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Queering Sex Work and Mobility

Ntokozo Yingwana

Abstract

This paper explores the intersections of sex work, mobility, and gendered sexualities through a queer lens. It is based on a study that made use of digital storytelling and WhatsApp to engage 17 migrant and mobile sex workers in South Africa. Through a queering of sex work and migration/mobility analysis, it demonstrates that because sex work is essentially about using one's body to perform varying sexual acts with different types of people for financial gain, migrant and mobile sex workers are exposed to different ways of experiencing sexual (dis)pleasure. According to the research participants, this can then broaden the body's erotic vocabulary and expand one's range of sexual desires, along with their expressions, to the point where it can also have an influence on one's gendered sexuality and choice of intimate partner. However, the respondents also stressed the integral role movement plays in this evolution of one's gendered sexuality. Hence, this paper argues for the recognition of migrant and mobile sex work as intrinsically queer and concludes by unpacking the socio-political implications of this in relation to (sexual) citizenship.

Keywords: sex work, migration, mobility, queer, sexuality, gender

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Introduction

This paper is based on a PhD thesis titled *Queering Sex Work and Mobility in South Africa*.[1] The research project sought to investigate whether mobility can influence gendered sexualities in sex work, and if so, in what ways and with what socio-political implications. Based on an engagement with 17 migrant and mobile/

[1] Upon writing this paper, the doctoral thesis was being finalised. The study is based at the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand.

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transient sex workers in South Africa, the study explored the extent to which this nexus might inform the (sexual) citizenship of people who move to sell sex (migrant sex workers) or sell sex on the move (mobile/transient sex workers) in South Africa. The objective was to find out what this might mean for those whose gendered sexualities are performed fluidly across the spectrum—those who tend to be unrecognisable to the nation-state, but in cases where they are 'seen', are often (mis)identified as 'sexual deviants' or (at best) 'victims'. Queering sex work and mobility and broadening the concept of sexual citizenship in this way enables us to unpack how particular embodiments, expressions, and practices of gendered sexualities influence national politics of belonging, recognition/denial of certain human rights, and allocation of developmental resources. In addition, this paper demonstrates how sex workers' alternative discourses about their experiences of sexual citizenship(s) can help liberate queer theory from heteronormativity, as their narratives challenge its pervasive binary power.

In his early contributions to queer theory, Michael Warner posited that '[f]or both academics and activists, "queer" gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual'.[2] Building on this thinking, Corina McKay argues that 'sex work should also be seen as "queer" because it engages in a direct challenge to the power of heteronormativity'.[3] It is important to note that while heteronormativity tends to be understood in relation to heterosexuality, the two are not inextricably bound.[4] Indeed, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner assert that some forms of sex between cisgender men and women might not be heteronormative.[5] This would mean that there are certain forms of sex (or sexual acts), which, while popularly practised by some cisgender heterosexual persons, might otherwise be socio-politically considered as outside of the so-called 'norm'; that is 'non-normative' forms of sex.[6]

Sex work is a quintessential example of this type of non-normative sex. The selling and/or buying of sex is criminalised in most countries, because it is considered a form of deviant (or immoral) sex, on the basis that it is not only sex outside of love or marriage, but also sex in exchange for money. According to Charlotte Valadier:

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2 M Warner and Social Text Collective (eds.), *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. xxvi.

3 C McKay, 'Is Sex Work Queer?', *Social Alternatives*, vol. 18, issue 3, 1999, pp. 48–53, p. 48.

4 N Rumens, E M de Souza, and J Brewis, 'Queering Queer Theory in Management and Organization Studies: Notes toward Queering Heterosexuality', *Organization Studies*, vol. 40, issue 4, 2019, pp. 593–612, https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840617748904.

5 L Berlant and M Warner, 'Sex in Public', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, issue 2, 1998, pp. 547–566, https://doi.org/10.1086/448884.

6 Rumens *et al.*, p. 594.

> From this perspective, one can say that the sexual practices of sex workers are 'queer' insofar as they manifest a non-conformist form of freedom or a disruptive position against the socio-political order of a heteronormative patriarchy.[7]

Hence, I argue in this paper that it is actually the type of sex a person engages in (or is even perceived to be engaging in, or associated with in the case of third parties in the sex work industry)[8] that informs one's sexual citizenship, and not so much their gender identity or sexual orientation (i.e., gendered sexuality) per se. Sex work is, therefore, a conceptually useful site to study as it allows us to explore sexual citizenship from the actual doing of sex, and not just from the identity politics perspective. For while identity politics are important and relevant in this analysis, a sole focus on them could detract attention from non-identity-based structures of oppression (and privilege).[9] Such an approach challenges us to go beyond the heterosexual versus LGBTQI+ binary and allows for queering to take place.

Background and Context

In the past, research on sex work has tended to focus on either violence in the industry, debates around the moral merits of its legality, human trafficking, or the health consequences of selling sex (commonly in relation to HIV/AIDS).[10] This has resulted in an oversaturation of reductive scholarship, which sees sex workers as either criminals, victims, commodities, or vectors of sexual diseases. While recent years have seen a substantial shift in this paradigm—with sex work research

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7 C Valadier, 'Migração e Trabalho Sexual por uma Perspectiva de Gênero' [Migration and Sex Work through a Gender Perspective], *Contexto Internacional*, vol. 40, issue 3, 2018, pp. 501–524, p. 514, https://doi.org/10.1590/s0102-8529.2018400300005.

8 Examples of third parties in sex work would be pimps, the so-called 'madams', drivers, bouncers, bartenders, and anyone else working within the industry, but who does not engage in the actual exchange of sex for money, which the sex worker and the client do.

9 A Gutmann, 'Introduction. The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Identity Politics', in *Identity in Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2009, pp. 1–37, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400825523.1.

