It does not take away from the privilege that he has of being white. And when we decide to not have these conversations, when we're told that we are being divisive, it's just a way of keeping us silenced. It cannot be a one-size-fits-all situation, and it cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution because we are not the same. Even if we have the same disabilities, even if we grow up in the same sort of societies, the same countries, the same cities, there will be marked differences.

KYM: Mm. I think it's important to recognize that racism occurs in many different ways. It's not just someone walking up to you or rolling up to you and saying, "Aw, get out of here, you Black such-and-such." That isn't necessarily how racism looks. And especially in the UK, racism has a completely different face; it's more covert. A British person will bump into you and say, "Excuse me" and mean, "F you." [laughs] There is a completely different way in which they interact. And so, I think it's a very powerful weapon that they have because it means that I'm never going to say "Black." I'm never gonna say it. But I'm gonna say all of the words associated with the stereotypes around blackness, but you'll never be able to say that I'm being racist 'cause I never said the word "Black." What makes you think I'm saying it's because you're Black? And so, there are lots of instances where you will experience racist discrimination but never be able to give voice to it. You're constantly then being forced to question your experience, being forced to question your understanding of your experience, and negating the facts that you know about the environment you're in. So, to ask whether I've been discriminated against by people in disabled community, I would say yes. They would definitely say no.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

KYM: You know, "Why are you mentioning race? We're all disabled together." They will say that there's nothing racist about that. That desire to silence you, they will say, "I'm just trying to understand."

I've tried to get certain types of help due to some of the experiences that I had at the beginning, my housing. I had to appeal to be entitled to DLA, and they refused it. And I had to go to tribunal. And even in the tribunal room, they tried to [chuckles]— I was in a hospital stay, and they scheduled the tribunal for a date that I was still in hospital. And they said they wouldn't change it, or they would refuse DLA—Disability Living Allowance—completely if I did not attend. Now, I was in critical condition in hospital, but my condition isn't going away. I need this thing. So, they took me in an ambulance to the tribunal, and a carer came and everything. And this panel of white folks sat in front of me, one of them—the doctor who was on the panel—laughed, giggling every time I mentioned a symptom, tried to get me to describe in detail how it was that I wet myself. In detail. Just for his amusement. And then tried to accuse me of hiring an ambulance [laughs] and hiring someone to play a carer! And they were like, "That's your sister. Don't lie. That's just a family member."

After that, I was trying to access these services through these companies that hire all disabled people. And on the phone, 'cause they're expecting a certain type of accent when you're a Black person, if you don't have that accent, they sometimes—and because my name is very kind of simple—when I say on the phone "Kym Oliver," they're like, oh yes! Standard white lady. When I've done that and asked for particular information, they've been so helpful. All of the information! And then I've gone in to go and see them, and none of that help is available. Or I've gone in to go and see them, and every disabled person on their staff is white.

So, one of the issues that I have with the representation of multiple sclerosis especially is that it is almost completely white. But also, it's almost completely white people who don't necessarily have any mobility aids. They focus a lot on the invisible side of the disability. And so, I've been called up and said, "Oh, we'd like to have someone come in to be part of this MS campaign, and we wanted someone of a different background to show that there's variety" but been refused because I had a wheelchair. [laughs] And that's not what they were going for. Yes, there's direct racism in stop and search and the disproportionate incarceration of Black people, the disproportionate abuse that goes on in custody. Here, they don't necessarily kill them on the street; they'll abuse them in custody. And so, there's a whole different thing that goes on. That exists. But the things that will happen to people of color will be that you try and access services, and they deny you. Or they'll say, "Well, you don't have enough points." Or they'll refuse it, and you'll have to appeal. Or you'll go in, and they'll say, "Well, no. It's fine. You don't need as much as you think you need." Or they won't tell you about the services that you're entitled to, but all your white counterparts know about every single thing available, every charity that's giving fridges, every charity that's helping people pay for equipment: they'll know about all of it. Because it's seen that you are taking something away from the country by existing here.

You know, for somewhere that's supposed to be the corner of colonialism and the great power of the world, the fact that their disability policies, the fact that their access, the fact that their education is so backward when it comes to accessibility kind of makes me wonder: OK, this is supposed to be one of the most progressive societies in the world. What is happening?

[bright electronica music break]

Ambitions for yourselves and for Triple Cripples

ALICE: What do you see on the horizon for Triple Cripples? What are your ambitions for yourselves and also for TC?

