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Article

Genders, Sexualities and Cities: A Review of South African Literatures

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Abstract

Well-developed bodies of literature—of course with major lacunae as well as strengths—exist in relation to two areas of research and thought relevant to the emergence of better cities in the tortured territory and society of South Africa. The more personal scale deals with genders and sexualities and is energetic, young, globally linked and relatively open. At city scale, extensive literatures are voluminous though sometimes tied to global urban conceptual traditions, although there are many creative and original contributions too. From the perspective of intersections between the person and the city, what is lacking is more substantial work which brings questions common in genders and sexualities literatures to city scale enquiry, and some of the techniques of city enquiry into genders and sexualities research more broadly. There exists, however, a variety of types of work which consciously (sometimes otherwise) brings gender and sexuality studies to the city, and, in turn, brings city studies to exploration of genders and sexualities. The modest purpose of this intervention is to survey such literatures and to generate new questions for conceptualisation, research and writing. The intention is to aid new entrants to the field of genders, sexualities and cities to add creatively and substantially to scholarship.

Keywords: intersections; genders; sexualities; cities; South Africa; review

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Introduction

In this article, I examine intersections between genders, sexualities and cities, as represented in diverse literatures on South African city conditions. It conveys some images and vignettes, seeking to focus on genders–sexualities–cities intersections in the more local literatures that represent a portion of the wider literatures on each of these subjects which in most cases do not deal with their intersections. The review is concerned with identifying themes in the literatures, as well as significant gaps, more than passing judgement on the work done so far. As a contribution to the theme issue "Gender, Sexualities and Place: (Re)imagining and (Re)making Urban Spaces" the article reviews the literatures to date as a contribution to advancing this hybrid field.

Global research-based literatures dealing with the intersections that are our focus here are expanding rapidly and their concerns have been shifting (see Shefer and Mabin in this issue). What literatures along these lines emerge, focused on the same kinds of issue, in South African cities in all their diversity and difference? That is the focus of the article, which demonstrates that "The need to see spaces as both generative and reflective of sexual and gendered identities and desires has remained important in more recent work" (Oldfield & Tucker, 2019, p. 1247).

As with global literatures, disciplinary boundaries are not particularly relevant given that every social and humanities field includes work across these issues. The review thus proceeds through considering in turn feminist, gay, queer and sexualities contributions to city life. The intention is to aid new entrants to the field to add creatively and substantially to scholarship.

South African Circumstances and Research

Approaching 25 years since democratic elections, what was written more than a decade ago remains apposite:

> Sixteen years since the end of the liberation struggle South Africa's cities have become crucial spaces of self-determination and lively community democracy. Yet their form has changed very little instead highlighting the persistence of poverty (and racism) . . . that the transition promised to end. . . . [E]nduring quality of deep economic and social marginalization . . . which reflect both collective desires for 'rights to the city' and their denial. (Makhulu, 2010)

Questions of race are deeply embedded in any approach to all these issues.[1] Citizens and territories are intimately related (Robinson, 1997), yet relationships continually change. Work that engages genders, sexualities and South African cities post-formal-apartheid, shows many changes "in particular in relation to youthful expressions and practices of gender and sexuality" (Bagnol et al., 2010).

That does not obscure extremely widespread violence against women and children, domestic and public; discrimination and sometimes violence against LGBTQ+ people despite constitutional rights; and major issues of sexual harassment (Vetten, 2016). Research-based literatures have some distance to travel in examining myriad facets of genders, sexualities and cities in the country, as pointed out some time ago:

> Much of social science literature [about South African cities] . . . reflects upon the effects of racist structural formation on these spaces . . . However, much of this genre, be it historical, ethnographic, or autobiographical fail to represent adequately the complex spectrum of sexual practices and associated identities that exist in these spaces, as well as how the sexual meanings of space are constructed. (Salo et al., 2010, p. 299)

A recurring question in the home of the world's most notorious example of official racism—apartheid—is how gender and sexuality relate to race. Work in that complex terrain such as that of Lock Swarr (2012) offers much insight but generally does not deal with intersections between race, gender, sexuality and city. Although "There was a strong link between anti-apartheid activism and research choices which reflected a battle for the inclusion of gender in struggles that prioritised the focus on race and class inequalities" (Morrell, 2016), it has also been noted that "broadly the connections between gay activism and struggle for freedom [are] sometimes romanticized" (Munro, 2012, pp. 8–9). "Gender identity, sexuality and the struggles for development and democratization intimately and violently interlink in everyday life, issues brought to the fore in contemporary student and popular movements across South Africa", suggest Oldfield and Tucker (2019, p. 1248).