10 A George, U Vindhya, and S Rays, 'Sex Trafficking and Sex Work: Definitions, Debates and Dynamics—A Review of Literature', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 45, no. 17, 2010, pp. 64–73; C Howlett, *Against Sex Education: Pedagogy, Sex Work, and State Violence*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2021; D Operario, T Soma, and K Underhill, 'Sex Work and HIV Status Among Transgender Women: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis', *JAIDS Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes*, vol. 48, issue 1, 2008, pp. 97–103, https://doi.org/10.1097/QAI.0b013e31816e3971.

now also including issues around migration, gender, and sexuality—much of this scholarship is still predominately from the West/Global North perspective, with some literature coming out of the Asia-Pacific, but even less from the African continent.[11] Notable exceptions include research produced by African feminist scholars such as Chi Mgbako and Sylvia Tamale.[12] In her 2011 study into sex work and sexuality in Uganda, Tamale argues that the very nature of sex work flouts hegemonic notions of women's sexual pleasure and penetrative sex.[13]

Like in most African countries, sex work is fully criminalised in South Africa, meaning that buyers, sellers, and anyone living off sex workers' earnings are made criminals. However, the country's Constitution is still considered to be one of the most progressive in the world, as it is the first to explicitly prohibit unfair discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. In 1998, South Africa passed the *Refugees Act 130*, which also included gender and sexual orientation as grounds for seeking asylum.[14] This has left many LGBTQI+ migrants from various parts of the continent with the impression that South Africa is a safe haven. Even so, 'gender refugees' (i.e., transgender-identified refugees) from the continent residing in South Africa still experience significant challenges to their survival, comparable with the persecution experienced in their countries of origin.[15]

Jonathan Klaaren notes that while South Africa's Constitution portrays a vision of sexual citizenship that 'recognises significant diversity of sexual practice … [and] does at least discuss the role of sexual desire and transient relationships,

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11 E Oliveira, 'Volume 44: Research with Sex Workers in South Africa', *Agenda*, vol. 32, issue 2, 2018, pp. 3–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2018.1438974; E Česnulytė, *Selling Sex in Kenya: Gendered Agency under Neoliberalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020; N Mai *et al.*, 'Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking: The Racialized Bordering Politics of Sexual Humanitarianism', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 44, issue 9, 2021, pp. 1607–1628, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1892790; S Parmanand, 'Saving Our Sisters: Critical Inquiry into Sex Trafficking Discourses and Interventions in the Philippines' (doctoral thesis), 2020, https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.63241; S P Shah, *Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work, and Migration in the City of Mumbai*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014.

12 C A Mgbako, *To Live Freely in This World: Sex Worker Activism in Africa*, NYU Press, New York, 2016; S Tamale (ed.), *African Sexualities: A Reader*, Pambazuka Press, Oxford, 2011.

13 Tamale, p. 164.

14 V Kleinsmidt and D Manicom, 'A Policy Analysis of the Refugee Act 130 of 1998', *Africa Insight*, vol. 39, issue 4, 2010, https://doi.org/10.4314/ai.v39i4.54671.

15 B Camminga, '"Gender Refugees" in South Africa: The "Common-Sense" Paradox', *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2018, pp. 89–112, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002039718053001 05.

this constitutional vision is limited and does not embrace a transient or pleasure-seeking version of sexual citizenship.'[16]

Klaaren goes on to argue for the development of a framework for identifying and understanding sexual citizenship in the Southern African region that pays particular attention to mobility, and also considers the 'cultural dimension of citizenship that consists of sexual practices'.[17] Hence, this paper is inscribed in and contributes towards this type of scholarship by concerning itself with the journeys and daily experiences of migrant and mobile/transient sex workers in South Africa, and the implications of this movement on sex workers' gendered sexualities and sexual citizenship.

Literature

Due to criminalisation and stigma, many sex workers may prefer to work away from their families and immediate communities.[18] This movement can simply be in the form of everyday commuting from one's home to their area of work, be it a brothel, bar, street-corner, or a bedroom in the house next door. There are also sex workers who prefer to migrate to other provinces or countries to sell sex, and others who ply their trade on long-distance truck routes. Indeed, for those in contexts with limited socio-economic options (e.g., rural areas or underdeveloped countries), engaging in migrant or mobile sex work can serve as a strategic means of survival.

However, migrant and mobile sex work can also be means to explore and express one's non-(hetero)normative gendered sexuality more safely in an anonymous

16 J Klaaren, 'Southern Africa: As Seen Through Sexuality, Mobility and Citizenship', *African Sociological Review / Revue Africaine de Sociologie*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2005, pp. 168–183, p. 171, https://doi.org/10.4314/asr.v9i2.23266.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 168.

18 S Thorbek and B Pattanaik (eds.), *Transnational Prostitution: Changing Patterns in a Global Context*, Zed Books, London, 2002; L M Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*, Zed Books, London, 2008; B Nyangairi, 'Migrant Women in Sex Work: Trajectories and perceptions of Zimbabwean sex workers in Hillbrow, South Africa', MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2010; M Richter and W Delva, *'Maybe it will be better once this World Cup has passed': Research findings regarding the impact of the 2010 Soccer World Cup on Sex Work in South Africa*, UNFPA, Pretoria, 2011; M Lowthers, 'Sexual-Economic Entanglement: A Feminist Ethnography of Migrant Sex Work Spaces in Kenya', PhD dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 2015; R Walker, J Vearey, and L Nencel, 'Negotiating the City: Exploring the Intersecting Vulnerabilities of Non-National Migrant Mothers Who Sell Sex in Johannesburg, South Africa', *Agenda*, vol. 31, issue 1, 2017, pp. 91–103, https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2017.1338858.

