

A cultural citizenship lens for the cinematic representation of queer persons with physical disabilities in African films

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ABSTRACT

This study recognizes the double jeopardy African queer persons with physical disabilities face. It also recognizes that cinematic representations are paths through public imagination and through which perceptions of minorities are curated. Cinematic representations of queer persons with physical disabilities can be reconfigured to guide the public imagination toward the inclusivity of queer persons with disabilities, and to influence corresponding law and practice. On the African continent, cinematic representations of queer persons with physical disabilities are almost nonexistent, which translates into a “crisis of imagination.” Existing normative human rights frameworks as well as prevalent, beliefs, norms, and attitudes have yet to embrace the full citizenship of human rights of these minorities. This article employs the joint lens of human rights and cultural citizenship as paths through which best practices for cinematic representation of queer persons with physical disabilities can be considered. This study argues for the belonging of queer persons with physical disabilities in African cinematic representations, public imagination across African communities, as well as the broader human rights project (including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; African Commission Resolution on Protection against Violence and other Human Rights Violations against Persons on the basis of their real or imputed Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity; African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights; and Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa).

Introduction

In the 2008 movie *Milk* (Van Sant et al., 2009)—based on the book, *Mayor of Castro Street* (Shilts, 1982) about the life of the first openly gay man to be elected into public office in California, Harvey Milk—there was a representation of a queer person with a physical disability. Harvey Milk’s rising political career and popularity were fully vested in the collective visibility and advancement of queer persons. It was at this point in the film that Milk received a call from Paul, a man who lived in Minnesota, to tell him that his work and life had inspired him. However, Paul also called to say that while he was inspired, he was trapped in a medical facility with his intolerant and homophobic family, who were trying to subject him to being cured of his being queer. Milk urged him to take a bus or train and flee to a big city where he could be himself like most queer folk were doing at the time. Paul then informed Milk that he could not flee because he was in a wheelchair.

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In the Netflix series *Sex Education* (Season 4, Episode 7), this man in a wheelchair is incarnated in the character of Aisha, a young, Black, queer female student with a hearing impairment, and in Isaac, a young White male student in a wheelchair. The fire alarm in the school was set off by Isaac in protest because the school's elevator was not working (and had not been working for a long time). He was stranded on the ground floor and could not participate in ongoing academic activities. Reacting to the fire alarm and thinking it was an actual fire, students poured out of their classrooms to the muster point. Aisha, who sat in the front row of her class focusing on her exams, was left behind in the classroom and was only fortunate to catch the glimpse of the back of the last student leaving the class.

Aisha made her way outside and, after having understood the cause of the movements, disrupted the school staff making a public address to speak up. In her words:

It (not having the elevator fixed and, by extension, the prevalent non-acknowledgement of persons with disability) is not a misunderstanding. It is an afterthought. None of you realized you left me behind just now when college could have burned down. I used to sign BSL (British Sign Language) as a kid, but when I went to secondary school, the access just was not there. And I was so embarrassed to ask for it. So, I pretend that I am coping as well as everyone else. It is so much work. Lip-reading, having people speak for me, no note-taker in class. It is so draining. (*Sex Education*, Season 4, Episode 7)

Following Aisha, Isaac spoke up: "I wish people understood that our problems come from barriers in society and not our disability" (*Sex Education*, Season 4, Episode 7).

The school staff advised all students to return to their activities and verbally committed to fixing the elevator. However, in response to this, Aisha and all the other students insisted that if the elevator halted Isaac's participation in school, they would all be halted in protest until the elevator was fixed. What would be a great title for this segment of the plot were the first words Isaac initially said to the school staff when the alarm went off, "I know it's not glamorous but it's really important that when people ask for something you need you listen" (*Sex Education*, Season 4, Episode 7). The school staff tried to placate the students by saying that was a big misunderstanding, and this set Aisha off to get him to really listen.

In democratic contexts in which the need for community participation is acknowledged and institutionalized, sensitivity to diverse identities is integral to inclusivity, protecting, promoting, and fulfilling human rights as well as recognizing cultural citizenship. Paying attention to the vernacular self-constructions of persons' realities and their implications is a path for acknowledging and understanding the subjective identities and human rights realities of minorities in order to effectively execute advocacy or governance.

Generally on the African continent, diverse identities and lived realities within the intersections of queer sexual orientations, gender identity and expression, and disabilities suffer great erasure (Ladele, 2020). The obvious reasons for this may include the double jeopardy that emanates from intersecting vulnerabilities of being a person with disability and being queer. However, this jeopardy also emanates from these intersecting identities being outside the scope of what is generally considered as belonging within the realm of the commonplace, the "normal." Across the African continent, queerness and disability are widely perceived as taboo identities (Ladele, 2020). Queer persons with physical disabilities have been denaturalized through dominant hegemonic constructions that render them invisible and unimaginable as citizens (McRuer, 2008).

Although this article acknowledges that citizenship emerges from political connection with the state on a vertical level as the right to have rights, this study focuses on the horizontal dimension of citizenship, which is nested in the sociocultural constructions and dynamics of belonging. The article is a part of a larger study that generally seeks to articulate the ethical trajectories for the representation of queer persons with physical disabilities in African films. This articulation was preparatory research for the writing of a film school screenplay titled, *The One You Wait For*. At the time of working on this article, part of this study (which is not included here) focused on the ethics of inclusive representations of queer persons with physical

disabilities flowing from the analysis of legal citizenship and international human rights frameworks and commitments.

