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City Streets and Disco Beats: Recentring the Urban in Queer and Trans Migration Studies

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Abstract

The last decade has seen significant scholarly interest in the cross-border movements of LGBTQ Africans. This work has helped spotlight the unique protection challenges facing these individuals, as well as the failure of governments, humanitarian bodies and UN agencies to provide adequate and appropriate support. However, by focusing so pointedly on the macro level, this scholarship overlooks key social and spatial dynamics. In this commentary, I reflect on what is lost when the urban is reduced to a narrative feature rather than a unit of analysis and show how (re)centring the urban can open up new avenues for theorising queer and trans displacement. Despite occupying tenuous social and legal positions, LGBTQ refugees continue to navigate and transform various urban locations. These everyday spatial negotiations deserve greater attention as they reveal much about how social exclusion operates, and is potentially resisted, in different moments and places.

Keywords Kenya · LGBTQ refugees · Queer · Displacement · Belonging

I have come to downtown Nairobi to meet Star, a young trans woman from South Sudan.[1] I know from our last interaction that she is glamorous and flamboyant, but I expect her to be dressed conservatively given our rendezvous point. Conspicuousness brings danger for LGBTQ refugees,[2] and nothing provokes outrage more than public violations of gender norms. The risk of danger is even greater for those

[1] All names used in this commentary are pseudonyms.

[2] 'LGBTQ' stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer. I use 'LGBTQ refugees' as an umbrella term for LGBTQ migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. I do so in recognition of the myriad barriers that prevent individuals from being formally recognised as refugees, despite often meeting the legislative criteria for international protection.

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whose bodies are read as foreign or threatening. But my assumption is soon proven wrong: Star arrives in skin-tight white trousers, a figure-hugging plum turtleneck and a cinched blazer of shocking pink. Her outfit is not as overtly 'transgressive' as the ones she wears at social events, but it still elicits amusement, bewilderment and occasionally disapproval from passers-by. With her slender frame, striking features and bold sartorial choices, Star makes for an arresting sight as she manoeuvres the rush-hour crowd.

When Star is finished with her errands, we catch a *matatu*[3] back to the peri-urban settlement where she lives. She wants me to visit the house she shares with six other LGBTQ refugees from across East Africa and the Great Lakes. She offers to cook dinner and so we buy vegetables from roadside stalls and a bottle of soft drink from a tavern. The vendors greet Star affectionately, enquiring about her well-being and even complimenting her outfit. I am pleasantly surprised by their warmth and familiarity. Later, when we are eating, Star tells me about these women:

> We like each other. We joke and gossip. It started because I buy [goods] from them, but now we are friends … Some women [in the community] don't mind us. We have an agreement – we stay away from their husbands and boyfriends, we don't sleep with men from around here, and they don't give us problems.

Star admits that these relationships are tenuous and transactional, in that they depend on her participation in the local economy and are limited to a handful of sympathetic neighbours. But they may still indicate a shift in how LGBTQ refugees are viewed and treated in Nairobi.

I share the above anecdote not just because it is a cherished memory but also because it conveys the murky relationship between 'non-normative' bodies and urban spaces. Star's ability to navigate her surroundings is shaped by various social, legal, economic and geographic factors. It has long been recognised that LGBTQ refugees are expected to straddle hypervisibility and invisibility (e.g. Camminga 2020; Palmary 2016). The former is typically associated with humanitarian and bureaucratic spaces, where claimants must present as 'authentically' LGBTQ to access protection (Koçak 2020), while the latter is used to evade hostility and harassment in day-to-day life. Star's presence on the streets of Nairobi suggests that the spatial dimensions of these negotiations need to be reinterrogated. Rather than collapse urban locations into neat binaries of public/private, safe/dangerous or progressive/conservative, researchers should consider the 'different shades of queer visibility' (Saleh 2020) that are present and the various functions that these might serve (see also Ombagi, this issue; Livermon, this issue).