context.[19] This is largely because migration enables one to set aside social expectations, and the 'surveillance'[20] that maintains them. Gurvinder Kalra and Dinesh Bhugra observe that various factors facilitate

> migrants' sexual experiences, the most important of which is anonymity in the new place. There is a possibility of the migrant person trying out his/her sexual fantasies of possible variations in the new place, anonymously […] Migration may thus produce a fertile soil for an individual to develop a culture of anonymity and later go on to explore issues of identity and sexuality, which would otherwise not be available to them in case their identity is revealed.[21]

Mobility refers to constant movement from one place to another, while migration suggests a prolonged stay upon arrival.[22] Migration and mobility are often discussed in relation to citizenship—including but not limited to refugee aid, national safety, securing borders, and 'belonging'.[23] Citizenship can simply be understood as the legal membership to a nation-state granted to a person by a government, and the rights and responsibilities that come with this form of belonging. The sexual citizenship discourse emerged out of the critique that 'dominant citizenship theories failed to recognize citizenship as gendered, racialized and sexualized'.[24] Therefore, building on the concept of citizenship, David Evans formulated the term 'sexual citizenship'.[25] Evans argues that all forms of sexualities under capitalism are materially constructed by the complex interrelationship between the state and the market. However, contemporary uses of the term tend to explicitly 'draw

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19 S Wood, 'Migration, Mobility and Marginalisation: Consequences for Sexual and Gender Minorities', *IDS Policy Briefing*, 118, IDS, Brighton, 2016.

20 M Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books, 1977.

21 G Kalra and D Bhugra. 'Migration and Sexuality', *International Journal of Culture and Mental Health*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2010, pp. 117–125, pp. 119–120, https://doi.org/10.1080/17542863.2010.498573.

22 C Overs, *Sex Workers: Part of the Solution. An analysis of HIV prevention programming to prevent HIV transmission during commercial sex in developing countries*, 2002, retrieved 7 June 2022, https://www.nswp.org/resource/international-guidelines/sex-workers-part-the-solution.

23 N Yuval-Davis, 'Intersectionality, Citizenship and Contemporary Politics of Belonging', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, vol. 10, issue 4, 2007, pp. 561–574, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230701660220.

24 R Robson, and T Kessler, 'Unsettling Sexual Citizenship', *McGill Law Journal*, vol. 53, 2008, pp. 535–571, p. 535.

25 D Evans, *Sexual Citizenship: The Material Construction of Sexualities*, Routledge, London, 1993.

attention to the political aspects of erotics and the sexual component of politics'.[26] Broadening the concept of sexual citizenship in this way allows us to understand how citizens' embodiments of gendered sexualities and their sexual practices influence national politics and the recognition (or denial) of rights.[27]

Like Brenda Cossman, I too use the term 'sexual citizenship' to denote those forms of belonging, recognition, and participation that are linked to the nation-state.[28] Indeed, African queer scholars and activists have long been advocating for sexual citizenship rights through rather strategic uses of the term 'queer'.[29] However, 'demands for democratic inclusions in the state often produce a limit to our reading of "queer" as it is neatly meted out to an identity politics'.[30] Hence, I explore sexual citizenship from the actual doing of sex, and not just from the identity politics perspective, in order to avoid falling into the heteronormative/heterosexual versus non-normative binary. As Svati Shah asserts, a 'theoretical matrix that accounts for migration, space, and time allows for a critique of sexual commerce that is otherwise foreclosed'.[31] For the research project informing this article, this meant going beyond physical movement by also navigating the intrapsychic and emotional sexual journeys within and across the varied fluid performances and embodiments of gendered sexualities.

Queering Sex Work

I deploy the term 'queer' not as a specific sexual identity marker, but instead as a verb—queer*ing*—in order to evoke a way of thinking that exposes, interrogates, and disrupts (hetero)normative gender and sexual logics that tend to script policy and academic debates about commercial sex.[32] As part of this queering, the study also adopts the term 'gendered sexualities'.[33] 'Gendered sexualities' refers to how

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26 G Hekma, 'Sexual Citizenship', *GLBTQ Archives*, 2004, p. 1.

27 *Ibid*.

28 B Cossman, *Sexual Citizens: The Legal and Cultural Regulation of Sex and Belonging*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2007.

29 H Abbas and S Ekine, *Queer African Reader*, Pambazuka Press, 2013; K Martin and M Xaba, *Queer Africa: New and Collected Fiction*, MaThoko's Books, Johannesburg, 2014; Z Matebeni (ed.), *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities*, Modjaj Books, Athlone, 2014.

30 D S Mupotsa, 'Queer African Reader. Edited by Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas. Dakar, Nairobi & Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2013', *Feminist Africa*, issue 19, 2014, pp. 113–120, p. 114.

31 Shah, p. 32.

32 M Laing, K Pilcher, and N Smith (eds.), *Queer Sex Work*, Routledge, New York, 2015.

33 P Gagné and R A Tewksbury (eds.), *Gendered Sexualities*, JAI, New York, 2002; Tamale.

gender (to a large extent) informs our understandings of sex and sexuality.[34] This is done not to collapse decades of important feminist and queer theorising that has eloquently demonstrated that there is no natural link between (biological) sex and the manifestation of one's gender or sexuality.[35] Rather I employ the term to point towards a gendered analysis of sexuality. According to Tamale, any enquiry into human sexuality that fails to take on a gendered analysis is a futile exercise, because 'gender provides the critical analytical lens through which data on sexuality must logically be interpreted'.[36] Tamale notes that it is therefore more useful to speak of sexualised genders or gendered sexualities, as '[s]uch an approach allows for in-depth analyses of the intersections of the ideological and historical systems that underpin each concept, which is an important factor in knowledge production.'[37]

Queering sex work and mobility essentially entails disrupting heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the only (biologically) natural expression of sexuality in society.[38] It assumes that sexual and romantic relationships should only be between people of the opposite sex and gender (i.e., conforming to the gender binary). Corina McKay proposes that 'Queer Theory can liberate sex workers from such dominant social/sexual ideologies, helping them to create alternative discourses which challenge the power of heteronormativity allowing them to enjoy sexual and social citizenship on their own terms'.[39] While this may be so, this research illustrates through the participants' responses that the inverse is also true: that sex workers' alternative discourses about their enjoyment (or denial) of sexual and social citizenship based on their own terms can help liberate queer theory from heteronormative social/sexual ideologies.