The focus of the article takes on the other half of the analysis, which narrows in on the ethics of inclusive representation of queer persons with physical disabilities within horizontal/sociocultural dimension of citizenship. This cultural dimension of analysis adopts the human rights lens as well as the law and humanities notion that human rights standards bear performative, cultural, and discursive implications that lend themselves interpretation and vernacularization through a cultural process that is not confined to positivist frameworks (Derbyshire & Hodson, 2008). This is also centered on the understanding that cinematic representation of identity is a commonly used mechanism for the vernacular construction, curation, and contestation of citizenship on a social and cultural level (Bittar, 2020). This article is structured into four parts: unboxing the lens of cultural citizenship, the film project, big picture and film-text references, thematic analysis through the lens of cultural citizenship, and a conclusion.

Unboxing the lens of cultural citizenship

Citizenship is generally perceived as an identity created and preserved by law. When it comes to the citizenship of African queer persons with physical disabilities, international human rights frameworks provide the best standards within which to conceptualize and understand their normative scope. Cinematic representation of African queer persons with physical disabilities implicates quite a number of rights protected under international human rights law that African states are obligated to respect, promote, and fulfill. These rights include the right to equality and nondiscrimination, the right to dignity, and the rights to freedom of expression and access to information.

Queer persons with physical disabilities bear the right to equality with everyone else and freedom from being discriminated against on the grounds of either their queerness or their disability. This right is grounded in the joint reading of Article 2 across the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1982); United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (A/RES/61/106); Article 5 of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa (African Disability Protocol); Art 2 and Art 23 of the Protocol to the African Charter on the Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (UN treaty collection number: 26363); as well as the Preamble and Paragraphs 2 and 4 of the African Commission Resolution on Protection against Violence and other Human Rights Violations against Persons on the basis of their real or imputed Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity (Resolution 275).

To complement the international human rights framework on the right to equality and nondiscrimination, some international human rights law standards incline toward fostering inclusive, fair, pluralistic, dignifying, democratic, nonoppressive, and nondiscriminatory cultural representations of minorities as integral to cultural rights participation of all persons. These include UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions; United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (A/RES/61/295); General Comment No. 34 (2011) on Article 19 (Freedom of Opinion and Expression) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; General Recommendation of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination No. 35 (2013) on Combatting Racist Hate Speech; General Recommendation No. 35 of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women on Gender-Based Violence (CEDAW/C/GC/35); and General Comment No. 25 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2021) on Children's Rights in the Digital Environment. Parallel standards, grounding international human rights norms on nondiscrimination within cinematic representation, also exist within the African human rights framework, such as Art 12(1) (b) of the Maputo Protocol. Similarly, there are Principles 22 and 23 of the African Commission Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression & Access to Information in Africa (2019) and the African Union Model Law on Access to Information (2013).

Queer persons with physical disabilities also bear the right to dignity and freedom of expression and access to information, and when it comes to cinematic representation, most of the standards that complement the right to nondiscrimination also overlap here. Nonetheless, to highlight a few, there is UN Resolution [A/HRC/RES/16/18](#) on Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, indictment to violence and violence against persons based on religion and belief, Paragraph 3, which condemns the adoption of the media as tool for fostering discrimination. Similarly, there is the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expression ([UN treaty collection registration number: 43977](#)), which provides for the principle of equal dignity of and respect for all cultures, as such the protection, promotion, and recognition of cultures of minorities.

In construing citizenship on the vertical plane by highlighting the relationship between state and citizens, it is also crucial to center citizenship as equally grounded in the relationship and sociocultural dynamics among citizens. This horizontal dynamic is deeply rooted in and fostered by the public acknowledgment of the existence and human rights of African queer persons with physical disabilities.

Within the African context, the right to dignity is closely linked with the moral concept of *ubuntu* (Murithi, 2007). *Ubuntu* is the African philosophy of human interconnectedness and belonging that “emphasizes the respect for all members of the community” (Murithi, 2007)—that “we belong in a bundle of life”; that we are human because we belong, we participate, and we share with others; and that what we do to others comes back to us through our interconnectedness (Murithi, 2007). Reading the rights of queer persons with physical disabilities to dignity in an African context jointly with *ubuntu* therefore implies an equalizing, symbiotic connection and co-centrality with the rest of the community. This equalizing is expected to happen in a context that makes room for all persons to thrive in their diverse humanities.

Rosaldo described citizenship as “the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense” (Rosaldo, 1994). This view of citizenship exists within the broader recognition of decentering the state and its obligations as the sole conferrer of citizenship (Clarke et al., 2014). And perhaps looking at the site of citizenship beyond formal rights or the right to have rights enables us to begin to consider that citizenship can exist, and can be contested, at the site of varying social and cultural contexts, practices, and processes (Clarke et al., 2014). The contexts, practices, interactions, and processes are multilevel, dynamic, evolving, and yet very articulate sites for the understanding of how citizenship as belonging works and what the needs of the people and communities are (Doherty, 2020).

As opposed to the clinical calibration of rights as state obligations—which, in its own way, essentializes and blurs out vast masses of complex realities—cultural citizenship calls for the denaturalizing of this essentialism and more critical engagement with context-specific analysis (Clarke et al., 2014). Cultural citizenship calls for the centering of the needs of these silenced identities by looking at how they construct, what they construct, and what is in the way of their construction of themselves (Rosaldo, 1994). Cultural citizenship calls for listening to vernacular practices of minorities and how these practices make and contest room for them in the world. Moreso, cultural citizenship calls for ensuring that the subjectivities of these minorities are respected and integrated in a way that public interaction with them does not hinder the advancement of these minorities (Rosaldo, 1994).