An explosion in the volume of scholarly writing about gender in South Africa took place in the 1990s and earlier 2000s, with a decline somewhat later on (see the excellent account by Morrell and Clowes (2016)) which has probably more recently been reversed, at least to a degree. Much of this work followed the path of Bozzoli (1983) who "placed gender analysis within an existing historiography of race and class analysis" (Morrell & Clowes, 2016, p. 9). A "relatively estimable though comparatively short history" can also be attached to critical studies of masculinities (Shefer & Ratele,

1 Apartheid, building on a history of racist administration under colonialism, constructed legal race groups, commonly known as black, coloured, Indian and white, and engineered differential rights, services and infrastructure around these. I reject any essentialised notions of race, but these categories shaped social life in South Africa, and sadly continue in many ways through both state policy and everyday use to shape the material realities of people living in South Africa.

2023, p. 72). Yet only some of this work brings sexualities into the narrative or analysis, and rather less engages how those matters intersect with city questions. A range of what does is discussed below.

Of course, there are also burgeoning literatures on a myriad of issues in South African cities. Two useful recent compendia are Massey and Gunter (2020) and Lemon et al. (2021). But it might be suggested that this work is often narrow, tied to stale global urban conceptual traditions, although there are many more creative and original contributions too. By and large what is scarce, from the perspective of intersections between the person and the city, includes substantial work which brings questions common in genders and sexualities literatures to city scale enquiry: thus just one chapter in one of the cited collections explores questions of gender and public space in South Africa cities (Dalu et al., 2020).

In the decades of struggle to overcome apartheid and install democracy in the country, transformation of South African society post-apartheid was apprehended and approached with rather little attention to gender—just "a bit on the side" (in the phrase of Beall et al. (1991)). One could add, just about no attention to sexualities, with awful consequences as epidemic spread to extremes in the 1980s and 1990s. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that research and writing on intersections of genders, sexualities and cities developed fairly slowly; but partly owing to the expansion of such work internationally, an acceleration in South African publication can be observed in the last decade.

Feminist Approaches to Cities and Genders

While substantial feminist literature could be identified on a wide range of issues over past decades, in general until recently little research was available on specific (urban) conditions and the needs of different groups of women. Yet, for example, since the 1980s, Durban experienced a rise in the number of women in the labour force, a rise in female migrants to the area, and movement into "more insecure, poorly serviced newer settlements" (Todes, 1995, p. 330). Women in urban slums survived with few sanitation amenities and limited access to an adequate water supply or electricity. Most development policies in the Durban area, in common with other cities, ignored gender differences and gender power relations and focused on improving land, housing and amenities for poor people in the central city (Todes, 1995).

To a significant but as yet inadequate extent, over the last quarter century much more literature has pursued lines of feminist enquiry in relation to the city, as well as the intricate challenges of research in this terrain (Meth & Malaza, 2003). Research-based examples include but are far from limited Gunkel (2010), Dirsuweit and Mohamed (2016) and Meth (2017). Further cases appear in this issue of the journal. By no means is feminist work restricted to being about women. Among many sometimes mutually contested strains of feminist research and writing, a variety of approaches to women,

gender, sexuality and society may be identified, and much of the literature focused on such things as gay or queer life in cities owes its origins to the strength of feminist approaches over many decades.

Scholarly work adds to a strong more popular literature (and on occasion other art forms) which is not necessarily focused on genders–sexualities–cities intersections, but certainly sheds much light. Some of the short essays in the partly scholarly, partly popular collection "Undressing Durban" refer to city–sexuality intersections, more implicitly than explicitly (Pattman & Khan, 2007). Here reference must be made to works by Luirink (2000) on gay life in the cities, a compendium on Pride events (De Waal & Manion, 2006)[2], Gevisser (2014, and parts of his 2020 book) on the difficulties and pleasures of gay experience, and Gould's (2008) account of "selling sex" in Cape Town. It is therefore striking that a major focus of the popular works that bear on the city lies in a gay (or queer) city life, as well as an showing an emphasis on transactional sex. One could add that some of the popular literature is woven with fiction (for example, Krouse and Berman (1995)). And diverse arts, particularly photography and other visual arts, also performing arts, reveal many new intersections. Artists who have portrayed aspects of city life foregrounding matters of genders and sexualities include, prominently, Zanele Mohole (see for example https://ocula.com/artists/zanele-muholi/) and Sethembile Msezane (see http://www.sethembile-msezane.com).