Brooke Beloso notes that '[d]uring the late nineties, leading voices of the sex worker rights movement began to publicly question queer theory's virtual silence on the subject of prostitution and sex work. However, this attempt by sex workers to "come out of the closet" into the larger queer theoretical community has thus far

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34 J McCabe, A E Tanner, and J R Heiman, 'The Impact of Gender Expectations on Meanings of Sex and Sexuality: Results from a Cognitive Interview Study', *Sex Roles*, vol. 62, issue 3–4, 2010, pp. 252–263, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-009-9723-4.

35 J Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 2011; S N Nyeck (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Queer African Studies*, Routledge, New York, 2020.

36 Tamale, p. 11.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

38 Warner.

39 McKay, p. 48.

failed to bring much attention to sex work as an explicitly queer issue.'[40] Drawing on Foucault's work, Beloso stakes a case for an alternative 'queer genealogy of sex work'.[41] By both responding to and challenging feminist scholarly debates on sex work, she takes the discourse beyond the rigid binaries that divide gender and sexuality theorists and goes on to disrupt the assumption that sex work is in any way distinct from queerness itself.

Queering Migration/Mobility/Movement

Jeffrey Weeks observes that globalisation continues to result in the mass movements of people, within and across countries, disrupting and (re)settling traditional sexual values and practices.[42] He argues that globalisation—specifically through migration—creates new patterns of 'global sex' that inform the '"political economy" of sexual life'.[43] However, Kira Kosnick laments that scholarly work on gender and migration often 'ignores the relevance of sexuality to its own concerns, while implicitly retaining a heteronormative focus'.[44] A clear illustration of this is found in migration literature that, while purporting to be theorising holistically on gender or sexuality, actually refers to tokenistic mentions of women's migratory experiences. Fortunately, some gender and migration scholars have made concerted efforts in taking this scholarship beyond the simple 'add women and stir' approach, by asserting that, 'whilst the current focus in existing literature on women is not necessarily inappropriate, a further analytic shift is needed to interrogate the concept of gender at play … [So] rather than understanding gender as a synonym of "women" we seek to analyse gendered positionings within normative discourses (of state policies and practices).'[45]

And where migration literature does reference LGBTQI+, it tends to be from an identity-politics framing, rather than actually queering migration. Eithne Luibhéid cautions against merely including queer bodies into sexuality or migration studies, and notes that the valorisation of the norm is intimately entwined with the abjection of queerness. She argues that 'sexuality scholarship must rethink the role of migration', and '[e]qually, migration scholarship must analyze how

40 B M Beloso, 'Queer Theory, Sex Work, and Foucault's Unreason', *Foucault Studies*, no. 23, 2017, pp. 141–166, pp. 141–142, https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i0.5345.

41 *Ibid*.

42 J Weeks, *Sexuality*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, London, 2003, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203425879.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

44 K Kosnick, 'Sexual Citizenship and Migration in a Transnational Perspective. Working Paper Series', *Gender, Diversity and Migration*, no. 9, 2016, p. 4.

45 I Palmary *et al.* (eds.), *Gender and Migration: Feminist Interventions*, Zed Books, London, 2010, p. 2.

sexuality structures all migration processes and experiences'.[46]

This is why my research explored sexuality as more than just a specialised subfield of migration studies, but rather considered how gender and sexuality influence our thinking on migration/mobility/movement more broadly.[47] In doing so, I hope to build upon existing feminist, queer, and migration scholarship that points to a need for a far more nuanced understanding of (sexual) citizenship in the global sexualities discourse.[48] Indeed, queer sex work scholars Mary Laing *et al*. argue that a 'queer agenda is important in order to challenge hetero-centric gender norms and to develop new insights into how gender, sex, power, crime, work, *migration*, space/place, health and intimacy are understood in the context of commercial sexual encounters'.[49]

Methodology and Data Collection

For my doctoral study, I employed the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) methodology. FPAR involves deploying participatory research methods, which enable participants to creatively engage in the data collection process. This is why the study used digital storytelling and WhatsApp as research tools. Digital storytelling is the process of producing an audio and visual (multimedia) package that is narrated by the storyteller and depicted through personal photographs or sourced images.[50] WhatsApp is a mobile application that supports sending and receiving a variety of media such as text messages, photographs, graphics (e.g., emoticons), voice notes, videos, documents, and geographical locations. Drawing from insights gained from a digital ethnographic study with young activists in Western Kenya, Anna Colom deduces that 'WhatsApp can enable deliberative discussions, which can be particularly valuable in participatory action research'.[51]

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46 E Luibhéid, 'QUEER/MIGRATION: An Unruly Body of Scholarship', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 14, issue 2–3, 2008, pp. 169–190, p. 171, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2007-029.

47 *Ibid.*

48 Kosnick.

49 Laing *et al.*, np., emphasis added.

50 L Worcester, 'Reframing Digital Storytelling as Co-Creative', *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 43, issue 5, 2012, pp. 91–97, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2012.00368.x; S Rahim, 'Digital Storytelling in Bangladesh: Experiences, Challenges and Possibilities', *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 43, issue 5, 2012, pp. 98–103, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2012.00369.x.