The cultural citizenship of queer persons with physical disabilities implicates the complicit parallel lenses of the queer and crip theoretical frameworks. The queer and crip theoretical frameworks jointly problematize the ease of the question, “What does it mean to be human and to belong?” McRuer (2008) engaged with the dynamics that queer and crip theories share. Crip theory, as explained by McRuer (2008), is an “analytic framework” for centering the subjectivities of persons with disabilities by highlighting the “slipperiness of embodiment” and the incomplete coverage of the disabled–able-bodied dynamic that is central to disability studies. McRuer (2008) also read queer theory as acknowledging the slipperiness of desire, attraction, and gender, as well as bodily normativity that defies the institutionalized binaries of human existence and social

relations. Parallel to McRuer, Gallop (2018) and Löfgren-Mårtenson (2013) described crip theory as an interweaving of disability studies and queer theory, and jointly as a more potent “affirmation of bodily difference” (Gallop, 2018, p. 2) and “resistance to normativity” (Gallop, 2018, p. 12).

McRuer argued that crip theory is to disability studies what queer theory is to lesbian and gay studies. Both approaches embrace the slipperiness of being human and the logicity of normative constructs. Both jointly embrace the intersectionality of identities and, when read jointly with the lens of cultural citizenship, they seek to urge legal and cultural practitioners to embrace and engage with subjectivities and realities beyond that which institutionalized binaries have established as instantly legible. This joint reading also exposes the complicit nature of unreflective static notions of being human that ground the intolerant social hues such as homophobia, racism, sexism, and ableism. And this ableism or ableist imagination of queer bodies includes the desexualization or oversexualization of the bodies of persons with disabilities or the reduction of the identities of persons with disabilities to, at the essentialist core, their being just persons with disabilities only (Ladele, 2020).

Construing the cultural citizenship of queer persons with physical disabilities with a crip and human rights grounding when it comes to cinematic representation calls for a co-centrality of international human rights norms as well as an intimate understanding and just portrayal of these minorities. International human rights law has to come to terms with the slippery and dynamic nature of humanity, especially when it comes to vulnerable persons such as minorities, including African queer persons with physical disabilities. Moreso when addressing the cultural citizenship of an identity that embodies vulnerabilities, it is important to come to terms with the human rights protections and standards of each layer of vulnerability, how they exist independently and how they interact (Skarstad & Stein, 2018)—in this case, layers of being queer and the layer of being a person with disability.

Similarly, there is the need to come to terms with lived subjectivities of each layer of vulnerability, how they exist independently and how they interact (Skarstad & Stein, 2018). Simultaneously, it is crucial to consider the unique nominal and practical ramification of citizenship for this intersecting identity within the context of their unique realities as well as how this intersecting identity interacts with the universal citizenship ramifications within which the broader community is couched (Skarstad & Stein, 2018).

The film project: Big picture and film/text reference/focus

In 2022, while in film school, I worked on a screenplay titled *The One You Wait For* as part of the academic requirements for the Motion Picture Medium Program at AFDA, South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance. *The One You Wait For* is a love story set in 1946 Colonial Johannesburg. The two main characters are Hendrick and Tshepo, and they are madly in love. Hendrick is a young, Dutch migrant bisexual photographer in a wheelchair who has just moved to South Africa to live with his father, a business man working with the South African government at the time. Tshepo is a young, Black, bisexual mine worker married to a wife who lives in Kimberly, Northern Cape, a township far from Johannesburg.

Tshepo and Hendrick find each other while separately navigating the underground multicultural queer subculture of Colonial Johannesburg, and they become inseparable as romantic partners. However, their union must never see daylight because of the criminality ascribed to such relationships by the South African Immorality Act, which forbids interracial sexual relations and same-sex relationships. This love boat is further rocked when Tshepo is hell bent on marching in the 1946 Mine Workers Protest against unfair working conditions while Hendrick strongly feels that Tshepo ought to let him play his protector role as a partner of better circumstances and higher privilege.

Concerns arose while writing this screenplay, such as Hendrick’s representation as well as that of the physical and emotional relationship between Hendrick and Tshepo. They are an

interracial couple, with same genders and sexual orientations but with discordant bodies that honor and love each other. This union draws inspiration from the overarching theme of cultural citizenship as belonging in a place or with a people in spite of being different. This screenplay goes against the norms of what bodies can be centered in screenplays, what persons can fall in love and for whom they should fall. And generally, the script is a disruption of what these general marginal bodies can cinematically accomplish and their ambition not just within the story but extending further into what they want the public to believe, disbelieve, and make room for when it comes to them. This love and representation of Henrick and Tshepo was inspired by the love that Aciman described in *Call Me by Your Name* (Aciman, 2018). And similarly, it is a queering of who, what, and where home is and can be when it comes to historically marginalized bodies and identities.

I did not write the screenplay for it to become a human rights advocacy tool, but I did realize, from my human rights background, that how I wrote and what I wrote ought to be intricately guided by several layers of interdisciplinary and multistakeholder consultation. The prior section of this article highlighted the position of international human rights law in the African Charter, CRPD, Maputo Protocol, and African Disability Protocol on the representation of minorities as being rooted in the principles of the rights to equality and nondiscrimination and veering away from stereotypes. Similarly, these standards are insistent on the potential of cultural productions, media, and storytelling as tools for the promotion of the humanity and human rights of minorities as well as making room for a diverse range of identities within the community (Gibney & Betsalel, 2011, p. 1186; Nash, 2022).