Some scholarly research has focused on different spaces within the city and the nature of changing relationships across class, gender, race and generation. A study of Johannesburg found

> that young people between 18 and 24 years from different 'race/color/ethnicity' who were previously separated during the apartheid era are now interacting and socializing in all the three sites examined in this study, namely Sandton, Melville, and Braamfontein. Notwithstanding these encounters, the specter of racism, homophobia, and exclusion is not far from the surface. The young people encountered in this study . . . live with an increased openness to diversity. (Bagnol et al., 2010, p. 297)

These sample spaces are those where manifestation of difference are probably easier than in most areas of the city, demonstrating the significance of local urban geographies to genders and sexualities. This work demonstrated a theme that could be advanced much further, more recently taken up in the USA by Ghaziani (2019) in work on "cultural archipelagoes"—the detail and extent of this work is something not yet seen in South African studies.

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2 This volume starts from South Africa's first gay pride march that took place in October 1990, just as exiled parts of liberation movements, including the ANC and the PAC, were returning home. It brings together a host of valuable and rare materials, including pictures, documents and personal testimonies of activists, organisers and participants.

Much of the feminist literature which addresses South African cities is still largely about negatives and disabilities. These are vitally important studies, for example that of Memela and Maharaj (2018); yet there is, as the global literatures demonstrate, a need to go beyond the violence. Agency of women remains somewhat lacking in the literatures—though see Hunter (2002) and Swartz et al. (2016), which demonstrate that multiple cities provide space not only for men to have multiple partners, but also for (some) women to do so.

These latter authors contributed to rising concern about "prevention" approaches to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV-AIDS, as has in particular Shefer in numerous contributions (see Shefer (2021) and Shefer and Hearn (2022)).

Gay City Spaces

Unsurprisingly, a major focus emerged in past years on "gay space" in some of the cities. Exemplars include Rink's (2008, 2013) exploration of a very well-established "gaybourhood" as well as examining "the pink map" in Cape Town. As the key area gentrified and gay life became more comfortable in other parts of the city, the "gay village" appearance seems merely a stage in the trajectory of De Waterkant into "a consumer lifestyle quartering that exhibited new notions of citizenship and consumption" (Rink, 2016). Cane (2019) provided a valuable account of "cruising queer, old Joburg". Following the work of Elder (2005) on gay tourism to Cape Town, Visser (2003a, 2003b) gazed at the tourist gaze in the same city and also explored gay life in the spaces of a smaller city as well as the unusually wealthy and academic town of Stellenbosch (Visser, 2008, 2023). Pieterse (2013) examined changing representations and perceptions of gay city life in work which calls for more examination.

In a different urban setting, Batra (2016) described a decades-long process of change in Johannesburg from a very much northern-referenced "gaybourhood" concentration in parts of the inner city with a focus on gay liberation, as "a new generation of activists committed to worlding sexualities through an intersectional anti-apartheid queer politics" (p. 45) emerged and in the 1990s new degrees of organising and a somewhat more open presence of gay lives in very diverse city areas spread. That is evidenced in "the varied worldly geography of GLOW's[3] activities (by 1991 it had branches in townships—Kwa-Thema, Tembisa, Soweto, as well as Johannesburg)" as the organisation pushed for political leaders including Nelson Mandela to "understand what it means to be a gay or lesbian person in the townships". Batra (2016) described how many "people, feeling unsafe in their home communities, are moving into the so-called 'grey areas' of the [formerly] white cities, which also happen to be gay areas" (p. 47).