JAY: This is Jay. I see us going everywhere. I see us going global because disability is present in every single corner of the globe. Disabled Black people, disabled people of color, we are the global majority, so therefore, there will be more disabled people that look like myself, that look like Kym, and that look like you, Alice. So, the future for us, it will be limitless. And what I do hope for Triple Cripples to achieve is a cultural shift. This is something that we've always wanted with Triple Cripples even from the very first moment that we met each other. It cannot be a superficial change, but we need it to be changed through policy as well. We need it to be changed through laws. We need it to be changed through schooling as well.

So, I had my disability before I could even go to school or learn how to speak properly, so there was never really an adjustment period for me. But I went through primary school from being five all the way to university, and what was really noticeable for me was that whenever children, especially, asked you questions about your disability—whether you yourself are a child at the time or not—there's always an earnestness. And the answer that you give them, they don't try to probe any further. You just say, "Oh yes. You know, I have polio. I have multiple sclerosis," whatever it might be. They're like, "Oh! OK." Like, "OK. I guess I get to school by walking. You get to school by using your wheelchair. You get to school by using your crutches." So, as long as we have this understanding, as long as we have this education there from the very beginning, throughout all facets of life. So, within the UK, we have what's known as special schools. Now, the expectations there in these kinds of schools, they're very low. It's just somewhere for you to be just so you're out of the house, get a little bit of fresh air. But it's not somewhere that you are going to get the kind of education that you need, the kind of education that you deserve. So, we need to have integration in every single part of life. And integration includes actually making places accessible. That's where I want TC to go.

And for me as Jay, I am a travel blogger, so I want me to go everywhere. I love traveling around. I love seeing the world. I love meeting people. I love eating. And I'm trying to help build and also enjoy and experience a world where it's not an issue from the time that I decide to book a flight to when I'm actually abroad that there are no barriers in the way for disabled people to experience the world, to make sure that there are things in place already to ensure that it is a reality for you, that being disabled doesn't mean that you have to plan and plan and plan. And even when you do all this planning, it might still fall apart. Even when you do all this planning, the airline might still break your wheelchair, for example. So, that's yeah, that's what I would like. How about you, Kym?

KYM: For TC, one of the things that I would love to see and we're starting to see now is us going and doing more talks and education. But also, I'd like people to hire disabled Black women to train them, to do programs for them, to do workshops with their companies and their governments. Because I think that's also important. I'd like for us to be involved at the beginning stages of architecture when they're building things. A lot of the issues that, especially with access, that occur are post-problem. You can't, after you've built the building, "Oh! Oh, no, no, no! We need to make it"— No, you need to include us from the beginning. From the minute you have a plan, include us in OK, so what are the things that we need to do to make this place accessible? What can we do to make our schools better places? I want us to be at the forefront of those conversations and delivering that training and doing those speeches and traveling around the world speaking.

But also, I would love for us to be able to create a global network of solidarity and create an archive of people that we've spoken to and kind of make a mark for every single one of those people that we encounter. That's important, that when people look back, they have reference. Right now, trying to look for one or two disabled people to reference when you're talking about just history in general, I think that's abysmal. Not being able to see yourself or understand your culture or understand your environment from the perspective of everyone who was in that environment, I think, is a problem. So, the cultural archive in that sense, a historical archive would be great.

On a personal level, I am working on an audio play with Spotify right now. I love creating. I love writing. So, I'd love to do more of that. But also yeah, to make this place a better world for the young Black and non-Black people of color, women, femmes, and non-binary people who are growing up so that in 20 years' time, 30 years' time, we're not having these conversations. We're talking about something else that needs changing. I think that is a conversation that I would love to be shelved in my lifetime.

ALICE: Well, I'm ready for the Triple Cripples world domination.

JAY: [laughs]

Wrap-up

ALICE: Kym and Jay, I've admired you both just immediately since following you both on Twitter. And I'm just so excited that you're part of this world and a little bit a part of my world. And just thank you for being on my podcast today.

[lounge-esque electronica plays until the end]

KYM: Thank you for welcoming us in and allowing us to be part of your world and this awesome world that you've created. We are also your big fans! So, [laughs] this is one, this is one of our achievements in the book of TC! [laughs]

JAY: Dittoing what Kym just said.

ALICE: We're gonna smash all the binaries. We're gonna smash patriarchy.

KYM: Yes! [laughs]

ALICE: We're going to smash colonialism and white supremacy and make the world in our own image.

JAY: There you go. There you go.

KYM: Amen.

ALICE: Yeah, and TC will be leading the way!

[electronica fades into hip hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Kym and Jay's work at my website.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeee!!

♪ Rock it to the blast off
Stop, drop dance off ♪