To further complement this, the writing of *The One You Wait For* was guided by what Rosaldo described as the recognition of plurality and interconnectedness, the ethics of love (Rosaldo, 1994, p. 410). This calls for the recognizing that representation of the dignity of the other comes from listening to the other. However, because I wrote the script in the context of a film degree, there was an institutional requirement for a deliberate parallel between the consultation of real voices of these minorities (through co-creation and supervisory conversations) and films and visual references, as well as their aesthetic, technical, and political constructions had to be my first resort.

There was a jarring absence of films that had representations of queer persons with physical disabilities and bodily discordant sexual relations. As such, the films I chose at the time of writing were ones that had representations of queer persons and representations of persons with physical disabilities separately. These films included *True Confession* (Nnebue, 1994), *Wind of Glory* (Chikere, 2007), *Raising Dion* (Barbee, 2019), and *CODA* (2021)—a mix of films with the representation of persons with physical disabilities from Nigeria and the United States. *Hell or High Water* (Amuwa, 2017) and *Men in Love* (Ebere, 2010) are films that include representations of Nigerian queer men. *True Confession* and *Wind of Glory* are Nigerian films from the traditional Nollywood era of video film and VHS and DVDs, whereas *CODA* and *Raising Dion* are non-Nigerian films sourced from online streaming platforms, Netflix and Apple+TV. Although my screenplay is set in South Africa, I chose to adopt Nigerian references above South African cinematic references for the queer men because of the similarity between present-day Nigeria and Colonial South Africa, in terms of the context of the criminality of same-sex relations. It was important that I consulted with these characters as men in same-sex sexual relationships within the context of criminality.

In *True Confession*, Mabel poisons her husband's bath water so that he becomes blind. She subsequently kills him so that she and her lover can elope with his material possessions. In *Wind of Glory*, Juliana's lover, in spite of her persistence, urges her to undergo an eye surgery so that she regains her sight. In *Raising Dion*, Dion—a child hero with super powers—tries to impress his friend, Ezperanza, by curing her from her not being able to walk through using his super powers to lift her off her wheelchair and wiggle her feet. In *CODA*, Ruby, a hearing girl, is born into a family with members who are hearing impaired, and she has to choose between chasing her dreams of becoming a singer or being a life-long translator for her

family. In *Hell or High Water*, a gay pastor struggles to fulfill his conjugal duties to his wife and maintain the façade of his heterosexuality. In *Men in Love*, Alex uses magic/charms to recruit his childhood friend, Charles, into homosexuality in order to break up his marriage and have him for himself.

From the positionality of a human rights lawyer and filmmaker, I understand the representation of a queer person with physical disabilities in an African screenplay through a human rights lens will be writing into a space of silence and an urgency of reparation/writing from a reparatory stand point. The space of silence exists because there is a lack of representation of queer persons with physical disabilities in African films. The space of reparation exists because, as the thematic analysis will demonstrate, the prevalent notions conveyed by existing representations of the separate identities of queerness and disability are created from a place of objectification and exclusion.

The cinematic objectification and exclusion of queer bodies and bodies with disabilities, because of its public nature, fosters negative perceptions and a social culture of exclusion, erasure, violation, and dispossession of these minorities (Everett, 2009). Everett argued that films can provide symbolic reparation for minorities through introducing and recurating these minority identities in how they exist in public imagination. “Re-storying” is a parallel term centered by Corntassel et al. (2009) that implicates a truth-telling with the primary aim of not just rehashing trauma that minorities face but also centering minorities’ voices, correcting false narratives, and securing a cohesive atmosphere to birth a practical and tangible transformation of circumstances emerging from public acknowledgment and accountability. This re-storying can be accomplished simply through a dignifying co-creating with the minorities; dignifying characterization of the minorities in film, by centralizing and developing them into whole persons, giving them a life and plot beyond just their queerness or impairment (Everett, 2009). In doing this, film can simulate contact between minorities and the general public as well as foster a social and cultural acceptance and attitudinal shift, a cohesion perhaps, ubuntu.

It is crucial to admit here that re-storying or queering or crippling the writing of a screenplay such as *The One You Wait For* bears potential as a tool for symbolic reparation. However, it may not reach its full potential as a reparative tool if, after its social and cultural igniting of acknowledgment and awareness, it is not followed up by shifts that tangibly include and improve the lives of African queer persons with physical disabilities (Durbach et al., 2022).

Thematic analysis through the lens of cultural citizenship

In articulating the ethics of representation of queer persons with physical disabilities within film as well as engaging with their human rights, the thematic analysis of this films arrived at four broad themes: (1) aesthetic performativity and cinematic consolidation of hegemonic views on disabilities; (2) the hierarchization of bodies and gender—the cinematic production of good men, good girls, weak men, and senior girls; (3) a damage-centered approach to the representation of queer and disabled identities in film; and (4) systemic performativity—the complicities of ableist and exclusionary creative and administrative systems in the crisis of imagination. The latter two are the focus of this article and are discussed in turn below.