3 The Gay and Lesbian Organization of the Witwatersrand.

Yet gay and lesbian life continues, often with awful obstacles in township space. Salo et al. (2010) explored how lesbian and gay lives may be lived "on the edge" in Cape Town townships, raising complex questions of changing visibilities and increasing or declining violence. Livermon's (2014) work on "Soweto nights" picks up related themes. A major contributor to these topics is Tucker (2009, 2010) who demonstrated the "shifting boundaries of sexual identities in Cape Town". He remarked that "(M)uch has been written concerning the effect of the post-apartheid transition upon gay communities in predominantly more affluent parts of South Africa, little is still known about how this transition affected black African residents in the former townships". Importantly, "a unique geography within the former townships . . . also allows us to see how an historically very Western centric term of identification 'gay' has been appropriated in unique ways" (Tucker, 2010). Tucker (2010) and Visser (2008) demonstrate that circumstances are more intricate than a simple black/white township/town split. Unusually, Tucker's work has been subjected to substantial commentary internationally too—where the application of such words as visibility/invisibility is contested (Ward et al., 2010).

One glaring issue presents itself which is that far more of the scholarly literature examines gay (men's) situations in South Africa than it does lesbian lives and experiences (as, for example, Ncube (2013, p. 138) points out in the work of Munro). That is not to suggest a complete absence of research in this arena. Matebeni (2011) conducted a substantial study of black lesbian sexualities and identities in Johannesburg. Canham (2017) reported on ways in which, indeed often doubly oppressed, black lesbians created potentially new space in Johannesburg and contrasted that with more visible, organised and known "pink maps" of Cape Town. Raising an issue that calls for far more exploration, this work posits that unlike gay men, lesbian women are less attached to place in that they do not as readily mark space as theirs.

In line with the exponential expansion of global genders, sexualities and cities work, some recent contributions have added much to the texture of South African research. Examples include Müller (2019) and Ngidi et al. (2020)—the latter inverts the idea of queer space, instead exploring queerphobic geographies of the cities.

Sexualities and South African City Spaces

In the early 2000s, a search for wider understandings of sexualities emerged in the South African literatures. A volume symbolising that expansion is "The Prize and the Price: Shaping Sexualities in South Africa" (Steyn & Van Zyl, 2009). Essays in that collection by Ratele (2009) (connections between sexualities and politics) and by Shefer and Foster (2009) enter the terrain of heterosexualities and not only homosexualities. Yet weaving those themes into actual city spaces remained rare. It was in the same volume, however, that Teppo (2009, pp. 220–221) provided one of the earliest and most powerful linkages between city spaces and sexualities: "[T]he ideas attached to spaces and virtues reinforce each other, but also divide social worlds between those who have

virtue and those who don't." Based on her study of Epping Garden Village, created to house selected "poor whites" but next door to predominantly coloured areas, Teppo showed how from the scale of the suburb as a whole to rules about gender separated bedrooms, the planning and management of this urban space intended to achieve the "right values" and correct "sexual morality" (pp. 220–221). But "despite these precautions the suburb had acquired a dubious reputation by the 1950s" (p. 222): one resident was eventually expelled for supposedly hosting commercial sex activities at her home.

Social control is a frequent connection drawn between sexualities and city spaces. Violence can follow—many studies draw attention to the ways in which LGBTQ+ identifying people may encounter threats and indeed violence—particularly in varied kinds of city spaces where for example "queer individuals in South Africa . . . adjust their appearance and behaviour to avoid queerphobic violence in public transport spaces" (Ngidi et al., 2020, p. 18). "Space is heterosexualised and continues to inflict harm on queer people" (Ngidi et al., 2020, p. 29). Yet there may be moments driven by individuals and groups that can suggest potential transformations of city spaces in relation to diverse sexualities and genders. Thus the story of Kewpie—a trans resident of District 6—captures potential disruptions of simplistic themes (Ramsden-Karelse, 2020), while acceptance of gay performers with particular styles confounding simple gender identities in the Cape Town new year minstrel carnival adds special features to the field (Pacey, 2014). South African cities can to an extent provide a space of refuge for LGBTIQ+ people seeking relative safety from the context of those African countries that are legally and socially oppressive to these individuals and communities, as evidenced by Camminga (2020)—a facet of migration which in turn is a major feature of the literatures.

