

Pride Toronto's Black, Queer & Trans Excellence Series Podcast Ep03

LENGTH

56:18

SPEAKERS

Hollywood Jade, Syrus Marcus Ware

Hollywood Jade 00:00

You're listening to Pride Toronto's Black, Queer & Trans Excellence Podcast, where we honor and celebrate the Black experience through the lens of the LGBTQ+ community with honest conversations about embracing Black joy. I'm your host, Hollywood Jade.

(Music plays)

I want to welcome you all back, thank you for tuning in and I am honored and thrilled to have a very special guest today. My guest is an Assistant Professor at the School of Arts for McMaster University. He is a Vanier Scholar, a visual artist, an activist, a curator and an educator. Those of us in the community who are in the know will recognize this individual and this person is Syrus Marcus Ware, and at this point, I'd like to welcome Syrus into the conversation.

Syrus Marcus Ware 01:05

Hi, thanks so much for having me.

Hollywood Jade 01:08

Thank you for being here. I appreciate you and your time, because time is the most valuable thing that we have, so thank you so much for agreeing to be here again with me.

Syrus Marcus Ware 01:20

Yes, no problem, and so happy to get to chat.

Hollywood Jade 01:24

I want to do a quick check in and see how you are doing and how things have been going for you in the roller coaster that has been the year of 2020.

Syrus Marcus Ware 01:35

You know, honestly, I am well and healthy, and so I'm very thankful, you know. This year has been a year of profound change. You know, I'm somebody who loves speculative fiction, I love Octavia Butler, I love reading, you know, stories about the future, and, you know, I love reading that book "Parable of the Sower," I read it every two years - again, you know I've been really reading and rereading it for 20 years, and it talks about this time right now when there's just a moment of profound change. So 2020 has been like a sci-fi movie in a lot of ways.. um, but I'm faring well, you know, I'm hanging in. I was sick earlier this month, and it was scary, you know, even just having a sore throat these days can make you real scared. So I was you know, I went and got a COVID test, thank gosh, it was negative. Because so you know, it was, you know, but I definitely am very thankful for you doing better and that 2020 is coming to an end. But we knew that this is you know, this is a revolutionary moment, so it's the moment of a lot of change and we knew that this was what it was going to be like, we knew that we were going to be called upon to act in ways that were bigger than ourselves, and that's what 2020 is asking for us to do. So here we go.

Hollywood Jade 02:49

That is so beautifully and profoundly said. I've been really reflecting on what my word would be for 2020 and it's definitely trans- transform, transformative, transformation - it's all of it! It's, it's been a definite time of change in, in a lot of movements in a lot of really big ways, for a lot of us. And a couple of those you are like directly related to and linked to ..I'm, and I think I wanted to like kick off this conversation with you, because I'd like these things to feel less like an interview and more like two people sitting somewhere having coffee, or whatever it is that you'd like to drink, and just like really getting a chance to pick the brains of people that I feel have impacted the - not just the Black queer community, but the queer community, in general - so if you want to give us like a background of how you became involved in activism.

Syrus Marcus Ware 03:58

Yeah, I mean, I'm I came out at a young age, I came out at 14, first as queer and then as trans, maybe when I was 20. And I experienced, you know, a lot of violence. And I experienced a lot of homophobia, and transphobia, in my family of origin at the time, they've since, you know, done their work, and they actually are my biggest supporters and are incredibly, incredibly wonderful champions of queer and trans rights at this moment. So sometimes people do change, that's nice to know, but I'm at the time they were really struggling and they had been taught a lot of hate and they, you know, they were really, really struggling. So I, you know, I knew that, that things could be different.

Syrus Marcus Ware 04:41

And I knew that I wanted to live in the kind of world where queer people and trans people would get to be free and liberated, would get her love who they wanted to love, would get to, you know, be with who they wanted to be with without facing, you know, violence, persecution or the threat of being sort of kicked out of or disowned, you know, and then that kind of thing. I'm also a Black person, you know, a Black person living on Turtle Island, and so you're very aware of white supremacy, and anti-Black racism my whole life, and also knew that things could be different and new and wanted to live in the kind of world where Black lives were considered inherently valuable. And I wanted to work to fight racism everywhere that I was, you know, encountering that, because I

knew that the world could be so much more beautiful than it currently was, you know, with all of this hate and violence. So, as of my experience of difference, you know, I wanted to get involved, you know, I wanted to, I wanted to be part of making the world a bit better and "Leaving it better than you found it", you know, that expression that "you, you come into this world, and you should try to leave it better than you found it in". And definitely that idea that, that we could try to, you know, "touch change" as Octavia E. Butler encourages us to do and actually be involved in shaping a kind of new societies that we wanted to live in, one where we were much freer, you know?! I just want to be freer, I wanted to be able to wake up in the morning, not be in debt, you know, get rid of capitalism, you know, like be able to, to do, practice our art, if that's what we wanted to do, to be able to, to live, live our full lives! You know?! That's what I wanted, even from a really young age. So, you know, to me activism was calling me from, from a young age, I started organizing officially in 96, and I've been an activist for 25 years, organizing around abolition, preserving Black justice, queer and trans justice, disability justice. So a lot of work over these past, I guess, a quarter of a century.

Hollywood Jade 06:38

Wow - hahaha You started becoming active in activism, you said in 1996?!

Syrus Marcus Ware 06:47

Yes.