Damage-centered approach to cinematic representations of queer and disabled identities

In *Hell or High Water* (Amuwa, 2017), an advocacy film, Pastor Gbolahan is an employed pastor who is in a heterosexual marriage. He is represented as struggling to play the sexual role of a heterosexual husband to his wife. His life comes crashing down when he is exposed by his same-sex partner’s wife for being homosexual. Consequently, Gbolahan loses his job and his marriage, and is chased about town by journalists.

The reiteration of the dispossessed Nigerian gay man echoes a human rights approach, an essentialism of queer minorities and the aesthetics of shock that seeks to publicize the impact of homophobic violence on the lives of queer persons. Although this has its merits for the advancement of queer rights within the human rights field, it reiterates the cinematic reductive representations of the queer person as just queer and does not engage with the totality of this queer person's complexities. Gbolahan's clergy career is an interesting layer to his character as well as his being married, but they both seem to be still wound into being escape routes from that which matters the most—his queerness.

A queer person is hardly ever just queer. Queer persons generally embody intersectional identities. This posthumanitarian cinematic requirement for the representations of characters also finds its theoretical ground in the desire-based approach of storytelling, which calls for cinematic representation of vulnerable persons through lenses and methods that are centering of a fuller, more rounded version of who they are, rather than through essentialist and reductive lenses (Tuck, 2009).

In filmmaking, as in social interaction, it may seem logical to stay on the outside of minorities and make projections and speculations as regard the practicalities of their lives, and as such the character we are designing. This does no justice for adequately humanizing minorities in public imagination. Of course, as the teacher in the classroom is presumably the center of power and information, the writers and directors of a film are deemed the center of creativity and the custodians of the aesthetic and technical trajectory of films. However, this assumption and political configuration is unhelpful while making films about minorities, such as such as queer persons with physical disabilities whose realities have been denaturalized by hegemonic standards of cinema, hegemonic imaginations, and projections.

In telling the stories of minorities, film is a tool for fostering critical consciousness and, as such, requires a certain level of multimodal rigor. This requires a consciousness and engagement with accessible dynamic resources that adequately fledge out the representational dynamics of minorities within the story. It cannot be overemphasized that, when it comes to centering the cultural citizenship of minorities in power, as well as in film set and film design and in production practices, institutionalized approaches have to be disrupted and decentered to include the voices, constructions, and bodies of minorities.

Rosaldo makes the case:

All members of a class can read a text, but they must listen with care to students who speak from social positions different from their own. ... The result is that classrooms become less comfortable than they were before. Instead of seeking maximum comfort, teachers should strike for tolerable discomfort. Educators have often reported that tolerable discomfort often goes hand in hand with written work of exceptional quality. (Rosaldo, 1994, p. 410)

Similarly, screenwriters, and filmmakers in general, should aspire to embrace the discomfort that comes with inclusive creative practices that acknowledge the subjectivities and cultural citizenship of minorities. And this can be done by keeping the doors open and paying attention to the how minorities construct themselves in the practices, processes, and contexts that are integral to their lives and belonging. In doing this, it is crucial that the dignities and subjectivities of these minorities, as they construct them, are represented, not essentially paraphrased, not destructively objectified.

Ncube (2023) made the case that, increasingly across the African continent, dignifying queer representation has flourished over the past decade across even frontiers that previously had not produced such themed films as the 2015 film *Tchindas* (Cape Verde), the 2020 film *Kapana* (Namibia), and the 2020 documentary *The Art of Sin* (Sudan; see Ncube, 2023).

Queer films have also emerged from countries with anti-sodomy laws: from Nigeria, the 2016 film *Hell or High Water* and 2020 film *Ife*; from Uganda, the 2016 documentary *The Pearl of Africa*; and from Kenya, the 2020 documentary *I am Samuel* and the 2019 film *Rafiki*.

Ncube has made the argument also that the aesthetics of queer bodies are themselves a language sufficient to communicate—and this was said in the context of his watching queer films that were shot in language he did not understand (Ncube, 2023). I agree that increasingly queer representation by queer persons is on the rise and that queer citizens are formidably contesting their right to belong with their queerness—and this commendable.

However, Ncube and I diverge on whether the visibility of queer bodies is sufficient to communicate their belonging. In a context in which homophobia, intolerance, and exclusion are the default imagination and associations made with queer bodies, it is crucial that the queer bodies are consulted on and involved with aesthetic and technical deliberation levels in parallel with the semiotics of their visibility. Minorities ought to be given the space to intentionally construct and articulate their messaging as clearly as possible in complementarity to their bodies as a deliberate disruption of the default and the dominant.

Kim (2011) discussed documentaries produced by Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI) to advance the rights of persons with disabilities. These documentaries include *Torment Not Treatment* (on Serbia), *Behind Closed Doors* (on Turkey), *Hidden Suffering* (on Romania; see Tuck, 2009). In these documentaries, the mute visual aesthetics of persons with disabilities in several vulnerable positions, against the voice of an able-bodied narrator, were considered: “The reduction of disabled peoples’ lives to a series of silent sequences of video realism eschews the responsibility to understand the complexity of the situation” (Tuck, 2009, p. 416).

Kim and Chouliaraki discussed the criticism of the “shock effect” and “positive image” portrayal of vulnerable persons in film (Chouliaraki, 2010; Kim, 2011). Whereas the shock effect objectifies vulnerable persons, the positive image approach—focusing on gratitude for the reception of external assistance—decenters the complex lived realities of the vulnerable persons being represented in film. Kim and Chouliaraki advanced a more posthumanitarian approach to cinematically representing vulnerable persons. The posthumanitarian approach steers away from the polarities of reducing persons to their pain or denying that the pain exists, as these practices dispossess vulnerable persons of dignity.

