

Abstract for RC21 2016: Submitted to panel on Transgressional Mobilities: strategies, resistance, possibilities

'Taxi queens' in mobile transgression: Practices of transactional sex in the taxi industry in the Western Cape, South Africa

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There has been increasing focus on unequal and coercive sex and associated challenges, such as unwanted teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence and HIV, in global Southern contexts. In South Africa, the complex intersection of gender, class and race has been shown to facilitate particular vulnerability of young poor Black women to coercive and unequal sexual relationships within a context of poverty and material disadvantage in which sexual and love relationships are frequently framed in material terms (see for example, Hunter, 2012). This is exacerbated in global contexts of neoliberal consumerist imperatives which impact on in which material wealth and related consumables such as cars, cellphones, dress fashion, are idealised through multiple media impacting on even the most isolated and poor communities.

In urban contexts in South Africa, where public transport systems remain poorly developed as part of the apartheid heritage, informal transport systems have proliferated and many young school-going women remain dependant on the system of 'taxis' (micro buses that are privately owned and state subsidized). The phenomenon of 'taxi queens' where young school-going women reportedly engage in transactional sexual relationships with the male taxi drivers and assistants, has some received attention in recent years (Potgieter et al., 2012; Shefer et al., 2011; Strebel et al, 2013). This paper draws on a study conducted in two regions of South Africa to explore the dynamics of relationships between 'taxi queens' and taxi drivers. While there was widespread recognition of the transactional nature of the relationship, and reports of a range of physical and emotional risks and abuse related to these relationships, the research also highlighted a more nuanced picture of such practices. While such

relationships were negatively constructed, stigmatised and viewed as transgressive of normative young femininity, it was also evident that young women may strategically engage in such relationships for purposes of material and mobility benefits, as well as certain care needs, nor experience themselves as exploited victims. We argue the importance of transdisciplinary scholarship that explores the gendered intersectional nature of urban mobilities. We argue further the importance of a sensitivity to the complexity of intersectional gender power relationships in material and mobile contexts within scholarship on and policy and programmatic work directed at gender justice and reproductive health among young people in city contexts.

References:

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