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Navigating Urban Spaces as Queer Women in South Africa

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Abstract

Occupying urban spaces for queer women, often shaped by implicit and explicit forms of regressive heteropatriarchy, has been understood as a challenge for queer women. As a result, queer women struggle to inhabit, live and feel safe in urban spaces. However, further scholarship is needed to consider how queer women may also find strategies to overcome such challenges. Such work can then add productively to, and right an imbalance within, existing scholarship on sexuality and urban space by exploring, acknowledging and giving voice to the lived experiences of queer women especially in urban Africa. Drawing on a PhD study that deployed in-depth interviews with 23 queer women, this intervention looks specifically at how black queer women have found creative ways to create communities with each other in challenging contexts, in the city of Johannesburg. This intervention shows how black queer women resist various forms of oppression by creating safe spaces for themselves (and others) within the city. An appreciation of these strategies by black queer women can then help further discussions as to how we come to understand how queer women occupy and make urban spaces their own through socialisation and support in ways that may also have applicability across the wider continent.

Keywords Queer women · Safe spaces · Digital spaces · Race · Class

Introduction

Among the limited scholarship that has explored sexuality and the urban in Africa, for queer individuals,[1] migration to cities on the African continent has been understood to be beneficial by offering these individuals opportunities to

[1] Queer individuals in this text denotes individuals whose identity and/or orientation is characterised by sexual or romantic attraction that is not limited to people of a particular gender identity or sexual orientation. These individuals do not align to a heteronormative expectation of being attracted to someone of the opposite-appearing sex or claiming a heterosexual identity (Dilley, 1999).

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form communities and to varying degrees express and perform their sexual identities in public urban spaces, relative to potentially smaller and more rural locations where their identities and forms of community may be more clandestine (Doderer, 2011). Yet many research gaps remain, especially when it comes to scholarship on queer women and black queer women in particular and their relationships to urban space(s). With a few notable exceptions (see for example Nyanzi, 2013; Tamale, 2007), research on queer women in Africa remains extremely limited. This is perhaps all the more troubling considering the documentation of violence and harassment that is inflicted on queer women, and especially black queer women in a country such as South Africa (Matebeni, 2011). In South Africa, even though LGBTQI + rights have been enshrined in the constitution since the new democratic dispensation, queer individuals, specifically queer women, still experience discrimination and violence because of their sexuality. This is in part informed by the notion that being queer is 'UnAfrican' where anything other than a heterosexual identity is seen as the result of neo-colonisation (Epprecht, 2013). Drawing on data from a study conducted with queer women in Johannesburg, this intervention reflects on how black queer women engage in urban spaces and what may be learnt about these experiences when looking at queer women in other parts of the continent.

Urban Utopia?

Before I begin with my own reflections, it is important to note that queer women and femme[2] scholars have already, implicitly, interweaved the experience of queer women in urban spaces in their work. Notable examples include Zethu Matebeni and her work on black lesbian women in Johannesburg (Matebeni, 2011) and B. Camminga's (2020) research on transgender refugees in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. Such scholars' work, however, often places discussion of queer women's experiences and engagements with urban spaces in the context of wider intersections where the urban forms a backdrop to other pressing concerns, rather than being a key constituent that relates to how women navigate, engage with, and attempt to overcome a wide array of structural constraints. Studies that explore queer identities and urban spaces need to be aware of the multiplicity of both. As such, and as this intervention considers, the urban may be brought more clearly into focus on studies of sexualities and especially the experiences of black queer women.

Through my own research, a topic that has emerged—and was also critically engaged with—is the idea that urban spaces are indeed 'better' for queer individuals compared to rural spaces. The idea of urban spaces being an 'easier space' for queer individuals to socialize and be in community with each other is informed

[2] Femme in this text will refer to a person who presents in a feminine manner. A femme can be a cis woman, a trans woman, a gender-nonconforming person, or a nonbinary person. This person may be a lesbian, pansexual, bisexual, or any other identity under the queer umbrella (Resnick, 2021). In this article, femme will refer to cis-gendered women, femme gay cis-gendered men and transwomen, although particular attention is paid later on to femme gay cis-gendered men and transwomen.

by the promise that urban spaces, especially big South African cities, are more liberal to queer individuals, allowing them to be able to publicly disclose their sexual identities, be part of communities with other queer individuals, and build and contribute to physical spaces (clubs, shelters, meetings) for and by each other (Batra, 2021 & Marnell et. al., 2021) (see also Livermon 2023, this issue). This notion is supported by studies from other locations that have shown the benefits for queer individuals living in big cities as compared to small towns by allowing them to openly disclose and associate with other queer individuals publicly compared to small towns which were seen to be more sites of potential discrimination and violence (Doderer, 2011). These dynamics can be seen to help frame for some queer individuals the idea of urban spaces, especially in large cities in South Africa, as spaces of relative safety.