It is crucial that every strip of a minority person’s identity and subjectivity is embraced. Ideally, this posthumanitarian approach also requires that the creation and conceptualization of these cinematic representation is done co-independently and democratically with the persons whose representations are being considered. Peoples’ lived realities are composed of more than one strip of identity. As such, it is imperative to reimagine their representation as more than being subject to the isolated realities of that one strip. In embracing the complexities of identities it is also crucial to recognize that people are made up of more than just their limitations and impairments.

Esperanza from *Raising Dion* rejects this objectification as well as the ableist structures of representations that sustain them; she says to let her go. This protest defies the imagination of ableist structures. But it also calls for more inclusive and critical ways of representing diverse characters in film. This calls for the crippling of cinematic trajectory of films even through fiction (Kim, 2011).

This article embraces *CODA* as a standard for crip and social justice-compliant representation of persons with disabilities. *CODA* critically engages with the various identity layers of the characters with disabilities in the film: Frank, Jack, and Leo (they have hearing impairments (see Heder, 2021)). *CODA* also vests itself in the immersive cinematic representation of the lived realities of persons with disability in a very posthumanitarian sense that is neither rooted in shock nor a naïve positive image.

In embracing *CODA* as an excellent iteration of the representation of persons with disabilities, two scenes stand out. In the first, Ruby’s family (Frankie, Jackie, and Leo) come to support Ruby at her musical show at school. They cannot hear her sing but they experience her vicariously through the responses that other members of the audience express in their bodily movements and facial expressions. Midway during Ruby’s performance, the volume of the film gradually

lessens to a mute, mimicking the experience of Ruby's family. The film's sound only resumes at the end of Ruby's performance.

Later that night, Ruby performs the song again for Frankie, while he assimilates the vibrations of it by gently placing his palm on her neck while she sings. Similar to Ruby's family, this cinematic style of immersive representation of disability advances in the public imagination the recognition of the gap that inaccessibility of public media accords to persons with disabilities. In the next performance Ruby has at which her family is present, she matches her singing with the performance of the lyrics of the song through sign language. Ruby's demonstration of the potential and cross-cutting applicability of accessibility and accommodation of persons with disabilities is an applaudable norm. This immersive aesthetics of representing disability occurs through decentering ableist and heteronormative notions and imaginations in the representation of characters.

To complement the immersive representation of persons with disabilities, AppleTV+ adopts universal design in the streaming of *CODA* by embedding its caption options for 36 languages and with voice descriptions to make its consumptions by persons with physical disabilities more accommodating and accessible (Apple Newsroom, 2002).

CODA's inclusive, immersive, and accessible cinematic approaches earned it towering numbers of film awards and recognitions, a fraction of which include the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay 2022, the Satellite Award for Best Screenplay Adapted 2022, and the Writers Guild of America's Award for Best Adapted Screenplay 2022. It was also listed as one of the top 10 films of 2022 by the American Film Institute.

In writing *The One You Wait For* and constructing the character of Hendrick and his relationship with Tshepo, I was deliberate that, despite their both being geopolitically located in Colonial South Africa, they met in an equalizing sociocultural bubble—the underground multicultural queer scene. Another deliberate choice, that emerged from my consultation with my friends with disabilities, is the setting of their meetings and the power dynamics they both embodied in these settings. In early drafts of the script, they almost always met in Hendrick's room at night. This would have been reflection of their invisibility to the public eye and marginal nature. But it would also have been a perpetuation of Hendrick's limitation to his bedroom, further representing him as being incapable of a public life owing to this impairment.

However, subsequent drafts represent Hendrick as mobile and even being a central member of the multicultural underground queer subcultures of Colonial Johannesburg. As opposed to being nurtured, Hendrick represents nurturing when he attends to Tshepo's whip marks. As opposed to being protected, Hendrick is represented as desperately seeking to protect Tshepo from death, even when Tshepo tries to avoid him. Hendrick takes his own chances and makes his own choices. He is acknowledged, respected. In the end, Hendrick plays on his seeming meekness, leading Tshepo to lower his guard. Hendrick wins. Here Hendrick plays on his invisibility as a super power, a similar trajectory adopted by characters with disability such as Esperanza in *Raising Dion* (Grant, 2019) and Freddy in *Shazam* (Sandberg, 2019).

Systemic performativity: The complicities of ableist and exclusionary creative and administrative systems in the crisis of imagination

Because filmmaking is a site of constructing citizenship and belonging, it is crucial that minorities such as queer persons, persons with disabilities, and queer persons with disabilities participate. It is also important that all the social, institutional, and infrastructural barriers in the way of their participation be intentionally tackled to ensure that nothing gets in the way of their belonging. The technical systems of African filmmaking that exist have yet to come to terms with this.

African films, at the levels of cinematic representations, productions, and consumption, are on a decolonial trajectory. However, these African systems of film production and consumption are still quite complicit in erasure and discrimination of nonhegemonic identities and bodies.

In its 2021 study on the African film industry, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) celebrated the digital revolution that the African film industry has experienced (UNESCO, 2021). Nonetheless, these digital revolutions have yet to factor in universal design and accessibility and accommodation in study, production, and consumption of films as legitimate, urgent, and social justice-rooted goals to be reached by film students and practitioners on the African continent.

