Gender, Sexuality, and Taxis: An Interview With Elliot James

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Why should we pay attention to gender and sexuality in something as benign as setting up a business?

Elliot James, Assistant Professor of African History and Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Minnesota, Morris, looks at how gender and sexuality are not typically factored into business models, and yet they play a significant part in normal operations.

“For instance when Uber was being internationalized,” says James, “in various parts of the world, from England, the US, India, South Africa, they noticed that a lot of women were complaining of being harassed and in some instances, they were being violently attacked. My study looks at how, in the process of being set up, it almost created the conditions for things like that to happen.”
Similar to the Uber model, discrimination has historically been part of the ride-sharing taxi business in South Africa. James explores how the taxi business became successful, under political conditions that didn’t want it to survive.

During apartheid, blacks weren’t allowed to own businesses. However, the government looked the other way when it came to taxi businesses. “It was seen as something that didn’t threaten the state” and so became pretty much the only option for blacks to run their own business.

“They were successful not just because of the political climate, but because it became a sort of this masculine industry that became seen as what respectable African families do . . . [and] it was able to thrive under those conditions.”

But this masculine model has had unintended consequences. James tells us, “In the historical record there are always these kinds of stories about rape – or that women were not able to own those kinds of businesses because they needed to be at home, not breadwinners.”

The taxi industry is a shared economy. “Drivers and passengers encounter all sorts of people every day. However, South Africa’s underrepresented minorities report some gender-based discrimination.”

“The industry was developed for normative, sexual presenting individuals and because of that history, it’s made it very difficult for queer people to feel safe within that,” James explains.

His goal is “to see how their discrimination came about historically, what was a product of that, and what are the best ways to change or challenge that situation.”

Who influenced him in this work?

Growing up in New York City, James was always interested in public transportation. His family relied upon it to get around, plus James’ father made his living as a bus driver. “He always talked in terms of driving a bus as a way to teach me about how to be good to people.”

As an undergrad at Carleton College, he recalled how Professor Harry Williams liked to expose his students to “really unconventional material” and make them think about its past. “I like to do that now, bring in songs and materials you don’t encounter … It brought [history] to life for me, and I like to teach that.”

“African Queer Studies was a way to look at different African histories in new ways, in ways that prioritize the concerns of gender and sexual minorities.” It brought together several of his interests.

James feels queer studies are very focused on the United States and Europe because they are seen as more progressive in valuing human rights, “while in places like Africa, the majority of countries kind of criminalize homosexuality and embrace very traditional African values. So queer studies overlooks Africa.”

However, on the African continent, “South Africa is the only country that has enshrined in its constitution protections for gender and sexual minorities.” So South Africa seemed a likely place for James to research a queer studies topic on the African continent.

How does he conduct his research?

The ability to explore history through a broader, interdisciplinary scope serves James in his research. To learn the history of the taxi industry in South Africa, James digs into old taxi applications, business ledgers, newspaper articles and advertisement. He collects oral histories of taxi veterans who were foundational in setting up the business. He also journals, continually recording what he observes, engaging an anthropological perspective.

His research is almost entirely qualitative. But, he says, “The field of transportation studies is almost entirely quantitative.” So he is broadening the information they have.

“It’s not just how many riders from point A to point B – but what kind of experience did they have?”

James focuses deeper into the human experience, that’s not reflected in the data. “My concern is the same as the feminist concern. I want to be sure that it is equitable for people of different gender and sexual identities.”

How does his work impact the local community?

Learning about the rest of the world helps James strategize how to engage the local community. And when he lectures, he is able to bring in international perspectives.
“Having people in South Africa caring about what’s happening in the United States and having people in the United States care about what’s happening in South Africa, I think that’s a good starting place for getting traditionally underrepresented students into international affairs and international relations and being interested in things beyond the United States.”

He also encourages his students to use their own social realities to empathize with people across the globe. There are active students of color who are passionate about social justice who are focused on the US. “But if the University of Minnesota wants to engage in global affairs and have a global perspective, they need to reach students of color and attract them to this.”

**What attracted him to teach in Morris?**

“I grew up in New York City and now I live in a town the size of the apartment complex I grew up in, in the Bronx.” The differences between his hometown and his new home are obvious, but the choice was easy. The students drew him. James was very attracted to the student profile at Morris: the fact that 18% of the student body is American Indian. The vast majority is also low-income and first generation.

“In my experience here as a teaching fellow [initially], I found the students to be kind of less entitled about what they need to learn in your classes but really open about wanting to learn… So I really enjoy the students, they are really interested in learning.”

He also appreciates the small class size in Morris and the proximity to the Twin Cities, which he says he loves. “It’s the best of both worlds. A small teaching environment and the support to develop professionally.”

/Header Image Credit: Kari Adams, University Relations, University of Minnesota, Morris/