

esethu monakali

Trans Masculine Geographies: on Navigating Urban Spaces And Negotiating Liveable Lives In Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa
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This PhD thesis makes an exceptional, timely, and original intervention into the study of trans masculinities, offering a creative and intellectually stimulating account based on the narratives of nineteen trans masculine people, racialized differently and living in Johannesburg and Cape Town. At a moment of unprecedented global debate about gender and the place of trans people, a context marked by violence, condemnation, and precarity, this study foregrounds the perspectives of those most directly affected, addressing a noticeable gap in both academic and policy knowledge about trans people's lives and identities. The dissertation is committed to decolonizing gender knowledge, situating its analysis not in the Minority World, but in South Africa, a Majority World country, and reframing familiar theoretical debates through local lived experience.

The past decade has seen an intensification of global debates, policy interventions, and culture wars about gender, and

particularly the rights and recognition of trans people. Public discourse remains beset by strong opinions, anxieties, and media moral panics, with trans people frequently encountering violence, invalidation, and pervasive precarity in everyday life. In such a context, the need for academic studies capturing the insider perspectives of trans people themselves is particularly urgent. This thesis responds to this deficit with an innovative study that foregrounds trans masculine people's own narratives, contributing new critical knowledge about their identities, everyday lives, and social relations.

The dissertation's decolonial orientation is clear from its choice to situate research in Johannesburg and Cape Town, cities that have historically grappled with legacies of colonialism, racial capitalism, spatial segregation, and uneven development. Rather than reproduce Minority World paradigms, the study critiques and reimagines the frameworks for understanding gender and trans embodiment, insisting that any account of trans masculinities must be sensitive to local histories and geographies. By attending to Majority World locations, the thesis foregrounds how space, as socially produced and experienced, constitutes a vital force animating both violence and creativity in trans life.

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The spatial focus allows the researcher to interrogate not only the external conditions faced by trans masculine people, but also the ways in which gender, sexuality, race, and class are temporally and spatially co-constituted through everyday practices. The thesis draws on critical theories from Black trans feminism, intersectionality, queer phenomenology, and psychosocial studies, thereby making a meaningful contribution to trans and queer scholarship that seeks to decolonize Eurocentric knowledge.

Conceptually, the thesis brings together theorization of intersectionality, liveable/unliveable life, racial capitalism, necropolitics, and embodied perspectives. It does this with sustained reference to Black trans feminist and queer phenomenological frameworks, generating an analytic vocabulary that is both internationally relevant and locally rooted. The author's account of the "spatio-temporality of liveable and unliveable life" (104) and "geographies of anxiety" (110) highlights the ways in which spatial context, temporality, and emotion intersect to constitute margins and possibilities in trans masculine people's lives. The study advances intersectionality theory beyond additive models, emphasizing the dynamic, temporal process through which identities are made and remade. These insights are grounded in narrative cases that illuminate strategies of negotiation, adaptation, and resistance within Johannesburg and Cape Town's shifting social terrains.

The methodology is notably flexible and reflexive, combining online life history interviews (conducted during Covid-19

lockdowns), ethnographic "hanging out", and narrative analysis. The approach is interdisciplinary, enabling the researcher to access insider perspectives and maintain a psychosocial understanding of the affective texture of trans masculine people's lives. esethu monakali explicitly positions themselves as an insider, practicing reflexivity and emotional engagement as methods for ethical research in which research participants are conceptualized as "collaborators" rather than subjects, challenging exploitative traditions and advocating for co-production of knowledge. This shifts the ethics of representation toward co-production of knowledge and accountability. The thesis thus challenges conventional hierarchies between researcher and researched, enacting a genuinely decolonial practice of scholarship that respects the agency of the collaborators and their interpretative authority over their own lives.

The ethnographic dimension, though rich in texture, could, however, benefit from further analytical elaboration. There are moments where the cumulative insights from observation and participation might be more explicitly theorized. The balance between discourse and ethnography sometimes leans toward descriptive narration, leaving underexplored how specific contexts (bars, homes, digital spaces) operate as politicized terrains of gendered negotiation. For instance, the walking ethnography with "Mr J." (158) could be further theorized in relation to movement and embodiment within trans geographies. Likewise, the decision

to exclude home spaces from sustained analysis (154) is methodologically intriguing but warrants deeper justification, given the home's significance as a domain of intimacy, safety, and power relations.

Epistemologically, the thesis raises compelling questions about what is taken as "real" prior to discourse. The author resists reductionist accounts of trans experience and shows how material conditions and discursive regimes co-produce realities of embodiment. This synthesis between phenomenology and critical social theory is challenging but fruitful. At times, however, the analytical relationship between narrative and discourse analysis requires greater clarity. It is not entirely evident how the two frameworks interact, whether narratives are treated as affective expressions of lived experience or as discursive constructions embedded in power relations. The thesis hints at this dual positioning but could make its epistemological stance more explicit, particularly when interpreting contradictions between

collaborators' accounts. Similarly, while reflexivity is commendably foregrounded, the emotional stakes of the researcher's involvement could be more critically interrogated. How does their affective investment shape interpretation, and how is this tension managed?

The conceptual contributions of the study are considerable. It nuances the understanding of how trans masculine subjectivities are spatially constituted and temporally lived. The conceptual triad of space, embodiment, and intersectionality is consistently carried through the empirical and analytical chapters. Overall, the thesis demonstrates how classed, racialised, and gendered structures animate the possibilities and constraints of trans masculinities in South Africa's urban milieus.

Ann Phoenix

Professor of Psychosocial Studies,
Thomas Coram Research Unit, Social
Research Institute, UCL Institute of
Education, University College London