51 A Colom, 'Using WhatsApp for Focus Group Discussions: Ecological Validity, Inclusion and Deliberation', *Qualitative Research*, vol. 22, issue 3, 2021, pp. 452–467, p. 465, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120986074.

Fieldwork was conducted in two phases. The first was a week-long (1–7 December 2019) digital storytelling workshop with eight participants in Cape Town. The second was meant to entail conducting a similar digital storytelling workshop in Johannesburg, but because of the COVID-19 restrictions on movement, this initial plan could not be executed. Therefore, the study was moved to WhatsApp, and a seven-week-long (17 August – 2 October 2020) research focus group with 12 participants (including two research assistants) was facilitated. Two participants and one of the research assistants had also been part of the digital storytelling workshop. Therefore, the study is informed by a total of 17 participants.

Most of the participants were South Africans (12), with four Zimbabweans, and one Burundian. Their ages ranged from 19 to 42 years; their gendered sexualities ranged from gay men (five) to cis-hetero women (four), lesbians (three), transgender women (two), pansexuals (two), and bisexual (one). None of the participants self-identified as cisgender men. Three presented as Coloured, while the rest are Black. Most are street-based sex workers, as they generally solicit their clients on roadsides. Two lived on the streets at the time of the study. The participants were recruited with the help of the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) and the South African national sex worker movement Sisonke. SWEAT is a non-profit that advocates for the rights of adult consenting sex workers and the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa, and the Sisonke movement is its birth child. The selection criteria were that the participants had to be adults and either migrant or transient/mobile sex workers.

The two research assistants (RAs) were a Zimbabwean migrant sex worker who describes herself as 'a woman who loves women' (Zoe), and a pansexual South African former internal mobile/transient sex worker (Nos). Both also strongly self-identify as queer sex worker rights activists. They not only formed part of the WhatsApp research group (engaging in the exercises and discussions) and helped significantly with participant recruitment, but also formed part of the research team by assisting me in co-managing/facilitating the (online) space. They also helped with transcribing and/or translating some of the interviews and WhatsApp messages.[52] In addition to offering technical support, the RAs also read literature relating to the research project, which we discussed during the weekly progress meetings. It was at these meetings that we also crafted the following week's WhatsApp research group exercise together. An online survey was administered as part of the WhatsApp group recruitment process (16 responses). I also held 20 interviews and four focus-group discussions. Self-chosen pseudonyms have been used for all participants.

[52] Zoe helped with the *chiShona* translations, and Nos with *isiZulu*.

Findings and Discussion

The following analysis is based on data collected from the digital storytelling workshop, the WhatsApp research group, interviews, and the focus-group discussions. I begin by unpacking some of the participants' reasons for leaving their families and countries to go engage in migrant/mobile sex work, and then look at their journeys of selling sex on the move. I then go on to discuss some of the socio-political implications of moving to sell sex, such as homelessness, belonging, and sexual citizenship. The analysis concludes by reiterating the paper's argument that migrant/mobile sex work can have an influence on gendered sexualities.

Leaving Home and Escaping State Persecution

The participants tended to stress the critical role that migration/mobility/movement plays in their sexual exploration and experimentation in sex work. Their experiences confirm what literature argues—that leaving home is a common survival strategy for gender non-conforming persons who are not accepted by their families, or face persecution in their home countries.[53] As mentioned earlier by Kalra and Bhugra, while various factors facilitate migrants' sexual experiences in the new place, the most influential of these is anonymity.[54] Indeed, many of the participants proclaimed that if they had not left their homes and moved to another place where they are not known, they would never have been able to evade their families' and friends' unwanted attention on their sexual lives, and that moving also enabled them to escape the 'small town' mentality (Mickey), which forced them to either live up to heteronormativity or face dire consequences. Zozo, a 34-year-old former mobile sex worker currently based in Johannesburg, recounted the following:

> I once talked to a lesbian of how her mother can't accept her sexuality, she even created an imaginary boyfriend. If your own family can't accept you, how will the community accept you? Lesbians and gays live in a society where there is too much 'what will people say' syndrome. Our fellow sisters and brothers and parents need to be educated on gays, lesbians, bisexual, and the gender non-conforming.

Across all cultures, family plays a significant role in enforcing gender and sexual norms. Since heteronormativity dictates that families should not produce 'erotic dissidents', many respond by trying to either reform, punish, or exile their sexually

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53 Martin and Xaba; Wood; B Camminga, *Transgender Refugees and the Imagined South Africa: Bodies Over Borders and Borders Over Bodies*, Springer, Cham, 2019.

54 Kalra and Bhugra.

offending members.[55] This can result in the non-conformer leaving their home, and thus being denied the sense of belonging, protection, support, and resources that families would be expected to provide.

Many of the cross-border migrant participants explained that the reason why they had left their homes was not only to evade family disapproval, but also to escape their home countries' persecution of non-conforming gendered sexualities:

> [In] 2017 I ran away from my country because they wanted to burn me because of how I am. One, I am a transgender. I do sex [work]. So in Zimbabwe, they don't allow. That is why I decided to run away from my country to come here to Cape Town.

Vanilla is a 25-year-old migrant sex worker. She went on to explain how she had spent three months at Mokopane in Limpopo to raise funds doing sex work to complete the rest of her journey to Cape Town. Similarly, Sheila, a 40-year-old Burundian gay migrant, made the decision to migrate to Cape Town in 2007, because same-sex relations in her country are criminalised.[56] In Burundi, LGBTQ+ persons are regularly prosecuted and face penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment for periods between three months and two years.[57] So for Vanilla and Sheila, moving to Cape Town was for both socio-economic and political reasons: to come make a living selling sex and to escape persecution in their respective home countries for engaging in same-sex relations.