There is an urgent need for the inclusive constitution and accessibility of the study, research, and practice of film. This inclusivity should be decentering of able bodies as the universal default. Plummer (2002) viewed storytelling—and, by extension, film making—in two different lights: filmmaking as a symbolic interaction and filmmaking as a political process. The symbolic interaction recognizes the role of the creative writers, the technical producers, the funders, the marketers, and the audience—who all contribute to the making and absorbing of the film itself into the collective imagination, through multiple interpretations and cultural frameworks of the general public. However, films are not made in the absence of political factors. Each stage of the filmmaking process is a demonstration of power, from the inception of the idea until its consumption and interpretation by the masses, if the politics let it get that far.

The films discussed here (drawn predominantly from Nigeria, South Africa, and the United States) have been read for their representation of queerness, gender, and disability. These cinematic representations of genders and bodies are reverberatory of the hegemonic social, political, and legal climate in which they are made—which disproportionately excludes queer persons and persons with physical disabilities. This exclusion robs these minorities of the chance to contest and construct their citizenship in resistance to hegemonic standards that exist in their societies.

Film is not a totally passive bystander in the sociocultural configuration of the state. The cinematic representation curates the public imagination and is complicit in the social cultural sensibilities of that place at that time. Ableism is the historical centering of able bodies and imaginations, to the exclusion of all else (Ramaahlo, 2021). The effect of systemic ableism is that it births, sustains, and defends laws, infrastructure, rights, realities, and stories that elevate able-bodied realities as universal and keep the realities and interests of persons with disabilities on the outside of relevance. These ableist and homophobic systems also keep the stories of persons with disabilities on the outside of relevance. This exclusion from relevance translates to marginal stories being erased, indeed, nonexistent in the symbolic interaction and political processes that lead to the telling of stories—to the making of films.

These films demonstrate that, insofar as such cinema can be a site for the contestation of citizenship, it can also be a site for the destruction of any traces of it. This destructive erasure results in silence in the discourse through film on “who we are” and “who belongs.” Educational institutions, film schools, and film practitioners exist as part of the horizontal plane and stakeholders of the contexts and practices through which citizenship is contested and consolidated, and they play a huge role in decentering the prevalence of exclusion of minorities. They can do this by simply functionally opening the door and introducing minorities into the technical practices of construction in this heavily complex field of filmmaking and cinematic representation. And they can do so also by listening to and referencing the vernacular construction of minority identities as constructed by the minorities themselves.

There is yet to be an African cinematic representation of a queer person with a physical disability. The complex lives and identities of persons with disabilities are still prevalently outside the imagination of African filmmakers and film practitioners regarding what deserves inclusive representation. Consequently, what does not make it to film does not make into to the public imagination and consciousness. It is ironic that, even now, when most tertiary institutions are on a decolonial and transformation trajectory, there is still silence and passiveness on the representation and lived realities of queer persons with disabilities.

For cinema to be inclusive of queer persons with disabilities, and for this to translate to the imagination of the general public, these persons have to be functional parts of the symbolic interaction and political processes that amount to the production, dissemination, consumption,

and absorption of film (Plummer, 2002). To address this crisis of imagination, it is crucial that spaces and avenues where these processes occur decenter institutional ableism and reimagine and redesign these platforms through the adoption of approaches guided by universal design for learning to be accessible to persons with disabilities (Ramaahlo, 2021).

These spaces need to effectively make room for queer persons with disabilities. Eddie Ndopu and John Meletse are two South African queer men with disabilities who have applied themselves across multimodal means to the exploration and explanation of their identities and the plights of queer persons with disabilities. Ndopu is a Black, queer, South African activist with atrophy, “one of the 17 advocates appointed by the United Nations to represent and lead” the global call to realize the Sustainable Development Goals (Mlaba, 2020). Ndopu writes blogs for the Global Citizen website and consults for several organizations on the issues of accessibility and the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Meletse is an openly gay, HIV-positive person with a hearing disability who applies himself to the production of multimodal reiterations of his autobiographic narrative using sign language (Willemse & Morgan, 2009). His works form part of the South African Deaf Culture Project and exist in other forms, such as film, theater performance, television programming, and DVD. Meletse’s work touches on his lived experience navigating the world as a Black, gay, HIV-positive person with a disability.

Other practitioners to look out for are Wangari and Yong. In 2019, Wangari, a Kenyan queer disability rights researcher with muscular dystrophy, and Yong, a filmmaker, released an autobiographical documentary titled *For All the Brilliant Conversations* (Yong & Wangari, 2019), which they both produced, exploring the theme of “friendship and productive discomfort.” Yong is a filmmaker, disability rights activist, and researcher who interrogates through her practice the aesthetics of cinematography from the vantage point of a wheelchair user.

Ndopu has highlighted the UNESCO statistic that “90% of children with disabilities have never seen inside of a classroom” (Time, 2020). This dispossession of children and persons with disabilities translates to a decentering exclusion of the lives, possibilities, and imaginations of persons with disabilities. Worse still, this dispossession translates to “a crisis of imagination.” Ndopu explained this crisis of imagination as “the social and cultural imposition that societies place on people who are different” (Time, 2020).

In writing *The One You Wait For*, this crisis of imagination constituted a stumbling block in writing Hendrick, a character with physical disability, from the outside of this identity, because there were no classmates or staff with physical disabilities in my graduate program with whom to effectively and technically collaborate. Yet through the faculty and staff members’ external networks and my own academic networks, we were able to engage and consult with persons with disabilities outside the film school.