Hollywood Jade 06:49

I want to take a second and just reflect on - how does it feel to know that statements like Black Lives Matter have only really recently, like, I would honestly say, in the last like, three, I'm going to be generous and say five years, I've really become something that has been front page news, and you've been an activist since 1996. There are people who are listening to this who weren't even born in 1996! (Hollywood laughing)

Syrus Marcus Ware 07:21

It's true and it's funny, because I'm not, you know, I'm not an elder by any stretch, you know. There are people who have been doing this for much longer than I have, you know, who have been in the struggle, who could tell you about the stories from the 70s, you know, and from the 60s, it's wild, you know?! And I'm so thankful for their work and their labour. But yeah, you know, definitely right now to be in a moment where we can say Black Lives Matter, which is the bare minimum of what we should be asking for is for our lives to matter, that we should be considered, as you know, the Combahee River Collective was this Black feminist collective in the 70s, who wrote this statement, where they said, the Black women should be considered inherently valuable that, and that was so radical at the time, (chuckling) but they were basically saying, if we made the world safer for the folks who are most marginalized, like Black women, we'd be making the world safer for everyone. So we should be considering Black women as inherently valuable and it's so funny that, you know, it's unfortunate that it's taken until 2020, for people to finally start to shape their, their mouths around this, these words, you know, Combahee River Collective were encouraging us to think about in the 70s. So yeah, now is a moment to definitely celebrate this, but it's still a shockingly radical statement for a lot of people to say. Look at - people still fight, as for just saying Black Lives Matter! Like people are there still people who don't understand what that acronym means. They don't understand that that necessarily means that all life matters, you know?! They don't actually understand that. And

that's what the Combahee River Collective was saying. If we center the people who are the most marginalized, so like Black trans women, right?

Hollywood Jade 08:57

Right.

Syrus Marcus Ware 08:58

If we center the folks who were the most marginalized and made sure the world was safer for them, we would necessarily be making the world safer for everybody. So why wouldn't everybody get on board with the project of making the world safer for Black trans women, because it actually is going to benefit all of us, right?!

Hollywood Jade 09:11

Right.

Syrus Marcus Ware 09:12

So, this is a moment that we're in where people are starting to be like, "Oh, wait a minute!" So it's exciting to watch, but it's frustrating that it's taking this long, but I think about our ancestors, you know, fighting on slave labour camps, you know, and how much they went through, you know, I'm from the South so this is a very recent memory in my family history and just thinking, you know, my great grandparents were in labour camps, you know, just, just thinking about, like, what they would have been going through trying to fight for freedom and liberation and how what I have to go through now, you know, is.. it's just a continuation of their work, you know, making sure that they can finally rest, you know.

Hollywood Jade 09:48

Right! And that it wasn't in vain. And it's so funny listening to you say it now that it literally is a statement about looking after and protecting the most marginalized groups will ultimately make - the world - a better place. Like I think, I don't think I've heard it framed quite like that and I think that's a very important narrative, especially for all of these people who are like, well, All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter, and, and all of these things. It's just it's an it's a very, like, you basically spoke it plain (chuckles) you know and I think that's an important thing for people to hear and to be able to process and to like, download into their, their, their psyche, so that when they hear it, they're not triggered by the statement and feel like it's, it's being said to attack any other group, we're basically just asking you to, like, see value, the same value you see in in the lion in the Sahara that you don't want them to shoot - same value.

Syrus Marcus Ware 10:50

Yeah.

Hollywood Jade 10:50

At least.

Syrus Marcus Ware 10:51

Yeah. And this idea that you could just, you know, imagine... yeah, if we made a world where Black lives mattered, you know, and you can read the Combahee River Collective statement, which they put it in '71, because it's very short, it's like two pages, so literally, for the folks who are struggling with this, I encourage you to pick it up and read it, it's written in plain language.

Hollywood Jade 11:14

Say the name of it one more time, just so everyone can catch it.

Syrus Marcus Ware 11:17

Um Combahee River Collective - so C-O-M-B-A-H-E-E River collective, combahee River collective. And they were this Black feminist collective in the '70s and they wrote this beautiful position paper that just basically says, look, folks, here's what we got to do, you know?! Once again, Black women showing us the way forward, right, but like, they just, they're like, Look, folks, here's what we got to do. If I were to sort of updated into 2020, I would say, if we make the road safer for Black trans women with disabilities, we'd be making the world safer for everybody. So that would necessarily mean that we would have solved climate change, as well, because if we actually created the world, where Black lives were given as much value as the lion (chuckles), who you're protesting shooting.

Hollywood Jade 12:01

Mm hmm.

Syrus Marcus Ware 12:01

You know, we would be taking care of the lion, too, and we would be taking care of the trees, we will be taking care of the air, the water, all of the, all life on this planet would benefit if we were considered inherently (difficult to hear). So our work really is, is working to make sure that everybody gets to be so much freer. And so it's joyful work. It's pleasure work. Being involved in activism has been the joy of my life, you know?! It is where I've met friends, that's where I met lovers, that's where I've built families, it's where I've found community, you know, it's where I've helped build community, it's, it's been so incredible. And I'm so thankful to get to be an activist every day. I'm really..

Hollywood Jade 12:40

I love, I love that. Sorry, you said the word community and full transparency for when listening, we had already had this conversation, but Hollywood is not so good with technology, so I didn't record most of it. So as, as Syrus is talking, I'm trying to piece together some of the points that we talked about and I remember one of the main things that we focused on in our first conversation was this sense of community that exists around you, that you've helped cultivate. In particular for me, like I know, growing up as a young, queer man, and figuring out exactly what my queer identity would look like, I knew that you were one of the people who was a mover and a shaker and getting things done for us. You are a member of a couple of different important collectives in Toronto, and I would like to talk somewhat about those collectives and the community that you've helped cultivate.

Syrus Marcus Ware 13:46

Thank you for saying that. And I mean, it's been an honour to get to work with groups like Black, like Black Lives Matter, but also Blockorama, you know, Blackness Yes!, is so special. And I've been working with Blackness Yes! since the fifth year of Blocko. So now we're in year 22, or 23.

Hollywood Jade 14:06

Crazy!