Selling Sex on the Move

On the sixth week, the WhatsApp research group participants were asked to document their journeys to and from their places of work using either voice notes, photographs, or videos to capture their travels. Zaza, a 30-year-old lesbian that services a male clientele, shared four photographs of the hotspot where she solicits, along with a 26-second video taken from the passenger seat of a moving truck. We learn from her captions that Zaza started her journey on the roadside of Baden Powell Drive, before making her way to Grabouw, which is about 65 kms outside of Cape Town.

The photographs show a green open field speckled with dry trees, patches of grass, shrubs with tiny yellow flowers, and bits of litter scattered in the foreground. Far in the background, there is a thin tarred road with a drainage underbridge barely

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55 G S Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in RG Parker and P Aggleton (eds.), *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, Second Edition, Routledge, London and New York, 2007, pp. 150–187, p. 168.

56 Sheila uses the pronouns she/her, while self-identifying as gay.

57 A Carroll, *State-Sponsored Homophobia 2016—A World Survey of Sexual Orientation Laws: Criminalisation, Protection and Recognition*, ILGA, Geneva, 2016.

peering from beneath it. From the images we understand that this is where sex workers also work. On Zaza's video clip, we see lush hilly scenery and cars whizzing past her front passenger sideview window and front windscreen. The small farming town of Grabouw is the commercial centre for the vast Elgin Valley, which is the largest fruit producing and exporting area in Southern Africa.[58] Therefore, it was not surprising for Zaza's truck-driving client to ask her to accompany him there.

According to one study, the sex trades along the county's highways are extremely territorial, competitive, and at times violent.[59] However, for Zaza, even though language differences in a new place can make it difficult for one to negotiate properly with clients and other sex workers in the area see you as competition, it is still worth making the truck route journeys as a mobile/transient sex worker. She relayed in mixed English and *isiXhosa*[60] that she is originally from King Williams Town, but since 2013 she has been travelling and sex working up and down the Eastern Cape truck routes, until she eventually made her way to Khayelitsha in the Western Cape in 2016, where she currently resides:

> I would change; like sometimes I would work eziklabhini [*at the clubs*]. Sometimes ndisebenze kwi [*I would work at*]... I would hike itraka [*a truck*] from King Williams Town to eMthatha [*Mthatha*]. Maybe indidrophe eEast London [*it drops me at East London*]. Then I would stop etrak-stop [*at the truck station*], ndisebenze eEast London [*work at East London*], and continue with indlela yami [*my journey*] to Mthatha, and then go back home ndisenza [*doing*] the same thing.

When asked why she preferred to sell sex on the move, Zaza explained that clients can get bored with one face, so you have to change your hotspots in order for them to continue finding you new and exotic. Therefore, migrant/mobile sex work enables you to remain sexually attractive to the market, thus allowing you to earn more than local sex workers.

Homelessness, Shelters, and Hotspots

The task for the fourth week of the WhatsApp research group was for the participants to watch and reflect on a documentary that had been released by

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58 'Grabouw Industrial Park', no date, retrieved 5 August 2022, http://www.grabouwindustrialpark.com.

59 N F Makhakhe *et al.*, 'Sexual Transactions Between Long Distance Truck Drivers and Female Sex Workers in South Africa', *Global Health Action*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1346164, 2017, pp. 1–9, https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2017.1346164.

60 One of the official Nguni languages in South Africa, predominantly spoken by the Xhosa ethnic group.

the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) organisation.[61] GALA is 'a catalyst for the production, preservation and dissemination of information about the history, culture and contemporary experiences of LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer) people in South Africa'.[62] As per the previous weeks' exercises, the participants were asked to specifically comment on parts of the film that speak to issues relating to sex work, migration/mobility/movement, gender, or sexuality. One of the protagonists in the film, a transgender woman sex worker from the Eastern Cape, relayed the physical abuse she had experienced at a Strandfontein sports facility, which the government had turned into a homeless shelter during the country's level 5 COVID-19 lockdown period.

In their responses to that week's exercise, the WhatsApp group participants generally expressed empathy for homeless transgender sex workers, noting that the challenges they face are far more compounded, because of their non-conforming gendered sexuality. Almost all chastised the government for sheltering homeless transgender people at the Strandfontein sports facility, as it had exposed them to transphobic violence. The participants also noted the government's failure to protect and uphold the human rights of LGBTQI+ people and sex workers. According to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, although the government had taken important steps to provide funding for shelters and other services for gender-based violence survivors during the pandemic, many had been made more vulnerable. So HRW called on the state to improve access and safety for marginalised people, including LGBT people, sex workers, and undocumented survivors.[63]

Loss of jobs during the COVID-19 lockdowns meant that many people were unable to pay their rents. This led to backhouse dwellers being evicted by their landlords, resulting in an increase in homelessness and illegal occupation of public spaces. Pukkie, a 32-year-old gay man from Zimbabwe, reported in his citizen-journalism voice note for week five's WhatsApp exercise that informal homes were being built where he used to work (his 'hotspot'). This was later affirmed by two other participants who also live at Mfuleni (a township in Cape Town). However, while Zoe and Zee sympathised with their colleague for losing his hotspot, they felt that the land occupation could somehow be beneficial to sex workers, as anyone who did not have a home could set up their shack there

61 GALA Archives, 'COVID-19 and Cape Town's Homeless Transgender Sex Workers', *YouTube*, 1 September 2020, retrieved 15 June 2022, https://youtu.be/MPFlfaQJodA.

62 'About the GALA Queer Archive', no date, retrieved 15 June 2022, https://gala.co.za/about/history.