Studies of Migration, Gender and Sexualities

A further "geographical" contextual approach to genders and sexualities has been widely expressed in literatures on migration, especially features of "migrant labour" and moreover international migration to South Africa, which inevitably and predominantly brings people into the cities. Work on migration has for some decades engaged at times with matters of genders and sexualities: that was the case especially with respect to male sexualities (for example, Epprecht (2004) who provides "glimpses . . . into the everyday life of migrant labourers and urban life in both South Africa and Zimbabwe in the first half of the twentieth century" (Schmidt, 2007, p. 333)). More recently migration studies which shed light on city lives moved in the direction of the position of women migrants. On occasion it is such women's involvement in sex work that attracts attention (Oliveira & Vearey, 2015). "Many migrants in inner-city Johannesburg survive through unconventional and sometimes criminalized livelihood activities . . . a . . . 'hard to reach' urban population" (Palmary, 2017).

The precarity of migrants and the reconstruction of genders can be seen in the work of Musariri and Moyer (2021, p. 888) who were concerned with fragile masculinities, as migrant men found themselves in "enclaves" in which "specific scripts on how to be a man were (re)constructed resulting in multiple and unstable masculinities in a perpetual state of becoming", a theme which occurs as noted above also in migrant communities in other parts of the world. Although much work has thus explored precarities of cisgendered lives for both women and men, with some attention to lesbian and gay lives, the broader notion of LGBTIQ+ remains somewhat of a lacuna in the South African literature (a gap which Gattis et al. in this issue seek to fill). Occasionally, news media explore these areas, as in for example an article headlined "Living in the shadows as a transgender sex worker" in the Johannesburg Sunday Times by Naidoo (2017).

Of course that point again raises the wider issue of the prominence of commercial, transactional sex in some of the literature. In that connection, Hunter (2002, p. 116) stressed

> the agency of women. Whether using sex for subsistence, more common in the informal settlement, or for consumption, more common in the township, women sew themselves into the very fabric of masculinity through their own agency. Women actively qoma (choose) men—while operating through patriarchal structures they rarely see themselves as 'victims'.

Similar arguments have been made by Strebel et al. (2013) on "taxi queens" though the terrain of transactional sexualities remains more explored in the popular than the scholarly publications.

In what is after all a highly mobile society, themes of mobilities at different scales arise. In this regard, substantial contributions are made by Leap (2001) about "strangers on a train", and Oliveira and Vearey (2015) on relationships between place and movement for women sex workers. Although not directly connected, Rink (2022) provides a basis for exploring relationships on collective transport.

"So We Want Better Cities"

In South African contributions, do we have to look to a "better city"—that is, to a city with at least less oppression and more space for non-heteronormative genders and sexualities? Here the field seems wide open. As Sibanda and Erwin put it in this issue, "The more voices that demand gender justice in cities, the closer we get to experiencing a more kind, just and safe urban environment for all women"—and I would add, to all in the cities. "The feminist imperative to collectively produce generative knowledge open to possibilities of the evolving but 'not yet', glimpsed through the practices of everyday social and political struggles, can point the ways to alternative urban futures while also ensuring that women [nor any others] do not fall away from urban theory" (Peake, 2016, p. 226).

The challenge is to develop ways of shifting practices where possible in directions of greater gender and sexuality justice in our cities. That is difficult; for example, the ways in which different parts of government perform are illustrated by authors such as Maharaj and Maharaj (2004) who report on the experiences of women municipal councillors. Similarly, Beall and Todes (2004) set out the need for a change of "head space" in approaches to planning where gender had been all but ignored. Todes et al. (2010) pointed to "disjunctures" between intention, involvement and action which undermined official notions of addressing gendered inequalities in planning. For Dalu et al. (2020) change is slow, sometimes reversed, and public space awaits enormous and perhaps radical intervention to change the ways in which the city "works" and is experienced.

Key Strengths, Apparent Lacunae: What Work Could be Done?

The impact of a "decoloniality" turn is evident in recent literature: although not yet necessarily closely exploring specific city–gender–sexuality links, it has been posited that "African-centred decolonial projects invite an epistemic struggle to understand men and masculinities in context, to reject the dominance of colonialist research methods, theoretical models, analyses, and interventions. Because they foreground coloniality, decolonial African-centred approaches makes it possible to see (non)-men and to make a place/places for them in masculinities studies" (Ratele, 2021, p. 780).