Using Star's experiences as my entry point, I argue for greater recognition of the urban within queer and trans migration studies. Over the last decade, this emergent field of research has shed light on the experiences of LGBTQ refugees, including those who move within and between African countries. This work spotlights the unique challenges facing these individuals, as well as the failure of governments

[3] A minibus or similar vehicle used as a taxi.

and human rights mechanisms to provide adequate support (e.g. Beetar 2020; Koko, Monro and Smith 2018; Mudarikwa et al. 2021).

While this focus on barriers to protection is crucial, it tends to overshadow other dynamics in the lives of African LGBTQ refugees. As B Camminga and John Marnell (2022) note, current scholarship contains several oversights. This includes a geographical bias, in that it is largely focused on South Africa; a gendered bias, in that it concentrates on cisgender gay men; and a disciplinary bias, in that it prioritises legal critiques over social analyses. Here I expound another knowledge gap: a failure to appreciate the everyday spatial components of displacement, especially those occurring at the micro and meso scales, and how these intersect with broader contestations over gender, sexuality, citizenship and belonging.

Scholars usually note where their research participants are located – e.g. Dakar (Menetrier 2022), Johannesburg (Hucke 2022), Kampala (McQuaid 2020), Nouakchott (Broqua et al. 2020) or Rabat (Gouyon 2022) – but pay little attention to how these urban environments shape the experiences of LGBTQ refugees, or how LGBTQ refugees shape these urban environments. While there are exceptions (e.g. Bhagat 2018; Sinclair and Sinatti 2021), most queer and trans migration scholarship fails to consider the nuances and impacts of specific urban geographies. This makes it difficult to identify similarities and differences between locations (i.e. whether the same challenges and responses are found in, say, Cairo and Kigali) or to track variations within the same urban areas (i.e. how the experiences of, say, lesbian women diverge from those of transgender men).

In this commentary, I reflect on what is lost when the urban is reduced to a narrative feature rather than a unit of analysis. Recognising the complexities of specific urban environments can open up new avenues for theorising queer and trans displacement. It can also unlock better activist and advocacy responses by ensuring that interventions align with LGBTQ refugees' social, economic and material realities.

Situating African Queer and Trans Displacements

The cross-border movements of LGBTQ Africans are beginning to garner significant scholarly and media attention. As noted, research is primarily concerned with barriers to protection, including LGBTQ refugees' struggle to 'prove' persecution, their experiences of institutional discrimination and their lack of access to safe and affirming services. This is certainly the case with Kenya, where research focuses on humanitarian challenges, governance failures, operational shortcomings and exposure to violence (e.g. Ndiritu 2021; Samuels et al. 2021).

There is not space here for a detailed summary of the social, political and historical factors driving queer and trans migration in East Africa. These topics are covered elsewhere and so I limit myself below to a few relevant points.

Kenya hosts one of the largest populations of LGBTQ refugees on the African continent. It has been a migration destination for LGBTQ people since at least 2005, though it was only in the following decade that it emerged as a discernible hub for sexuality- and gender-based asylum claims (Camminga 2020). This was largely due to the adoption of the *Anti-Homosexuality Act 2014* in neighbouring Uganda. Many

of the people fleeing this legislation headed towards Kenya in the hope of receiving support from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which at that time managed the country's refugee programme. At first, the agency prioritised sexuality- and gender-based claims and expedited third-country resettlements (Zomorodi 2016). Special assistance, such as a monthly stipend for food and accommodation, was also provided to some LGBTQ claimants.

Concerns were soon raised about LGBTQ refugees receiving 'preferential treatment' and the potential for fraudulent claims, prompting the UNHCR to instigate more stringent vetting processes (Munyarukumbuzi et al. 2022). This policy change coincided with a tightening of migration controls in Kenya. The government began to more strictly enforce its encampment policy, with urban refugees and asylum seekers forcibly relocated to remote camps, ostensibly due to concerns over national security (Kremin 2017). Soon after, a highly visible population of LGBTQ refugees began to emerge at the Kakuma Refugee Camp. A series of brutal attacks against this group forced the UNHCR to move those deemed 'most vulnerable' to safehouses on the outskirts of Nairobi (RefugePoint 2018). Offshoots of these safehouses remain, though they now receive little to no support from the UNHCR or its partners. Some of the safehouses' residents have official permission to live in Nairobi, but most have either left Kakuma clandestinely or remain unregistered.