63 Human Rights Watch, 'South Africa: Broken Promises to Aid Gender-Based Violence Survivors Improve Shelter Funding; Increase Access for Sex Workers, LGBT, Undocumented Survivors', HRW, 24 November 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/24/south-africa-broken-promises-aid-gender-based-violence-survivors.

at the so-called COVID-19 Village. According to Zoe:

> So it's been one of those things that the community just takes everyone. They're not judging anyone and they just saying 'come and stay if you need a place', and that hotspot unfortunately has been occupied. So […] it's a blessing and a curse at the same time in that it's been taken over […] that means people can still work from there, and still be able to work indoors now in those spaces.

At first it would appear that when a community faces a broader societal problem that affects most of its members it does not matter whether you are a sex worker or not, you are considered part of the community. However, when I asked Zaza, who lives not too far from Mfuleni, she explained that even though the community meetings about building informal homes in the area were (supposedly) open for all to attend, she never felt welcome, because some people know she is a sex worker and tend to use that against her. Therefore, even when communal-democratic development interventions are being embarked upon, past stigma and discrimination make it difficult for sex workers to participate in those 'acts of citizenship'.[64] According to Andrijasevic:

> The shift to the question of what makes the citizen means that 'acts of citizenship' places emphasis on what people *do*, namely on those claims and actions through which citizenship is enacted… It also allows us to conceive of […] citizenship outside its legalistic and institutional format…[65]

However, Zaza's self-censorship as a consequence of her community knowing that she is a sex worker illustrates the degree to which sex workers are unable to fully exercise their citizenship rights. Andrijasevic's understanding of citizenship as acts is useful when we consider migrant/mobile sex workers' existence. So even though one might be able to claim citizenship rights in one way (i.e., Zaza is South African), one might fall short in terms of their citizenship in other respects (i.e., the low sense of sexual citizenship in her community), and consequently be denied (or lose out on) resources for legally recognised citizens. Thus migrant/mobile sex work not only helps us to queer heteronormativity, but also our understanding of (sexual) citizenship.

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64 R Andrijasevic, 'Acts of Citizenship as Methodology', in E F Isin and M Saward (eds.), *Enacting European Citizenship*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 47–65.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Migrant/Mobile Sex Work Influence on Gendered Sexualities

When asked whether they thought that migrant/mobile sex work could have any influence on one's gender or sexuality, the participants appeared divided. Some felt that one is born either 'gay' or 'straight' and that is it; regardless of whether you are in a sexual relationship with someone or not, you would remain as such even upon entering the sex industry. Sussie, a 35-year-old transient sex worker in Paarl (Western Cape province) expressed that for her, sex work does

> … not really [have] an influence because sexuality [is] a thing that comes from childhood.

On the other hand, some also noted how the type of sex a person has while in sex work can influence their gendered sexuality. According to Zozo, this is how it all begins:

> Okay—iqalakanjena, ne [*this is how it starts, right*]? Isichueshini [*The situation*] its whereby, umangila ngikhona nginguZozo, ne [*when I'm where I am being Zozo, right*]? And then ngithole enye iklaenti ithi ifuna ithreesome [*I get another client that says they want a threesome*]. Kuleyo threesome leyo uzothola ukuthi mina [*in that threesome you will find that with me*] maybe he is gonna do an anal sex. Then its whereby mina umasengilala angisa [*when I have sex I don't*] feel active. Like—umangabe sengithole omunye umuntu sengienjoya ienal than iman-on-top [*when I have found someone else I now enjoy anal than man-on-top*]. […] Hmm, so that's why ngisisho ukuthi iya ngesichueshini and neadapthing [*I'm saying it depends on the situation and adapting*]. Siya adaptha; uma ungumuntu nje uyaadaptha anything nje [*We adapt; if you are a person generally you adapt to anything*].

Here, Zozo tells us in *isiZulu*[66] that it would start with a client asking her for a threesome and wanting to have anal sex with her. Later, when she has found someone else and is having sex with that person, she then finds that she no longer feels as active as she used to be with a man-on-top (i.e., having vaginal sex), because now she enjoys anal sex more. Which is why she says that it depends on the situation, because as a person you can adapt. I read the adaptation that Zozo is referring to as the direct result of sexual exposure in sex work, which then contributes to the expansion of the body's sexual vocabulary and desires. In addition, I understand Zozo's reference to 'man-on-top' (also known as the 'missionary position') as denoting heterosexuality, and 'anal sex' as an indication

[66] *IsiZulu* is one of the 11 official languages in South Africa. It is one of the Bantu languages and is predominately spoken by Zulus in KwaZulu-Natal.

of non-(hetero)normativity. What is curious is that, while anal sex tends to be associated with men who have sex with men, for Zozo, if a cisgender woman sex worker derives sexual pleasure from a client penetrating her anus, then she is also considered non-(hetero)normative. Therefore, regardless of your gender, if you are having sex that involves anything other than a 'man-on-top', according to Zozo, you are non-(hetero)normative (i.e., queer).

As earlier stated, 'heteronormativity and heterosexuality are analytically distinct, albeit interdependent'.[67] Zozo's understanding of anal sex as signifying non-(hetero)normativity even when practised between a cisgender man and woman illustrates this. Her understanding of anal sex resonates with other participants' responses on the subject (e.g., Lindy, Zee, etc.). It also echoes studies conducted with cisgender heterosexual persons, which have noted men reporting their refusal to engage in anal sex with their women intimate partners, out of the fear/anxiety that they might be read as non-(hetero)normative (i.e., gay), thus affecting their social standing.[68] This speaks to how a sexual act—or society's perception of one's engagement in a particular sexual act—can influence how your gendered sexuality and sexual citizenship are read. Hence, viewing sexual citizenship from the actual doing of sex, and not only through the identity politics lens, helps to better illuminate those gendered sexualities that fall outside of the heteronormative/heterosexual versus non-normative binary.