Syrus Marcus Ware 14:06

And, you know, we have seen it grow into this massive Black Arts Festival, if not, for COVID this year, was going to spill out into two days and was going to become this, you know, larger footprint. And, you know, it's been so beautiful to get to witness it. And I remember my first time going to Blockorama, I can remember it was 2000 or 2001. And everybody has that story of their first time going to Blocko you know, however it was I remember it before the moves. So I remember it when it was in the edge of the parking lot and there was no -

Hollywood Jade 14:39

At the back!

Syrus Marcus Ware 14:39

-at the back. And I remember coming around the corner and being like whaaat is happening, because suddenly there was just, you know, 11,000 Black, queer and trans people like just vibing, and I was like, "Where did I just turn?" you know?! and

Hollywood Jade 14:56

like literally almost out of nowhere (laughing)

Syrus Marcus Ware 14:59

It'd spill out onto Maitland, and they'd be hanging down by the apartment and there was all over the side street, and like people were just everywhere. And you know, Courtney McFarlane talks about like, the, the more out you were, the closer you were to the center of the party, but there were people all the way, you know, spread out. And this was a place to...

Hollywood Jade 14:56

Ouuuu...

Syrus Marcus Ware 15:15

Find community. This was the place to -be- in community and, and I and I, and I love it. And so many people tell these stories about their first time going to Blocko, and I can remember, you know, talking to Juba Kalamka from Deep Dickollective, and, you know, we had, he had been to Toronto a, numerous times, but had never been to Blocko. And when we booked Deep Dickollective to perform, I think, maybe in 2006, that might have been, you know, this is the first sort of original homo hoppers hit, you know, queer hip hoppers.

Hollywood Jade 15:16

Oooh.

Hollywood Jade 15:28

Mm hmm.

Syrus Marcus Ware 15:36

When, when we booked them and they came in, they came out on the stage, it was the last year actually, one of the last years we were in that little scrap of the parking lot. And I remember them coming in on stage, and you're just in front of this sea and they still talk about it to this day, there's nothing like it is, it was so special, we're so lucky to have Blocko in, in Toronto, and I feel very honoured to get to work with the, with the Collective to help put it on. And yeah, and every time we go up on that stage, you know, or if you're walking in the crowd, if you're in the disability viewing area, if you're in the community marketplace, if you're at the harm reduction tent, if you're out checking, you know, Black cap has had a booth there since 1999, you know?! Like have been a woman thought the woman's hands, you know, since the early 2000s, like just continued support from community. And of course, now we have, you know, big, big name headliners, and there's been some really great folks who have come and supported Destra, waving the rainbow flag was a significant moment that was rippled through the Caribbean.

Hollywood Jade 16:46

Yeah!

Syrus Marcus Ware 16:47

There's been some really significant beautiful moments, but, you know, big or small, I've loved every moment of it, you know?! The times where we were rained out in the park, when they moved us up to George Hislop, the times when, you know, we were, you know, small group of DJs, those first couple of years, you know, those are special moments, too. So big or small, Blocko is, is really special in my heart, and I'm very thankful to get to work with this group. And, you know, this collective has grown and, and changed over the years, you know, from the core group of founders to, you know, so many different folks that have come in and out of Blackness Yes! with Nick Redman and I staying through the through the whole time, but you know, there's just some incredible people, so you know, Craig Dominic, and Samson Brown and Tandy Young, and Nick Redman and Keyshia Williams, and, you know, like, they're just some incredible, Shani Robertson, you know, who, who make, who get to do this work together, it's pretty dreamy.

Hollywood Jade 17:42

I love, I love it, I love it, I love it and I love hearing all of the names of all of these people who have helped push this narrative of representation and, and equality for us, queer Black artists, and for us to have a space because through working in entertainment, I sort of always had like a back seat or a window seat to what was going on and, because I'm a naturally inquisitive person, like I'd overhear, so like when we when it got shifted to the Beer Store parking lot, and then the small parkettes and, and the fight that it was to, to hold our ground, which was a space that nobody in the Village originally wanted, and then it became this big TEE sponsored thing. And, you know, like, I think it's important that - and this is something that I took from our original conversation, you said it's important that we call names.

Syrus Marcus Ware 18:43

Mm hmm. We need to call these in and Courtney McFarlane writes about this is, this process of calling this, calling names, this process of bringing forward, you know, the folks. So I also just want to call the names of some folks who are no longer with us, but who were huge parts of the Blocko community like Sharona Hall, like Duchess, you know, like that, who was an early drag performer, and Sharona was a longtime organizer and activist. You know, like, there's just these folks who have come through our communities who have been such foundational parts of our communities, who, who we celebrate their spirit every year, you know, and we honour them, and we honour their contributions to our communities. And, you know, there are so many names of folks who are still active in organizing, names of folks who are retired from organizing and are resting in their, in their elder years, you know, names of folks who are no longer with us, as well. So all of these names need to be called and remembered.

Hollywood Jade 19:38

Yes.

Syrus Marcus Ware 19:39

You know, and just, you know, we need to be in the practice of honouring what's happened here and celebrating it.

Hollywood Jade 19:44

I agree completely, and I - it's something that I always do and something that I have already done, like I believe in giving people their flowers while they can smell them and acknowledging the people who've helped make it possible for me to have a platform now where I get to interview, Black queer excellence. You know what I mean?! Like I, it's huge to be a 19 at 18, 19 year old kid dancing at Blocko for the first time with the legendary Michelle Ross to now, sitting here and having a podcast that's on a major streaming platform - like this is huge! And like, I hope that you and the others involved understand that, at least for someone like me, I don't take for granted all the work that you have put in and all the sacrifices that you've all made and the commitment that you've made, not just to yourselves, but to pushing this narrative forward.

