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# Forced (Queer) migration and everyday violence: The geographies of life, death, and access in Cape Town

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## ABSTRACT

LGBT+ rights have recently gained international attention across the continent and have resulted in expanding tensions surrounding access to both city and state in South Africa. The experiences of LGBT+ asylum seekers, an underexamined group of migrants in South Africa, adds further complexity to the literature that has already challenged common-sense notions of Cape Town as a safe haven for sexual minorities. Increasing xenophobic tensions in South Africa's major urban centres combined with neoliberal-led cut-backs at municipal and national levels has further hidden and made invisible the struggles of LGBT+ asylum seekers. Accessing shelter and employment are interrelated facets of the right to the city as these aspects determine whether forcibly displaced queer people are allowed to live or are simply abandoned and left to die. Thus, this article asks, 'What is the interplay between access to the right to the city and the opposing social realities of death?' Using data from fieldwork conducted in 2014–2015 in Cape Town with NGOs and asylum seekers, I seek to examine the violent processes in which state-structured violence embedded in the heteronormative urban space impedes the survival of forcibly displaced queer people. I argue that LGBT+ asylum seekers in Cape Town navigate a landscape of abandonment and death in their attempts to access the right to the city.

## 1. Introduction

LGBT+<sup>1</sup> rights have recently gained international attention across the continent and have resulted in expanding tensions surrounding access to both city and state in South Africa. The experiences of LGBT+ asylum seekers, an underexamined group of migrants in South Africa, adds further complexity to the literature that has already challenged common-sense notions of Cape Town as a safe haven for sexual minorities (Lock-Swarr, 2012; Oswin, 2007). 20478751720850South Africa's constitution is amongst the strongest in the world offering protection regarding same-sex desire; but, as the literature suggests, these rights are unevenly guaranteed. In Cape Town, this unevenness rests on white male capital and the globalization of 'gayness' as a commodity that can be accessed in spaces of sexual consumption (bars, clubs, etc.) or as Natalie Oswin names as a form of queer globalization (2007). Yet, those queers who do not have the capacity to consume are cast into township space where violence and structural barriers undercut everyday life (Livermon, 2012; Tucker, 2009). As this article will show, LGBT+ asylum seekers exemplify this spatial unevenness as they face additional pressures due to the entangled discriminations of race, class, and sexuality. Queer asylum seekers face structural and everyday

forms of violence as they navigate both the core and periphery of the city facing violence in every aspect of public and private life despite legal provisions on a national scale.

Increasing xenophobic tensions in South Africa's major urban centres (Klotz, 2016; Oluwaseun, 2016) combined with neoliberal-led cut-backs at municipal and national levels (Bond, 2011; Ferguson, 2007) has further hidden and made invisible the struggles of LGBT+ asylum seekers. Accessing shelter and employment are interrelated facets of the right to the city as these aspects determine whether forcibly displaced queer people are allowed to live or are simply abandoned and left to die. Thus, this article asks, 'What is the interplay between access to the right to the city and the opposing social realities of death?' Using data from fieldwork conducted in 2014–2015 in Cape Town with NGOs and asylum seekers, I seek to examine the violent processes in which state-structured violence embedded in the heteronormative urban space impedes the survival of forcibly displaced queer people. I argue that LGBT+ asylum seekers in Cape Town navigate a landscape of abandonment and death in their attempts to access the right to the city. In doing so, this article draws on various queer scholarship focused on consumption, migration, and survival and aims to add further complexity to these debates through the theoretical interplay of access and death.

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<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans – I use the + to indicate other forms of sexual or gender identity as a means to be exclusive of non-western forms of sexuality. The Acronym of course bears its own tensions as having a western intellectual and activist tradition; however, it is useful shorthand for the purposes of this article.

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I will illustrate that tensions surrounding class, race, space, and sexuality, are inseparable in Cape Town. Indeed, my research adds further nuance to the literature on same-sex desire in the city by engaging explicitly with the apparatus of the heteronormative state in its construction of desired queer subjects through the exclusion of undesirable others. Cape Town, unlike other major urban centres in South Africa, such as Johannesburg or Durban, has historically provided a safe-haven for gay-white men since before the apartheid era (Tucker, 2009).

This article is organised into four sections. In section one, I situate my analysis within theorizations of the right to the city and access and the politics of abandonment and death in the context of queer space in Cape Town. Following this, I develop my theoretical framework of state-structured heteronormativity particularly in relation to housing, employment, and police violence. Section three and four provide empirical data gathered from my fieldwork where I tackle issues of violence when forcibly displaced queer migrants attempt to access the state and subsequently attempt to survive in Cape Town upon relocation.

## 2. Framing Queer Space in Cape Town

Henri Lefebvre's conception of the right to urban life and the overall aims of democracy, social justice, and equity seem disconnected with the everyday realities of the urban poor in the global south (Lefebvre, 1991; Mitchell, 2003). For many asylum seekers, not only is achieving status difficult, but, this right to the city has no direct implications for their livelihoods or socio-economic circumstances. The debates surrounding 'the Right to the City' and neoliberal financial governance (Peck, 2015) have been expanded by many scholars to include such factors as gentrification, housing, and incarceration, in relation to austerity on urban and national scales (Soederberg, 2014; Wacquant, 2009; Wyly, 2015). Indeed, as argued by Kafui Attoh, the 'rights' in the city remain in a black-box and continue to be unexplained (2011). Using the insights within critical human geography this article juxtaposes the right to the city with the politics of survival (Mitchell and Heynen, 2009)—the interplay between access to shelter and employment and death (Das Gupta, 2014; Mbembe, 2003; Shakhshari, 2014).