However, such ideas of utopia and safety must also take into consideration how issues of race, class and gender differentially affect queer individuals and that urban space(s) may not always be as accepting as initially hoped for. Work by Holland-Muter (2019) shows how in Cape Town, for example, queer women from different races and classes face challenges in navigating the city, despite it being known as the 'Gay Capital of Africa'. This work shows how black or coloured queer women living in the townships or in suburbs far away from the city centre have difficulty in accessing or feeling comfortable and accepted in queer spaces in the city that are predominately white, gay and middle to upper class. This is further emphasised by Visser (2003) who has looked at how the creation of the gay enclave in the city (De Waterkant) excluded other queer individuals from different races, class and geographical locations within the city. Urban space research on queer individuals must be contextual, and idealistic views of urban spaces must always be questioned.

From my own research, the experiences of black queer women also brought to light to how the city of Johannesburg need not at all times exist as 'Utopia' as Bongi (age 25) noted:

> Being queer in Johannesburg is not easy or as utopian. I think I thought it would be easier to meet other lesbian and gays, but it is still so hard. Everyone is in their own little cliques and meeting other queer women is so difficult as they don't go out as much—April 2021

While therefore acknowledging the perspectives of black queer women such as Bongi, and specifically the need to temper ideas that urban spaces are indeed simply 'urban utopias', I turn in the next section to consider how black queer women have attempted to overcome various structural challenges to find and build community in the city of Johannesburg.

Public Spaces for Queer Women

For queer women in South Africa, there are a variety of structural barriers that can make it challenging for them to navigate urban spaces. As briefly mentioned above, queer women and black queer women in particular in South Africa are

Fig. 1 Picture of 7th Street in Melville and the bar Sixes on the left of the photo. Photo by author

often at risk of violence resulting in extreme cases not only in violence but also in murder in townships, informal settlements and small-town and larger urban communities (Matebeni, 2013). This can also be seen to be connected to high levels of gender-based violence (GBV) inflicted against women, generally, in South Africa tied to the entrenchment of deeply regressive and repressive patriarchal attitudes (Gqola, 2015). Furthermore, the legacy of the spatial segregation of apartheid continues to influence how sexualities are orientated in different spaces (Graziano, 2004; Steyn & Van Zyl, 2009). This is particularly true for queer women whose identities are obviously shaped by multiple intersectional factors (i.e. related, for example, to race and class) who still experience the legacy of apartheid when they engage in public spaces (Matebeni, 2018). Such factors continue to make it difficult for women to be able to fully participate, publicly, in urban spaces.

Yet even with the above challenges, post-apartheid, queer women have created space for themselves by socialising and expressing themselves in terms of music and dance in different parts of the city of Johannesburg, while claiming their sexual identities in public (Livermon, 2012). Melville is one such place located in the west of Johannesburg. It is a suburb made up of residential homes, shops, restaurants, bars and clubs that are not located in shopping malls but on public streets, mainly on 7th Street (as seen in Fig. 1). This, it could be argued, has created a more inviting and open space for people to socialize and explore, when compared to the numerous enclosed shopping malls in the city. The multi-use nature of the neighbourhood also encourages people to explore and mingle, rather than simply buy goods and leave (as can be the case in shopping malls). Melville was also one of the few suburbs in which different races socialized and built community with each other during the late 1980s during apartheid. Black and white individuals were understood to come together to build community in protest of the oppressive system (Bagnol et al., 2010). Today, the mixed race nature of Melville continues to help define it. In addition, artists, scholars, students and activists are known to meet up in the neighbourhood for reasons such as activism, community dialogues and reading clubs (Morris,

1999). This has made Melville today a bohemian neighbourhood where different individuals from multiple backgrounds come together to engage with each other.