Syrus Marcus Ware 20:45

Thank you, thank you. I mean, this is - no, we're very lucky, I think to live in this place where there is such a thriving Black, queer and trans community, I mean, communitIES, right?! Like, we actually have so many of us that there are communities of Black, queer and trans community people, you know?! And we, we are, I mean, that is not everywhere, and I travel a lot, or I did before COVID. And, you know, I work with black folks all across this north part of Turtle Island, and the north and, and, you know, everyone talks about, you know, there's just something really special about Toronto, you know, that not everybody has this kind of hotbed of activity, or communities, you know?!

Hollywood Jade 21:28

Yes!

Syrus Marcus Ware 21:29

And I'm really thankful. And I, like, you know, I think about what Blocko has been really trying to nurture and celebrate his Black disabled and deaf and mad folks, you know, in a festival that doesn't have as much accessibility as, as, as, as is needed, there's always a need for more. You know, Blocko has always had, you know, was the first stage to have ASL interpretation and have Black Deaf interpreters and having a festival stage and have a, you know, really beautiful disability viewing area and so thinking about those parts of our communities, too, right, and just how we get to celebrate all of just all of the, the beautiful vastness that we have here, we're really lucky and thankful.

Hollywood Jade 22:12

I agree (echoing) I, I think I've definitely benefited immensely from all the different communities that have, for whatever reason, opened their arms, and welcomed me as an individual and.. I'd like to talk a little bit more about some of these communities that you also exist in, like you touched on earlier quickly about coming out at the age of 20. Like, I know, grown.

Syrus Marcus Ware 22:38

14

Hollywood Jade 22:39

Sorry..

Syrus Marcus Ware 22:40

Yeah, 14, I came out as queer at 14

Hollywood Jade 22:42

At 14.

Syrus Marcus Ware 22:43

Yeah.

Hollywood Jade 22:43

And then then you transitioned...

Syrus Marcus Ware 22:45

At 20. Yeah, yeah.

Hollywood Jade 22:47

My apologies.

Syrus Marcus Ware 22:48

No worries. It's just, you know, I was, I was so young, you know, when you're also when you're 14, and you think you, well I thought I knew everything. (chuckling)

Hollywood Jade 22:55

No, we all did - hahaha (hearty laughter) Thank you, Toni Braxton, and "You're making me high" music video for confirming all things for me. (laughing with Syrus) and it wasn't Toni Braxton I was looking at.

Syrus Marcus Ware 23:08

Yeah, yeah, yeah. (chuckling)

Hollywood Jade 23:10

I wanted to talk about the process of transitioning for you, at a time when I don't believe there was like a lot of knowledge and information readily available to you, and others like you, but you knew that the form that you were living in was not, or the way that you were being identified was not an authentic experience for you. So can you, if you don't mind, going into that.

Syrus Marcus Ware 23:42

Yeah, I mean, when I transitioned was, or started my transition was, in I turned 20 in 1997 and I started my transition maybe in the year 2000. So I was maybe 23 when I started medically transitioning, and I had changed my name first. But yeah, it was at a time when it was very interesting moment in Trans history where there was still this very long entrenched lasting effect of the Gender Identity Clinic, which at the time, you know, it is a violent institution, and at the time was even more so than it is now, and they still did the practice of encouraging people to you know, cut off from their support network, move to a different city, change their name, like they just encouraged you to erase your history because you were never supposed to tell anyone they were Trans, so this is what they advocated. So this is, this really violent institution that also didn't let you be your authentic self. So in order to get through the Gender Identity Clinic, you had to be straight, you had to be binary presenting, you had to want to fully transition medically, you had to have all of these rigid rules that were, you know, working for exactly no one. And in order to get through in order to be accepted to get into the Gender Identity Clinic, you had to basically lie and say that you were going to transition to be a binary heterosexual person and there was all these questions that you had to answer in these particular ways in order to get in.

Hollywood Jade 25:15

This is crazy...

Syrus Marcus Ware 25:16

And it was the only way to get access to hormones and surgery at, you know, prior to 1998 because of the way that it was listed through OHIP. So, so what people did what was beautiful with it, there was this underground network of trans people who helped each other. And so we had this copy of the questionnaire, and there wasn't, you know, there was barely an internet, right, like barely an internet, there was like you know, rudimentary like online spaces that people would share the answers, so that you would know what to say in order to pass the test, to get through to get your hormones or to get through to get approved for your surgery or whatever.

Hollywood Jade 25:55

Okay, sorry, I hate to cut you, so you're saying that, at this time in 1997, the only way that you could medically transition here in Toronto was to lie?!

Syrus Marcus Ware 26:09

You, so you had to, if you were going, to you, if you're going to do it, you had to go to the Gender Identity Clinic, and if you went to the Gender Identity Clinic, you had to transition to, to be a straight binary person. That was a requirement. And so..

Hollywood Jade 26:23

Insane!

Syrus Marcus Ware 26:24

Yeah, it is absolutely so offensive, and so transphobic and so violent and absolutely horrible, horrible, horrible, (laughing), which is why people did the activism that they did. But then it's very interesting thing happened, which is that in 1998, Mike Harris, who is an absolute terrible, right-wing, white supremacist premier that we had, who hated trans people, and queer people, he delisted sex reassignment surgery from OHIP, and so it was no longer covered by OHIP. And so what happened when he did that what he didn't realize was that that sparked a whole bunch of trans activism - people came together to lobby for it to be relisted, and by doing so, they started being publicly, visibly trans, you know?! And being out and, and creating a media presence and talking about being trans and everything that the Gender Identity Clinic was encouraging us to not do, we were doing, we were being out visible trans people saying "This is not right, we deserve it, we deserve to be able to have access to control our, to do whatever we want with our bodies. It's our bodies." So people fought. So that created a sense of community that perhaps was a little bit more underground before that. That was the first thing that happened. And the second thing that happened was the whole of the surgeons (chuckling) started saying, well, we'll take your money, cash if you got it and you didn't even have to go through any of these questionnaires. So the surgeons started, you started being able to go directly to the surgeons, the plastic surgeons, and so people started, why would you go to the Gender Identity Clinic, if you didn't have to.