Some of the strengths of South African contributions to and research on understanding and perhaps transforming cities can be seen as outlined above in three areas. A particularly strong contribution lies in studies of migration—especially in relation to sex work, health and other intersections. The dynamics of changing forms and ideas of gay and queer space form a second strength, and a third exists in studies of youths and transaction in the city, especially about mobilities.

Among the lacunae in the literatures it is noticeable that the "TI+" of LGBTIQ+ remains little investigated, especially among youths in the cities. And not least, there is very little that more explicitly examines both how cities are shaping genders and sexualities, and how genders and sexualities are shaping cities.

Specific areas also present themselves: while the global literatures are thin on bisexuality, that theme scarcely appears at all yet in South African texts. There is space for (perhaps a need for) more work on trans and other city people who very generally fall into the "TQIA+" area of the catchall phrase for non-heteronormative society. All this suggests the massive opportunity for more research and publication towards deepening understanding of the circumstances of South African cities.

In beginning to set out a research agenda, Tucker and Hassan (2020) suggested "Significant opportunities exist to connect more directly sexuality research to urbanisation research in the global South" and emphasised fields particularly in relation

to the informal sector, the state, and urban health. Their focus was mostly on same-sex sexualities, and I would generalise that point to a wider frame. A particular feature of their article is its concern with how transnational research might contribute to improving conditions for stigmatised elements in society. Their conclusions are therefore concerned both with new lines of work and opportunities for "solidarities" (Tucker, 2022) across countries and continents; solidarities that may include more personal connections and "empathy to build bonds that resist . . . social stigma", as Martin (2020, p. 673) showed in the particular case of Simon Nkoli in South Africa and Andrew Hansen in the USA.

While focused on young sexualities, but with implications for ways of approaching intersections between genders, sexualities and cities, Shefer (2021, pp. 7, 12) argued

> Embedded within rethinking our scholarship through relationality and an ethics of care is the importance of dislodging habits of colonial thinking and knowledge making—that feminists are not innocent of. Acknowledging that contemporary scholarship has been directed by what Queer Theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has termed a paranoid reading which has privileged a particular kind of academic critique, frequently articulated as a masculinist engagement of seeking power, we must argue further for the importance of 'reparative readings' in rethinking of transnational feminist scholarship, in order to allow for the generation and acknowledgement of multiplicity, resistance, disruption of normative logics, and creativity.

New research can target the special challenges LGBTIQ+ youths face coming of age and navigating urban LGBTIQ+ communities in predominantly heteronormative, homophobic cities. Emerging sexual and gender fluidity among modern youths in South Africa provides points of connection. The "southern turn" demands, as Tucker (2010) has it, that "westerncentric" idea of "gay" and other concepts require closer and local grounded examination. One can therefore endorse what Visser (2013, p. 273) wrote and hope for: "a vastly expanded empirical project that is inclusive of various spatial realities." Further research in South Africa "on gender can complicate and challenge how we can approach gender and gender-based inequalities, and the diverse ways in which gender categories and framings are deployed and troubled in post-colonial states and cities" (Oldfield & Tucker, 2019, p. 1249).

In Closing

Globally, as Wilson (2014, p. 208) pointed out, major questions about intersections between cities, genders and sexualities have eluded substantial attention: for example, "how do sexual politics relate to metropolitan scale?", or "what are the specific spatial dynamics in sexual expression?" My review of South African literatures in the field suggests that the same dimensions could occupy much more attention in this part of the world.

As Ghaziani (2015, p. 325) posits, the existing literatures with their strengths and gaps are "an invitation for future researchers to give voice to the incredible diversity of human sexuality and its geospatial expressions". Change is constant in the intersections between genders, sexualities and spaces of the city. Recent research seems to validate the view expressed a decade and a half ago by Shefer and Foster (2009, pp. 283–284):

> At this particular conjuncture of spatial, temporal, political and socio-psychological South African history there is a window of opportunity to make changes in women's (and men's) lives . . . an important moment in the broader challenge to gender oppression and violence, which should be utilized as productively and critically as possible in . . . local struggles towards gender equality.

My hope is that this review will both provoke and support more work by new, emerging scholars in the field of genders, sexualities and cities, particularly in South Africa, just as Visser (2011, p. 212) indicated, helping to "introduce a 'new' generation of [researchers] investigating the geographies of sexualities".

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