Strange Space – Fem bodies and other Others in Observatory, Cape Town

This research investigates how urban space is constructed and experienced by fem (feminine identified) people who reside in it, through a particular focus on encounters in public spaces in a neighbourhood of Cape Town, South Africa. This includes both an explorations of the subjective experiences of residents, through multiple one-on-one in depth interviews with twenty residents, and an investigation of the wider historical and contemporary discourses of community, belonging, safety and danger, that have contributed to their understandings of the space, and those they may encounter, through historical records of the city and ethnographic observation. It is an in-depth study of a strategically chosen space, that seeks to illustrate the broader workings of postcolonial urbanism through the particular, taking both history, embodiment and affect seriously in exploring the contemporary city. It also takes a purposefully intersectional perspective, seeking to understand the existence and operation of multiple identities in the space, and how these (embodied) identities shape both the historical and affective elements of city space, and how they may result in conviviality or conflict, both on an interpersonal level and on larger material and symbolic (ideological/political) levels as regards the just use and occupation of space.

Through the moment of the encounter this study unpacks how fem residents borrow from and recast notions of history, space, city-ness, diversity, crime, danger and vulnerability to generate their languages of life. In common usage, encounters are understood as a meeting, especially by chance, or an experience with another person. In this research then, I refer to encounters as any interaction between people who do not know each other, including where the interaction includes only looking, or where it involves speaking, other sounds, touching, or even following. I focus on everyday encounters in public spaces, and not on exceptional encounters including those of physically violent interaction (although these invariably overlap).

Whilst, the notion of the encounter has productively been used to understand politics and ideology in relation to publics and public space (Althusser 1971; Ahmed 2000; Valentine 2013), the concept has not been used specifically to understand the gendered, street-level interactions, particularly in the African postcolonial city. This study then, seeks to reveal the ways that the multiple identities of fem peoples operates as sites of belonging and exclusion, and conversely how they rely on the perceptibility of the identities of others to interpret and interpolate (Althusser, 1971) them in public space. That is, it seeks to understand the 'languages of life'

(Mbembe 2001), available to some fem residents of Cape Town, and how these languages of life are deployed on a daily basis to make sense of the space, and the bodies therein.

Whilst there is considerable research on gender in public space (Koskela & Pain 2000; Pain 2001; Koskela 2005; Hubbard 2005; Valentine 1993; Matebeni 2011; Podmore 2001) the bulk of this literature is from the global north, and almost only addresses the category of (cis)women. One kind of public encounter that has been specifically explored in this literature are those interactions commonly known as street harassment. This existing scholarship falls broadly within a gender-based violence understanding of relations between men and women (although one study by McNeil (2014) addresses same-sex interactions). Public interactions, initiated by men with women, are assumed to be automatically negative, oppressive, or objectifying, or those are the only interactions under investigation (Gray 2014; Gardner 1995; Madan & Nalla 2016; Macmillan et al. 2000; Ilahi 2008). As such there is no analysis of what leads an interaction to be viewed as harassment, and what might make it positive or benign instead. That is what subjective experiences, historical narratives, and constructions of space, personhood, belonging, safety or danger play into the production and interpretation of the encounter. As such existing research is very much couched within the feminist literature that focuses on oppression and resistance, and sees the interaction of these street encounters as including a (male) perpetrator and a (female) victim, and is careful to expound the oppressive effects on the victim, and the multiple ways that she may resist such subordination. By contrast, I wish to reveal how fems are not simply (passively) encountered (by men), but are active in the social and spatial production of the encounter, through their own perceptions of the space, but also their views of themselves, and those they encounter or who encounter them. That is fems make sense of the encounter through their own languages of life. Hence, the encounter is not predefined in effect or affect.

Through the category fem I include women and men, cis and trans, and gender non-conforming people who identify as feminine, and use the term fem as an umbrella term for all these identities. I group these diverse identities as I believe that the experience of being feminine, or being perceived as feminine in urban public spaces results in particular experiences of embodiment, expression, interaction and vulnerability that may productively be compared across this group. This usage of fem also purposefully aims to move beyond the tendency of intersectional approaches to merely list an ever increasing plethora of identity categories (Anthias 2012), but rather aims to search for commonalities and differences in experiences across a wide group. It also aims to combat a tendency in the feminist or gender-based violence literature to exclude the experience of gender-non-confirming and trans peoples – resulting in an othering of these identities rather than acknowledging common vulnerability and experience

among groups marginalised by patriarchal norms and practices, and vulnerable to gender-based discrimination and violence.

In addition the experiences of feminine peoples in postcolonial and African cities and in public life therein are extremely underrepresented in the literature. In the African context questions of race (and its relationship to class) in the urban literature, and of livelihood are seen as pre-eminent (see for example Parnell & Pieterse 2010; Pieterse 2006). Where gender does appear, it is largely addressed with regard to material questions alone – economic opportunities or gender-based violence. Whilst these are important issues, that require attention, they tend to ignore the role of gender in the non-material, or representational (symbolic) aspects of the city (Lefebvre 1991).

Seeking to address this gap, this research aims to answer, however partially, the following questions:

- How do differently gendered bodies differently experience the postcolonial African city?
- What identities (such as race groups, class allegiances, linguistic heritages) surface in participants' understandings of, and descriptions of people and place in the city?
- How do fem peoples experience various other identities, or the identities of 'others', in the diverse African city?
- How are these perceptions operationalized in moments of encounter?
- How do they shape the actions that unfold in and from the encounter?
- How do these everyday encounters shape the city space (including collective histories and symbolic associations)?

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