Hollywood Jade 27:55

Right!

Syrus Marcus Ware 27:55

More doctors started prescribing hormones, you know, and, and, and so and then the Sherbourne, you know, Clinic, Health Center opened and there became more possibilities. And then eventually, in 2008, by the time sex reassignment surgery was relisted under OHIP, because the activism that trans people had done, had worked, but it was relisted, people were like, "Oh, and by the way, you're not controlling it anymore, we're not going to be mandating that, that this go through the Gender Identity Clinic." So it changed to be decentralized, so that now you can have doctors approved, you know, all over the province approved, and you don't have to go through. And also, luckily, the Gender Identity Clinic did go through some changes, and is trying to be more trans-positive. But anyways, a lot of activism (both laughing), a lot of organizing. So when I came out, it was..

Hollywood Jade 28:45

Wow!

Syrus Marcus Ware 28:46

It was that, this was an awesome, it was in the middle. Luckily, when I came out, you know, it had already been delisted, I knew the answers to the quiz to go through the Gender Identity Clinic, but it wasn't being covered by the Gender Identity Clinic, so there was kind of no point to go through it, you know..

Hollywood Jade 29:00

Right.

Syrus Marcus Ware 29:00

I, you know, I was able to find my way through it on my own, paying for everything myself, and I was able to get the support that I needed, and..

Hollywood Jade 29:11

Wow!

Syrus Marcus Ware 29:12

It was very, ..I was like a third or fourth patient at the Sherbourne Health Center when they first opened. And you know, I had had a sort of series of traumatic experiences trying to get access to hormones for a couple of years at that point. And then what, and then by the time I got to see them, I finally got the help that I needed, and you know, I sort of never looked back. But you know,

Hollywood Jade 29:32

Wow!

Syrus Marcus Ware 29:33

In a very different reality, you know, and it's just incredible. I have a young nephew, who is a trans kid, you know, and he, you know, he's been able to access hormones, you know, be like, at a time of puberty. So he's been able to have a, you know, the puberty that he wanted to have, you know, and that's a such a gift. And so we're living in a moment where trans kids, if supported well, where they get to have the puberty that they want to have, they get to grow and develop the way that they want their bodies to grow and develop, and they get to be to be freer, right?!

Hollywood Jade 30:05

Right!

Syrus Marcus Ware 30:05

I'm very thankful that we're seeing the kind of changes so that people don't have to go through what we used to have to go through.

Hollywood Jade 30:11

I'm even just imagining psychologically how much better your nephew's experience of life is going to be not having to heal from all of the trauma that you experienced, just trying to live your authentic experience.

Syrus Marcus Ware 30:27

I had a doctor when I was trying to get hormones, you know, because the way that you would do it, you know, the way that people used to do anyways, I don't need to go into all of this (both laughing) but ways that people used to do it, so it was known that if you eventually hit a brick wall and couldn't get it anywhere, you would just start taking what they would call street hormones, which would be that someone would share their prescription with you. And after you had been taking it for a while, the doctors would kind of

Hollywood Jade 30:51

Have no choice! (in unison)

Syrus Marcus Ware 30:53

Yeah, because you, you know, they didn't want to interrupt your, because it's the, anyways.. So there was ways, there was ways around it, so I was trying to navigate this whole system, but I had gone to this one clinic, and I said explicitly, I don't want to be referred to the Gender Identity Clinic, I would like to have hormones, this is what I want, can you help me, please don't refer me to the Gender Identity Clinic. And I remember that they not only referred me to the Gender Identity Clinic, but the Gender Identity Clinic, they gave them my work number, so the Gender Identity Clinic called my work, used my dead name!

Hollywood Jade 31:21

Not your work!

Syrus Marcus Ware 31:22

My work! Used my dead name, and asked to talk to me about my gender identity disorder, which I was like, "I don't fucking have generated disorder, I'm a trans person, and I'm proud to be a trans person, and it's not a disorder, and you can go and fuck yourself" (laughing) But I, sorry, I don't know if you're allowed to swear on this podcast. But..

Hollywood Jade 31:39

I mean, we doing it!

Syrus Marcus Ware 31:40

Like, can you imagine, right?! Can you imagine..

Hollywood Jade 31:40

Crazy...

Syrus Marcus Ware 31:42

The people, the system. And at the time, the Gender Identity Clinic calling you was, it was a sign of, it was it, it would make your blood run cold, because they literally controlled everything, they controlled through your OHIP number they could prevent you from, from surgery, from getting hormones, from getting, you know, so, so when I said "Don't tell them about me", I meant it, you know?! So when this doctor breached my trust, and did that, again, in my hallway in them, they energy, and then they did what, what transphobic says doctors at the time, and

the Gender Identity Clinic did, which was named me to my coworker, like it was just a nightmare, it was everything that of the reason why I didn't want to go to them, right.

Hollywood Jade 32:08

That's insane!

Syrus Marcus Ware 32:20

That we are living in, in vastly different times. And now, but I still know that it's very hard for trans kids, but there's still a real struggle, because trans identity is still listed in the DSM, you know, as a gender identity disorder. And so, you know, there are still some psychologists who really, you know, put these trans kids through the ringer, you know, trying to get access to the treatment and support that they need. And they sometimes string them on for years and never intend to give them hormones. They, you know, and there's a famous -infamous white -cis doctor from the Gender Identity Clinic, who, who I won't mention because he sues anybody - (both laughing) but he was known for, for mercilessly brutalizing trans kids and, and, and doing conversion therapy and trying to do conversion therapy with them up until maybe two or three years ago. So very..

Hollywood Jade 33:16

Insane!