As Gevisser (1995) argued in other South African urban contexts, the racially mixed and mixed use nature of certain places within South African cities (even during and immediately after apartheid) can also enable and encourage the inclusion of queer individuals to socialize and build communities.[3] Here, a multiplicity of identities, communities and interest groups encourages plurality in use of the urban environment and limits any one (regressive) social or moralistic doctrine from gaining prominence. In the case of Melville, this has gone further, with queer communities within the space also raising awareness of the issues affecting them such as violence and harassment of queers more generally in the city (Bagnol et al., 2010).

Queer women of all races have been able to create space in Melville especially on 7th Street by having queer clubs aimed at women such as 'Liquid Blue', which mainly black queer women frequent, and 'Sixes', which has a lot of queer women and femme individuals[4] who frequent the bar. These are not the only spaces that queer women occupy in the neighbourhood, but in these spaces, they have most been able to create a place for themselves to be able to express their sexual identities without the fear of social prohibition, discrimination, or indeed violence. Reflecting on this, Thabang (age 27) commented.

> I really enjoy hanging out in Melville. I find that a lot of my gay friends hang out there and there are gay clubs like Liquid Blue so it is really a space for us to feel safe and express ourselves… even if someone tries to harass me when I am with my girlfriend there will be other individuals who will protect me and chase that person out—July 2020

Thabang highlights how being in Melville allows her to express her sexual identity, and even if someone tries to harass her because of her sexual identity, she knows that there will be someone to protect her. This allows her to feel safe to express her sexual identity in the clubs and bars of Melville which she may not be able to do in other spaces of the city.

Beyond Melville, in creating space for themselves in public, queer women (and especially black queer women) have also been intentional in collaborating with other queer individuals in order to build solidarity with each other. An example of this is Pussy Party. Pussy Party is an 'incubator' and collective affirming space for queer individuals, women DJs and club culture in Johannesburg.[5] It was originally founded in 2016 as a space for femme and queer women DJs to nurture their talent by performing in a monthly club series but has gone on to become a space that 'advocates for a community of artists of all genders who are pro-pleasure, prioritising self-love and a safe space for femme and queer women (Fig. 2).[6] The inclusion of femme

[3] For Gevisser (1995), this was most evident during the latter years of apartheid in South Africa in the District Six area of Cape Town.

[4] Specifically here femme gay cis-gendered men and transwomen.

[5] https://fakugesi.co.za/contributors/pussy-party/

[6] https://fakugesi.co.za/contributors/pussy-party/

Fig. 2 Flyer of Pussy Party event hosted at Kitchener's, Braamfontein

individuals, specifically transwomen and femme cis-gendered gay men, has been intentional as traditional gay (and primarily male) clubs have been understood as not being welcoming to these groups (Fox & Ore, 2010), often due to an overt policing of bodies via strict (cis) gender roles (Horton, 2020), which is the case in Johannesburg with gay male clubs. The resultant marginalisation of femme individuals from such spaces can also be seen as an impetus for their taking part in the more welcoming space of Pussy Party. Pussy Party affirms both femme and queer women by not marginalising their identities but rather celebrating them and allowing them to express their identities through music and a love of themselves.

From my observations, Pussy Party parties are attended by all races but mainly by black queer women. They are hosted around the city of Johannesburg in bars and clubs, and they are 'Free For Honeys' (as seen in Fig. 2) which refers to cis-gendered women usually before 10 p.m. All other individuals who want to attend have to pay an entrance fee before and after 10 p.m. In contrast to the significant body of literature that has highlighted the exclusion of queer individuals based on gender and class in South Africa (see for example Visser, 2003 and Tucker, 2009)—especially in relation to LGBTQI + spaces that cater primarily to middle-class cis-gendered men—this strategy allows for Pussy Party to be more accessible to women from all economic backgrounds and not feel alienated from the space. The space is therefore significant as it has brought together diverse groups, which it can be argued has helped to build new forms of the queer community in the city via a shared love of music, as Mbali (age 35) observed.