The UNHCR's handling of LGBTQ refugee cases has drawn criticism from scholars, journalists and activists (e.g. Bearak 2020; Pincock 2021). Most question the reduction in third-country resettlements, arguing that immediate relocation is the only feasible long-term solution for this community. B Camminga (2020) also describes the 'parallel legal system' that has now emerged in Kenya, with LGBTQ refugees simultaneously protected under international law and criminalised under domestic law.

Locating the Urban

Over the last four decades, queer and trans geographers have shown how social and spatial orders (re)produce genders and sexualities, and vice versa (Bonner-Thompson et al. 2020). This vital work illustrates the centrality of place in the development of erotic desires, sexual practices and gendered identities, as well as how these are represented, policed and treated in both law and everyday life.

From its inception, this field of research has been deeply entangled with the study of urban environments, as demonstrated by its early fixation with 'gaybourhoods' and pride events. This scholarship was innovative and foundational, but it also established a pattern of prioritising specific locations, identities and modes of visibility. The experiences of lesbian women and gender-diverse persons were largely ignored, as were the lives of LGBTQ people in suburban, peri-urban and rural locations. These omissions have been somewhat addressed in recent years, but the discipline's geographical imbalance persists. Andrew Tucker and Neil Hassan (2020) critique the parochialism that haunts urban sexualities research, arguing that extant theories draw on a limited set of Global North case studies and therefore remain ignorant to how LGBTQ people in other contexts inhabit, navigate and reshape their social and

spatial environments. Similarly, Gustav Visser (2016) notes that LGBTQ identities in the Global South are often spatialised differently from those in the Global North, making them incongruent with theories and analyses emerging from the latter.

Global South scholars have challenged this universalising impulse by producing context-specific, locally orientated research. This includes a rich body of work charting the construction, regulation and expansion of African genders and sexualities (e.g. Ekine and Abbas 2013; Nyanzi 2013). Yet very little of this work takes the urban as its theoretical, methodological or empirical starting point. This is despite African urban studies providing fertile ground to explore identities, embodiments, desires and practices linked to gender and sexuality (e.g. Ombagi 2019).

There is not space to catalogue all the potential pollination points between these disciplines and so I limit myself to two illustrative examples. First, recent work on 'geographies of getting by' (Thieme 2018) – also referred to as 'hustling on the move' (Monteith and Mirembe 2021) – not only recognises the informality and insecurity of African cities but also highlights the assemblage of everyday struggles and negotiations used by those with little or no access to formal support mechanisms. This resonates with my own research, in that it gestures to the unseen survival tactics deployed by people with extremely limited social and economic capital – a categorisation befitting LGBTQ refugees (see also Tucker 2020). Second, research on how cities manage and engage migrants shows that everyday urban practices sometimes contradict the official positions of national governments. This includes work on how conditions of mobility and urbanism influence processes of belonging, visibility and identity, especially for those who negotiate multiple spatial and temporal orientations (e.g. Landau 2009; Turner 2015). Again, this work offers productive inroads for researching groups considered 'out of place' but who continue to exert a right to the city.

What does this mean for future research on LGBTQ refugees? As noted, queer and trans migration studies is overwhelmingly concerned with the macro scale. State-centric analyses are useful but they tell only part of the story. Drawing on theoretical and empirical advancements in other disciplines – including urban studies and human geography – is vital if this myopia is to be corrected. If nothing else, scholars of queer and trans migration would be prudent to recognise the open-ended and unpredictable ways that urban populations reconstitute spaces, objects, practices and infrastructures (Simone 2019).