Syrus Marcus Ware 33:17

Yeah. So I mean there's still a long fight ahead to make sure that all trans kids have the support that my nephew has. My twin is incredibly supportive and trans knowledgeable, so he really lucked out in a mom, but not everyone has a parent, you know who's gonna fight for them. But that's what our work is, you know?! So that's where we come in as activists as we do the work that we do. And I'm as visible as I can be as a trans person, as a proud out trans person to make sure that I'm making, you know, and for all the people who can't be, you know, to make sure that the changes happen.

Hollywood Jade 33:46

I love it. I love it. And one of the things, too, and this is something that I personally am very, like touched by, is just how, and it should be obvious to everyone who's listening, but just how well educated you are not just about the things that pertain to you, but you are also an ABD PhD candidate at York University in the facility of environmental studies. As I mentioned, you are a professor at the School of Arts from McMaster, like these aren't, aren't small accomplishments, you know, so I wanted to touch a little bit about your education and your, your wealth of knowledge that you so willingly share.

Syrus Marcus Ware 34:31

Thank you so much for saying that. Yeah, I love education, you know, and I love learning and I've always loved learning and I knew,.. I didn't always know that I wanted to do a PhD, but I knew that I wanted to keep learning and to stay engaged in school for, for a while. So I don't know that I thought I was going to go all the way but I did. I'm actually just in the process of formatting my pieces, so my dissertation is done and I'm hopefully going to be defending it in the spring. So, you know, you know, I'm very relieved (laughing) for this process to be done. But, but yeah, it's been really incredible. And what I've been able to write about is about Black activists, you know, and

about Black, queer and trans organizing in the city and about, you know, our stories. And, you know, I've been drawing portraits of activists through my art practice, and so I included those in my dissertation, and I write about those and about the activists that I've met through doing my project "The Activist Portrait Series." And, you know, it's just been really fun, actually, I'm really --... I hope that, you know, there, there can be.. a PhD is a lot of work. I'm not saying it's not a lot of work, but I would encourage anybody out there who's thinking about it, you know, to maybe give it a try, because it, you know, you really can write about something that you love, do a project about something that you love. And certainly, it's been incredible getting to read friends' projects, you know, when they were writing about things that they were really passionate about. My twin is also a PhD, she's a scientist, and she, she writes about dragonfly migration, she's an entomologist, but it's a project she loves. And she writes about her growing up. And, you know, and catching dragonflies as kids as much as she also talks about drag, dragonfly migration to talk about borders and, and why no one is illegal, and she ties it to politics and the transatlantic slave trade. And so you can do wild fun things with your learning, because the further you go in, in school, the more self-directed it is, and you get to eventually be at the point where you're just basically doing a project that you want to do anyways. So I've been very lucky and very thankful to have a supportive team of advisors who are helping me and I'm almost done. And, and I'm so thankful, I mean, nothing ever happens without the supportive community, and nothing.. So this, this has been, you know, I've been very supported by my community, throughout my prep, my dissertation process, and nothing ever happens without, you know, you know, people teaching you, so I'm so thankful to the teachers that I've had, all the way from grade, you know, from kindergarten, right through, all of the ones who believed, because, I mean, in the city, I'll be honest, my grade school experiences weren't the best, I had a lot of teachers who were dubious that I could hold a pencil, because I was Black, you know?! Or they were, you know, they tried to stream me immediately, all this kind of racism in education. So you know, it's quite a, I feel very satisfied to be able to say, maybe just to, to some of those teachers, you know, boy, you were really wrong about me, and, you know, you're wrong about all of us, actually, you know, and you're bias in education has no place in our learning system. And so as a teacher, you know, I'm trying to make sure that, that, you know, I'm teaching in a really fair and equitable way, and making sure that everybody's getting the chance to be supported and encouraged to go on and learn, you know?! So yeah, it's, it's, it's fun, it's fun, definitely an activist scholar, so definitely somebody who ties my scholarship to activism and who tries to change academia from the inside, through my practice. And, you know, when we had in person classes, I would always make sure that there was food in the class, not assuming that people had eaten before they had come, you know?! Making sure that there's lots of accommodations for people to hand in work late or to set new deadlines, because life happens, having a policy about children, children in the class, if you have to bring your children to class, like I did all these while...

Hollywood Jade 38:30

Oh wow!

Syrus Marcus Ware 38:31

..Change the classroom environment to be what, what Chinyere Oparah calls "a semi-autonomous zone", where you get to, like, make up your own rules, you know?! And..

Hollywood Jade 38:40

Right! And I mean,

Syrus Marcus Ware 38:41

..blur the line, you know, you get to do that even more, you know, because everybody's learning from home.

Hollywood Jade 38:46

Yeah, I think I think that's an important, that's an important tip, and tool and something that you said, because a lot of of us could potentially be afraid to go after our dreams because of our circumstances, you know?! Like, maybe I'm a young dad, a single father, or, you know, I didn't eat and I'm like, I'm not going to be able to go to class and concentrate, so knowing that there's an environment where I can come as I am, I think is vitally important. And, and I think all the different communities that you have been embraced by and celebrated by and are a part of are, part of the reason why you have this mentality around making sure that, that your class environment and your education environment is conducive for people to learn versus just conducive for you to stand up there and dictate.

Syrus Marcus Ware 39:49

Yeah, 'cause the whole point of communication is for people to understand what you're saying, right? So, like me, I, you know, I want my students to feel connected to the material and to get to learn it and to know it and to feel confident in it, and to celebrate their brilliance, you know?! And I, I have, I'm very thankful to Professor Jin Harry Dorn for teaching me to celebrate people's brilliance, you know, as a teaching method. And just yeah, this idea that, you know, if you can make it through and get in the door that you keep that door propped open for others to come in. So I'm always trying to encourage me to apply for more things and to try to get their stuff published and to, you know, put their work out there because you know, you're doing this work and, you know, why not celebrate your accomplishments by sharing it with the world, so..