> You just get a mix of people at Pussy Party. Everybody is there form different suburbs and townships and we are all just vibing to the music and having fun—February 2021

The potential for Pussy Party to reorient the existing discourses regarding the exclusionary nature of certain LGBTQI + socialising venues also extends beyond the bounds of Johannesburg. Recent Pussy Party events have also been held in other cities in South Africa including Cape Town and Durban. In my informal conversations with the organizers of these events, they informed me that these events are deliberate in trying to create spaces for queer women and femme individuals across the country to socialise and feel safe in expressing their sexual identities. This intention has also gone further and moved passed South African borders, with performances

of DJs from Pussy Party and DJs from Strictly Silk,[7] a dance party for queer women in Nairobi, occurring in Kenya. This, one could argue, is a way of building transnational solidarity of queer women on the continent through attempts to claim urban space for themselves in contexts with different legal environments to that found in South Africa. The degree to which such transnational collaborations will be successful, and the degree to which such events may become 'visible' to wider non-queer groups, is a question requiring future research (see also Ombagi 2023, this issue).

Lastly, a space which Johannesburg queer women have engaged significantly and which has served multiple roles for them is what we might come to frame as digital public space. While the physicality of urban space will always be critical in building community and shared identity, digital spaces are also playing a facilitative role in bringing queer women together, both online and offline. Here, such digital spaces play an important role via their ability to affirm and validate sexual and gender identities which can remain marginalised or hidden elsewhere (DeHaan et al., 2013). This online-mediated affirmation has allowed for especially queer women to be able to openly identify as queer, establish friendships and build networks with other individuals in ways which they might otherwise not be able to, as Belinda (age 35) explained.

> I have come out online to others but not to my family. I just really like being online with other queer people who struggle to tell their family that they are gay and we all can relate to that experience which I really like—October 2020

The digital spaces have also played a key role in knowledge dissemination for queer women via the use of platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Such platforms are used to share news and critical information and raise awareness on numerous issues affecting LGBTQI + individuals (Fox & Ralston, 2016). This was highlighted by Nadia (age 27) who said.

> I have found Instagram to be really useful for me in knowing more about issues affecting LGBTQI+ individuals. Whether it is others posting on the violence experienced by us or certain organisations which I can donate to or just posting about clinics where trans individuals can access their hormone medication, I just have found it to really be a useful space for me—October 2020

Even though research has indicated that digital space in some instances has also seen an increasing level of violence against women (Rai, 2017), in the context of this study, it continues to be a space where queer women are able to create safe spaces and build community with each other in Johannesburg. One such space especially important to respondents in my study was AmBi. AmBi is a global group and describes itself as 'a space for visible, proud, and unapologetically bi community'.[8] It is also open to bi-allies, but it centres itself as a space for bisexual individuals. In Johannesburg, the online gathering has translated physically as members of AmBi meet up in various parts of the city

[7] https://www.thisisthenest.com/strictly-silk

[8] https://www.ambi.org/?fbclid=IwAR1cLPyENY_1gQf3XCFRhjc1AaiogM0zwvUoKkod4QPFWAS0ny8ZMPi3KD8

to engage in numerous activities such as picnics, art gallery visits and social drinks. For queer women who identify as bi or bi-allies, AmBi is important as it connects both digital and physical spaces, as Sarah (age 38) commented.

> I really enjoy AmBi as it allows me to be with other bisexual individuals and not feel judged about my sexual identity. For me that is important as bisexuality continues to be misunderstood and being around others who identify in the same way and get it is cool—April 2021

For Sarah, AmBi exists as both a digital and physical space that affirms her sexual identity and allows her to be with other bisexual individuals who can relate to her experience. The melding of digital and physical urban space in this way points towards another key area where future scholars may want to consider how queer individuals and communities are able to make the city their own, and on their own terms.

Conclusion

As this intervention has shown, there are numerous ways in which the urban environment of Johannesburg is represented and understood by queer individuals, and also numerous strategies at play that enable especially black queer women to engage with the city on their own terms. This work points towards the need for future research to explore how queer women can be overtly inclusionary for themselves and for others, and how the urban environment of a city need not simply be the backdrop for social processes, but rather an active constituent that goes to inform and shape how queers engage with and make space for each other. The challenges faced by queer women are, however, obviously not the same for all, as race and class continue to privilege certain queer women over others. It is therefore important to continue to look at queer women through an intersectional lens that allows for their multiple identities to be reflected. Such an intersectional approach will help us understand the multiplicity of challenges (and strategies queer women deploy to overcome such challenges) in how they occupy urban spaces on the continent which, it is hoped, will help enrich the analysis of urban sexuality studies.

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