Evolved Desires and Intimacy

Other participants expressed how migrant/mobile sex work can also end up influencing who you find desirable in your intimate life. For Mickey:

> …it depends, ne [*right*]? I'll speak about my own experience; 'cause mina [*I*] I grew up thinking ukuthi [*that*] I am straight, ne [*right*]? Knowing actually, not thinking, ukuthi [*that*] I am straight, because I've been only told ukuthi if ungumuntu wesifazane [*that if you are a woman*] you only have to have a relationship with a man. I never knew about amalesbians [*lesbians*], gays, and what-what and what-what, ne [*right*]? Up until I started isex work, and then from isex work I had this client who requested a lesbian show; that's when I was intimate

[67] Rumens *et al.*, p. 601.

[68] C Ndinda *et al.*, 'Perceptions of Anal Sex in Rural South Africa', *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 10, issue 2, 2008, pp. 205–212, https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050600988416; B Fahs, E Swank, and L Clevenger, 'Troubling Anal Sex: Gender, Power, and Sexual Compliance in Heterosexual Experiences of Anal Intercourse', *Gender Issues*, vol. 32, issue 1, 2015, pp. 19–38, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-014-9129-7.

> with a woman, and then I was like: 'okayyyyy, okay ziyawa ngala; ziyabuya [*it's going down here; it's happening*]'. And then ngabona kodwa futhi ukuthi [*but I also saw that*] I am not restricted to only having amafeelings [*feelings*] for another woman or man. So ngithandana nawunowubani [*I date/love anyone*]. It depends wethu [*our*].[69] That's how mina [*I*] I feel ngakhona [*like*]. Ja.

Mickey is a 27-year-old internal migrant sex worker from Port Shepstone (KwaZulu-Natal province) who self-identifies as a 'pansexual', which she explained as someone who is attracted to the person inside regardless of their sexuality or gender identity. In the above quote we learn that had it not been for her exposure to lesbian sex through sex work, she might never have come to the self-awareness that she enjoys sex with women. This later led Mickey to the realisation that she is not limited to only being with women or men in her intimate relationships. So now she dates anyone she loves.

During one of our interviews, Mickey revealed that she is in a 'situationship'[70] with a transgender man. They had met while she was living in Cape Town and had been dating for just over a year when we spoke. However, since she had to move to Queenstown (in the Eastern Cape province) in February 2020, it had turned into a long-distance relationship. Here, we can deduce that Mickey's initial exposure to non-(hetero)normative sex, through a 'lesbian show' requested by a client in sex work, not only opened her to discovering her pleasure in having sex with women, but also to being in an intimate romantic relationship with anybody she finds attractive across the gendered sexualities' spectrum.

Exposure, Exploration, and Self-realisation

Mawande, a 27-year-old gay man from Zimbabwe, is one of the participants who also believes that selling sex can influence one's gendered sexuality. In sex work, Mawande cross-dresses into 'Sera' (she), but everywhere else they self-identify as a 'gay man' (he). Mawande's clients want her 'as a full-on lady'. Even though growing up, Mawande had felt like a girl and enjoyed playing with girls, they admitted to not always having been open to wearing dresses and acting like a woman—actually the idea used to appal them—until they entered sex work:

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[69] The direct translation of 'wethu' is 'ours', (e.g., 'dadewethu' means 'our sister'), but Xhosa people tend to use it as a term of endearment to refer to whoever they are speaking to as theirs.

[70] A colloquial term for a sexual or romantic relationship that is not considered to be established or formal.

> We call them cross-dresser or drag queen—right? I told myself that I would never associate with a person who dress like a lady. I was even myself being judgmental. I get to laugh at myself now. It was a thing of being out of curiosity, and because as well my clients wanted me that way. […] And from there, I think I become to like it. And so as well here, where I am staying, everyone knows me I'm gay. And uhm, during the week when I'm going to [NGO] work, I would be dressing like a guy. Mostly on weekends when I'm going out, I'll be a lady.

Mawande's sex work clients' requests for them to dress-up as 'a lady' created a conducive environment for the self-realisation and the actualisation of their femininity. This enabled them to work through their own prejudices against cross-dressers and embrace the 'Sera' within. When he goes to work at a local NGO, he dresses like 'a guy', but on weekends she does sex work as 'Sera' and dresses as 'a lady'. So Mawande can be either *he* or *she*, depending on the situation. Therefore, it appears that migrant/mobile selling sex allows for at least the temporal queering of heteronormative (and even homonormative) gender and sexual roles.

Conclusion

Based on this analysis, sex work appears to allow for the exploration and queering of gendered sexualities. According to the participants, because sex work is essentially about using one's body to perform various sexual acts with different types of people for financial gain, a person becomes exposed to varying ways of experiencing sexual (dis)pleasure. This seems to broaden the body's erotic vocabulary and expand one's range of gender and sexual expression. Some asserted that this can further inform who a person finds romantically attractive and becomes intimately involved with. However, the participants stressed the integral role that migration plays in providing the anonymity needed to create an enabling environment for this experimentation and evolution to take place. In other words, when sex work intersects with mobility, a conducive space for gender and sexual exploration manifests, which results in queering.

Through the queering of sex work and mobility, we learn that it is not just who you have sex with, but how you have sex (or the type of sex you are perceived to engage in) that also informs your sexual citizenship (be it with your immediate community or the nation state). Consequently, this can impact one's sense of belonging, and access to particular rights and resources, such as the right to safety, shelter, land, a means to make a living, and even the right to life itself. This paper has therefore demonstrated how migration and mobility can influence gendered sexualities in sex work, and with significant socio-political implications.

Ntokozo Yingwana is a researcher and PhD candidate with the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her main passion lies in gender, sexuality, and sex worker rights' activism in Africa. She has worked for the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), and occasionally consults for Sisonke, the South African movement of sex workers, the African Sex Worker Alliance, and the Global Network of Sex Work Projects. Email: ntokozo@migration.org.za