Hollywood Jade 40:46

I'm just, I mean, I think I have a very, a picture in my mind, but I think I want to get it directly from your mouth is, where did it stem from? Like, what, what triggered this activist's, like, I want to call it a gene, because I feel like you have to be born with this thing, but it's like, it's almost like a mutant with their superpowers, like it's there, and then they turn 16 and all of a sudden, they can blow things up (laughing) Like, where does this come from? Because like that, like this is, this is a calling, you know, like you, weren't you, you said it, even in your education, you are an activist. Like where, where did that stem from for you?

Syrus Marcus Ware 41:29

I mean, when I became an activist, it was around the same time that I became an artist, you know, I became an artist 25 years ago, as well. And so, you know, to me, I think the, you know, we leave it, there's a speculative fiction thinker Walidah Imarisha and she says that all activism is speculative fiction, because we're daring to imagine that another world is possible. So an artist, as an artist who loves speculative fiction, as it paints and draws and imagines these other worlds, I'm engaging in activism, because I'm, you know, I'm imagining another world being possible. And artists and activists are very connected. So I think, to me, it was just, you know, my experiences of difference and my experiences of discrimination from a young age made me want to change the world and make it freer and make it a world where other kids didn't have to go through what I went through. And an artist, being an artist gave me the tools to literally paint a picture of what the future could look like, if we work together to try

to make the changes happen. So to me, they've gone hand in hand, and they've really informed each other, and I think that's why I've, I've, I've, you know, been incorrect, but I'm also very thankful, you know, because my family, as I say, they really came around, you know, and I do come from, you know, a family that was really, that really believed in a lot of social justice, you know?! And my grandparents were very encouraging of us, you know, getting involved in organizing, and, you know, they would always be like, just be careful, though, but just be careful (chuckling). But they were very proud that we were doing the work, me and my twin were doing the work that we were doing, to try to change the world. And, you know, without their support, I don't know if I would have been as encouraged, you know?! But I knew that I was doing something that was bigger than myself, and I knew that I wanted to leave this world better than I found it. And I knew that my great grandparents on that slave labour camp, were hoping that there, that my generation would be born free. And I'm working to make sure that my children's children will be born free.

Hollywood Jade 43:31

Ah! That just shuttered through my whole body. (chuckling) Oooh!

Syrus Marcus Ware 43:37

It's the work.

Hollywood Jade 43:38

It's, I think it's so important and, and I, I'm telling you, I am a direct, I am reaping the benefits of the work that all of you have put in. So I hope that tonight when you are winding down, and you reflect on your day, and you think about, you know, all of it, that this sticks with you and know that everything that I have accomplished is a direct reflection of all of the hard work that you and the countless names that you've already mentioned, the ones that we haven't mentioned yet, and that you've all done like I am, me, my generation, the generation under me and the generation under them are reaping the benefits of the labor and the commitment and the work that you and your generation of activists and bold livers and people who were just afraid of being themselves like you guys made it possible for me to feel encouraged to walk into spaces in my authentic skin and not try to make myself I fit into somebody else's design of what I should look like.

Syrus Marcus Ware 45:04

Yes, yes. Well, you know, I'm thankful for all of your work. And I'm thankful for all that you're doing bringing us together and having a podcast series like this, especially in this year of all years, like, this is so beautiful. And I'm thankful for your work and free creativity. So thank you.

Hollywood Jade 45:22

I appreciate that. I'm grateful for Pride Toronto and this opportunity, because I think there's, we've done a lot of work, you have done a lot of work, but there's still so much more work to do, like you were saying earlier about making sure that these kids grow up in a world where things are available - knowledge, information, support, community - is available to them. I know, for me, being a young, queer, Black man, it, I didn't always feel a sense of community around me. You know, I was too effeminate, "he's too.." I come from a very Caribbean background, so "he's to girlie, girlie, he's too this, it's too that," you know, even my ignorance around the trans-experience

stems from not having men in my life, older men in my life, talk positively or have a positive reflection of trans people.

Syrus Marcus Ware 46:28

Yeah.

Hollywood Jade 46:28

You know, and I've had to do a lot of unpacking and unlearning about what it, what it means to be trans in my mind, in order to move forward and be a part of this world that I have fought so hard to try to make better, to be better than I found it, you know?! So even me, I had work that I needed to do. And these types of conversations, I think, have definitely really helped broaden my understanding and my, my willingness to accept. Because there was definitely a block for a minute, I just, I didn't understand it.

Syrus Marcus Ware 47:06

Yeah.

Hollywood Jade 47:07

So like, hearing the stories about what it was like, is, is as a game changer, for me, personally, and I hope that this resonates with others, who are reluctant to be open to understanding what the trans experience is like, within this queer community.

Syrus Marcus Ware 47:30

Yeah, I really hope that, you know, that my words resonate, and that, you know, these are the stories, right, these are the story, this is why it's so beautiful to have intergenerational places. And that's what's beautiful about Blockorama, you know, because, I mean, before there was a, now I mean, it's unfortunate that there has to be, you know, a little bit more policing, with the liquor license and stuff like that, but there was always children that would come, you know, as well as elders, and then, you know, 20-something, 30-something like, there's just intergenerational spaces are really valuable. And so, really, really thankful for those times, because we get to learn from each other about, about everything, which is so great, so thank you so much!

Hollywood Jade 48:11

Yeah, and I, I agree, I think it's so funny, you described Blocko as a Black arts festival. And I've never thought of it in that context, you know?! To me, Blocko, and to most of us, Blocko is the one party during Pride where all the Black people gonna be you go here, you gonna hear to black music, you gonna see the Black faces, but I never thought of it as an arts festival, where, you know, we, we really get to come together and just experience our art, our way - I've never thought of it like that and I think that that narrative of it being a Black arts festival needs to be pushed more into the light, as opposed to just this concert with amazing headliners.