In this sense, the usage of the right to the city as a conceptual tool in this article is meant to bridge issues of access with the violence of state-led heteronormativity. Access, as defined by Jesse Ribot and Nancy Peluso, as the ability to benefit from material things such as institutions, people, objects, and symbols (2003) is placed in contention with Sima Shakhshari's notion of queer refugees being suspended in a liminal zone of rightfulness and rightlessness as an abandoned population (2014). This article illustrates how various oppressions of race, sexuality, and class, share overlapping boundaries that are interwoven, incoherent, and thus, difficult to disentangle within neoliberalism in Cape Town. As Oswin (2014) emphasizes, neoliberal futures for same-sex couples coincide with state strategies of accumulation. That is to say, same-sex desire, on a global scale, is classed and raced where white gay men are afforded visibility and freedoms in both public and private spaces of desire while queers of colour remain marginalized in physical, textual, and/or virtual spaces (Benedicto, 2015; Nash, 2011).

Access, beyond who gets to use what and when, (Neale, 1998) is also deeply linked to structural issues of control particularly concerning land (Appadurai, 1986; Ferguson, 1994; Hart, 1986). Beyond issues of access to land, housing, and natural resources (Bolzoni et al., 2015; Sultana, 2011) this article contends that further theoretical complexity using queer theory's understanding of death especially for hidden, invisible, and forgotten populations is required to understand access to shelter and employment for sexual minorities. Although critical discussions around David Harvey's accumulation by dispossession have been coloured by questioning access, Marxian conceptions of the right to the city do not contend with the heteronormative state directly. Accessing shelter and employment is an implicitly heteronormative

exercise that needs to be queered and named as such. Expanding upon Derek Hall, Philip Hirsch, and Tania Li's work on exclusion surrounding land issues, I pay attention to their conceptions of exclusion by force and legitimation (2015). Force can be explicit or implicit and normative ideas about which bodies belong in the city fuel exclusion by legitimation. In the case of forcibly displaced LGBT+ migrants, the logic of exclusion rests on the overlapping interactions between race, class, and sexual-orientation based anxieties.

The logics of force and legitimation (Hall et al., 2011) do not allow LGBT asylum seekers to navigate Cape Town with ease. As the empirical sections of this article will show, queer asylum seekers face a constricting state—particularly through their interactions with the Department of Home Affairs (DHA)—that reifies xenophobic and homophobic tensions found through the navigation of everyday life in Cape Town.

Everyday life, as theorized by Lefebvre and others, cannot be removed from the processes of urban austerity that make the 'everyday' a site of power and resistance (De Goede, 2006; Lefebvre, 1991).<sup>2</sup> South Africa, from segregation to apartheid, has a continuous history of race-based hierarchical forms of governance inseparable from relations of production (Wolpe, 1976). In the post-apartheid era, globalization provides a new overlay of race-class based exclusions for the racialized poor, including migrant workers, within logics of neoliberal capitalism (Hart, 2002; Griffin, 2011).

Tying exclusions with issues of racialization within development issues in the global south, Li (2009) adds that the 'right' to survival—with regard to the right to food and employment by the Indian national state—is a state-led strategy which decides which populations are made to live and which populations are allowed to die. Although a deep theorization of the surplus population in relation to queer asylum seekers goes beyond the scope of this paper, what Li calls, 'letting die' should be recognized as a type of state-led violence mediated through national and urban processes of neoliberalism that excludes people from, shelter, and employment (Li, 2009). Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* compliments Li's conception of 'letting die' and considers the intersections of state-sovereignty, sexuality, and death (2003). Using both Mbembe and Li, it is important to note that neoliberal strategies of exclusion in urban space create the landscape of letting live/die for forcibly displaced queer migrants explored further in the theoretical framework section below.

Colonial history, race, and the 'letting die' strategies of the heteronormative state are inseparable aspects of violence faced by queer asylum seekers. Li notes that letting die is, "a stealthy form of violence..." which undoubtedly protects some queer bodies and relegates unwanted bodies to lives of abject poverty, improper access, and death. Projects of racial hegemony such as apartheid never disappear instead, they continually reconstitute themselves and this is visible across Cape Town's queer spaces (McIntyre, 2011). Colonization not only produced the racial hierarchy crucial to the functioning of apartheid, but its legacy continues to be central to the production of unwanted bodies vis-à-vis ongoing forms of racialization in city and township spaces.

In Cape Town, 'making live' strategies for gay white men in De Waterkant has been apparent through the spatial construction of a queer enclave amongst heterosexual space. Williams (2008) offers some nuance regarding queer spaces in township areas as places of resistance and enclaves of security for racialized people; however, the same cannot be said for LGBT+ displaced people who face additional discrimination due to their foreign origins. This article pays particular

<sup>2</sup> Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell's article, *Neoliberalizing Space*, offers a critique of the transformation of the welfare state vis-à-vis the promotion of entrepreneurialism, enterprise and urban development within the city. Ultimately, they argue that despite the neoliberal cities rhetoric of innovation and openness the policies generated from this thinking has been narrow and has resulted in coercive measures forcing 'modern' cities to 'keep-up'—trading welfare rights for uneven spatial development (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

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