In the course of the research for the screenplay there was also engagement with anthropological and archival material on South African masculinities in general and those of men employed in gold mining across the country. Among other things, this study demonstrated the slipperiness of interracial sexualities and bodies of masculinities and sexualities in Colonial Johannesburg. This slipperiness would generally be illegible under notions of gender and sexualities that entrench binaries of homosexuality and heterosexuality as well as binaries that strictly carve boundaries of masculinities. These binaries are grounded in the assumption that being one thing simultaneously implies that we cannot be something else. Yet slippages are evident in the studies and archival material, which refer to mine-wives and *de facto* same-sex coupling among mine workers (Moodie, 1988). These binaries are related to the unimagability of interracial same-sex relations in Colonial South Africa and are similarly slippery.

Another consideration is that the final product is a written script designed outside the requirement of the universal design for learning (UDL) guidelines, as such making this product in itself inaccessible and complicit in the crisis of imagination. The works of Yong and Wangari as discussed earlier, as well as the work of Macharia and Ikpo, speak to the potential of UDL cinematic practices (Yong & Wangari, 2019).

Similar to Yong and Wangari's work, the documentary, *Possible: A Day in the Life of Wilson Macharia* was cowritten and codirected by Ikpo (a lawyer and filmmaker) and Macharia (a Kenyan disability rights lawyer and subject of the film), who is also a researcher, activist, and person with visual impairment. *Possible* (Ikpo & Macharia, 2021) addressed the importance of leveraging technology for the advancement of the quality of life of persons with disabilities. *Possible* was both consultative and collaborative from the point of conceptualization, writing, preproduction, production, postproduction, up until its final release on YouTube. This process was also supported by the technical assistance of the Disability Rights Unit, the Freedom of Expression and Information Unit and Communications, and the advocacy team at the Center for Human Rights, University of Pretoria. It is an essential, ethical cinematic requirement to involve and represent persons with disabilities within the democratic and social trajectory of effective and inclusive co-creation.

These factors, integral to the absence of persons with disabilities in film school classrooms and inaccessibility of final product jointly, implicate the historical hegemonic ableism and exclusion entrenched in the process of study and practice of cinema and cinematic representation. The film school, being a microcosm of the larger society, ought to increasingly apply itself committedly to the reimagination of its trajectory and activities through crip lenses. This reimagination begins through recognizing the cultural citizenship of queer persons with physical disabilities and embracing UDL. UDL is a "framework to optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn" (Munster Technological University, 2020). These guidelines constitute standards and forms to which knowledge production and dissemination should apply for these materials, approaches, and systems to be accessible to and accommodating of everyone—including persons with disabilities.

Other UDL complementary steps include the practical engagement with institutional policies on accommodation. This makes the case that accessibility for persons with disabilities does not just refer to infrastructural and pedagogical adjustments or merely complying with policies on formal inclusion and accessibility (Ndopu, 2020). Accessibility for persons with disabilities also implies "empathy, connection, freedom, and possibility."

Conclusion

African queer persons with physical disabilities are erased from public imagination, and as such they are not deemed as falling within the sphere of state protection, let alone being recognized in international human rights law. Although there is no specific mention of queer persons with physical disabilities in any international human rights law treaty, there are international human rights legal standards that provide for the protection of the rights to nondiscrimination on the grounds of disability as well as sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics. Similarly, international human rights law aligns with the state recognition of and protection from intersecting vulnerabilities owing to intersecting identities as such protecting their legal belonging—their legal citizenship.

However, the lived realities of queer persons with physical disabilities are as much a function of the specific coverage in international human rights law and state protection as they are a function of a lack of public acknowledgment and cultural acceptance of their identities. It is within the human rights of African queer persons with physical disabilities to express their cultural citizenship by living, fully expressing, and reaching their full potential anywhere in the world—including in African societies—without having to confirm or aspire to norms and beliefs that malign them or their identities. To complement international human rights legal standards and state protection, it is necessary to foster inclusive attitudes by combatting exclusionary norms and beliefs that malign African queer persons with physical disabilities.

Cinema and storytelling are ways through which acceptance can be fostered and negative attitudes and norms toward minorities addressed. This requires adopting the cultural citizenship and human rights lens for representing minorities. These lenses center the dignifying inclusion

of minority voices and the more dignifying and dynamic characterization of minority characters. As a human rights lawyer and filmmaker, I realize that writing a screenplay that centers minorities is both a writing into silence and an attempt at reparation. The layer of silence seeks to address the prevalent climate of erasure that minority bodies face, and the reparation layer being a complement to other parallel attempts at public acknowledgment of minority marginalization and the agitations for tangible attitudinal and systemic improvements for minorities emerging from the creative process.

Writing *The One You Wait For* as a screenplay featuring a bodily discordant same-sex relationship between Hendrick and Siphon required the simultaneous compliance with the ethical lenses mentioned above and the disciplinary requirement to foreground creative and cinematic references. The analysis demonstrates that African cinematic references that exist for the representation of queer persons with physical disabilities are damage-centered in the representation of these minorities. The analysis also shows that these exclusionary representations emerge from structures that are complicit in the democratic participation of minorities in cinematic process.

Writing the script for *The One You Wait For* entailed aligning the cultural citizenship and human rights lenses with global standards for the construction of the representation of the bodily discordant same-sex relationship between Tshepo and Hendrick, and the queer character with physical disability, Hendrick. This article demonstrates the broader human rights implications of doing so.

Notes on contributor

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