Syrus Marcus Ware 49:06

Yeah, yeah. Well, there's like, you know, 11 hours of programming, there's visual art, there's textile art, there's banners. There's, you know, crafts for sale, there's music, there's DJs there's just so much it's just the whole art festival. So there's dancers is dance, there's, you know, there's so much performance and, and it's it this is what

is so we're excited about expanding and thinking about two days and thinking about, you know, just how to kind of move into this next 22 years, you know, what do we want the next 22 years of Blocko to look like, and what do we what are we fighting for, yeah.

Hollywood Jade 49:43

I love it. Um, I want to talk quickly about the best selling "Until We Are Free" reflections of, reflections on Black lives matter in Canada, that you were the co-editor for.

Syrus Marcus Ware 50:00

Yes.

Hollywood Jade 50:01

So give us a little bit about this book.

Syrus Marcus Ware 50:05

Yeah. So "Until We Are Free - the making of Black Lives Matter in Canada" was a book project that we put together to help with community to help tell a story about what it means and what, what, what our experiences are doing Black organizing and activism in the north part of the island. So working with activists in the Yukon, activists in the west coast, activists on the east coast, activists in the prairies, you know, and collecting all of these stories about what it means to be mothering in the movement, what it means to be working around Blackness and disability, what it means to be Black in the North, you know, intergenerational work on the west coast, you know, work from inside prison and outside of prison, you know, all of the organizing in the digital age. But this book is full of all of this different accounts that are written by community for community, about organizing. So it's this beautiful collection, that is an archive of what's happened really in the last, since the beginning of the, when Black Lives Matter Toronto started, which was six years ago. And but stretching beyond because of course, there's stories in there from elders, there's stories from, from organizers that tell of times earlier, in times, coming up. So it's this beautiful collection that, that offers a glimpse into what, what is, what has been happening with Black organizing in Canada.

Hollywood Jade 51:29

Archiving our stories.

Syrus Marcus Ware 51:32

It so important.

Hollywood Jade 51:34

It is very important, like I mean, it's, it's different now, because everybody, everything is recorded and stored in the cloud, and dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, yay, great. But like, our, our experience, and our existence, can't start from the beginning of social media, because so much of what makes us who we are as people happened prior to this age that we're living in now and I think it's important that, that we like, like you said, calling out names and archiving our stories. I think these, these things are vitally, vitally important.

Syrus Marcus Ware 52:12

Yeah. It's so.. I mean, I worked with this collective called Marvellous Grounds that are that archives QT2S/BIPOC stories in Toronto, Toronto. And we, yeah, you know, just the power of starting to tell these stories - I remember the very first Korean Black History Month event I spoke at it and I was talking about Black trans archives and about the need to archive our stories, and I was talking about how the first person to have sex reassignment surgery in North America, as a Black trans woman named Elisa Newton, and I talked about Blockorama, and I talked about all of this organizing, and about what do we do to sort of, how do we kind of document our stories when the sort of white mainstream doesn't seem to be interested in it. So through Marvellous Grounds, I was able to actually go out and collect a bunch of restaurants, talk to Monica Forrester and talk to, you know, all these folks about, Giselle Dias, and these folks who are doing organizing, about our stories and collect them and we ended up putting on two books all these stories, but it's, it's been really, it's been really great. I think that we need to remember what's happened here, we need to remember our stories so that we can go forward in new ways, you know, some of them will learn from my mistakes, and also not remake them.

Hollywood Jade 53:28

Listen, I couldn't agree more and I think 2020 has literally been like, a reset, and an opportunity for us to really sit and reflect and be like, "Okay, guys, what do we want the world moving forward to look like?" You know?! What, what, what choices can I make today that are going to ultimately make tomorrow, a better tomorrow. And I just, again, if I had a hat on, I take it off to you, and I applaud you and I celebrate you. And I'm thankful for not just your contributions as an activist, but also as an artist and having your work displayed in galleries and festivals across Canada. And on the last note, where can we see, where, I mean it's hard probably to predict this, where can we see your work coming up next?

Syrus Marcus Ware 54:24

I have a bunch of work going into the Never Apart Gallery in Montreal, a project I did called Antarctica and also "Ancestors, Do You Read Me" which is video set in 2072 and that'll be online, there'll be images and stuff online, so you can check it out at Never Apart Gallery, Montreal. I also have a show going in Vancouver also in January at Wil Aballe Art Projects, or WAAP gallery - W-A-A-P - and there'll be information there. And then in Toronto, I'm working towards just some new work for the Toronto Biennial, which will be happening in September 2021 lens.

Hollywood Jade 55:05

I mean, here I was thinking it would be hard, and here you are with projects on projects on projects. (both laughing) We love to see it, we really do, we love to see it. I'm so grateful for you and for your time, and I thank you again for having this second conversation with me and I look forward to having more.

Syrus Marcus Ware 55:28

Absolutely. Thank you, Hollywood.

Hollywood Jade 55:30

Oh, you're so welcome! Like it's, I feel like there's, there's definitely more conversations that needs to be had about trans awareness and I think the best way to get that is from personal experience, you know, and the sharing of each other's stories and I'm grateful for you and your sharing and I wish you all the best moving forward!

Syrus Marcus Ware 55:54

Thank you so much and the same to you. Good luck with everything!

Hollywood Jade 55:57

I appreciate that. Thank you so much and we will talk soon!

Syrus Marcus Ware 56:02

Okay, take care.

Hollywood Jade 56:04

All right, bye bye.

Syrus Marcus Ware 56:05

Bye.

Hollywood Jade 56:05

Once again, thank you all for tuning in. I am your host, Hollywood Jade, and until next time, peace love 'n hair grease.