The Urban as a Place of Contrasts

Participants in my research are undoubtedly experiencing human rights violations, but they are also attempting to make life liveable within profoundly insecure social, legal and economic contexts. Tracking these efforts, particularly how they play out at various scales and in different settings, can unlock new insights into queer and trans displacement. My current project seeks to understand how the mechanics of exclusion operate within different urban settings and what happens when these practices rub up against various identity configurations and legal formations (i.e. how gender, sexuality, citizenship, documentation status and border regimes intersect with social

and spatial arrangements to heighten or diminish vulnerability). Making room for the micro and meso scales – that is, reading state persecution alongside everyday interactions – can expose social dynamics that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The anecdote shared at the beginning of this commentary hints at the benefits of multi-scalar analyses. Star's movements and interactions show that LGBTQ refugees' spatial negotiations are more layered than some academic and journalistic writing suggests. Depictions of African LGBTQ refugees tend to reproduce a singular narrative of desperation; people with complex lives, histories and aspirations are reduced to passive victims awaiting rescue by the 'benevolent' Global North (Marnell 2022). In raising this critique, I do not wish to downplay the horrific violence to which LGBTQ refugees are subjected or to disregard any person's right to seek third-country resettlement. Rather, I hope to show how certain research framings can disregard or conceal other facets of experience. LGBTQ refugees in Nairobi navigate a variety of spaces, including salons, bars, hotels, restaurants, markets, shops, churches and *matatus*. These spaces always carry a level of risk, especially for those who are undocumented or who present in gender-nonconforming ways, but they are not universally oppressive. Nor are they experienced in the same way by all people. In-depth spatial analyses can push beyond one-dimensional readings by showing how social exclusion operates, and is potentially resisted, in different moments and places.

It is true that Kenya remains dangerous for my research participants, as evidenced by its draconian anti-LGBTQ laws, restrictive refugee policies and conservative social mores. Star recites countless tales of abuse, including being mistreated by sex work clients and brutalised by police officers, experiences that are echoed by her fellow LGBTQ refugees. Vicious attacks are also known to occur, with one such incident leading to the death of a gay Congolese man during my fieldwork. It hardly bears repeating that research and advocacy on these issues must continue. But caution is also required – reading queer and trans displacement solely through the lens of states and institutions risks creating a single story. LGBTQ refugees in Nairobi have limited resources, opportunities and rights, but they do not necessarily lead cloistered or joyless existences. I know this from direct experience, having accompanied participants to nightclubs, partaken in communal meals and witnessed impromptu drag performances, as well as from spirited conversations about clothes, friendships, hook-ups and imagined futures. These encounters serve as a reminder that moments of pleasure, vitality and fabulousness are possible within landscapes of abandonment, even if such moments are fleeting or covert (Manalansan 2014).

Most of my interactions with Star and other LGBTQ refugees take place in 'safehouses'. I use scare quotes because this term can be misleading. 'Safe' might seem a suitable adjective when compared to Kakuma, but it is best read as aspirational rather than literal. The Nairobi safehouses tend to be crowded, isolated from services and lacking in basic amenities; even the better resourced of them remain suspectable to police raids and community surveillance.

I spend a lot of my time in these spaces, sometimes conducting interviews but mainly hanging out with residents and observing their daily routines. The safehouses double as social and community venues, and I find myself attending everything from karaoke sessions and raucous parties through to Bible reading groups and health outreach

workshops. Star's is one of the first safehouses I visit. It is a large, two-storey dwelling with an overgrown but charming garden. The property is surrounded by a high perimeter wall, though the security this promises soon proves illusory. The interior of the safehouse is sparsely furnished and yet there is evidence of the space being cared for. The living room is adorned with colourful religious posters, and Star's bedroom is meticulously organised despite her limited possessions.

Visiting Star's safehouse pushes me to think differently about LGBTQ refugees' domestic arrangements, just as the time we spend together downtown challenges my assumptions about visibility and movement. While references to safehouses are common in the literature – including crucial work on how they bring unwanted attention (Camminga 2020), facilitate psychosocial support (Munyarukumbuzi et al. 2022) and enable identity formation (Oosthuizen 2020) – there is yet to be sustained engagement with them as social and spatial entities. I quickly realise that Star and her housemates experience their accommodation in vastly different ways. This manifests as heated disagreements over chores, money, food, homemaking practices and decision-making structures. Zeus and Athena – a lesbian couple from Uganda and Tanzania, respectively – moved out just before my fieldwork began and later told me that patriarchal expectations were their primary motivation for leaving. Star, too, believes she is treated differently because of her gender.

These intrahousehold dynamics deserve attention, not just because safehouses play a central role in the lives of LGBTQ refugees but also because they are sites in which social hierarchies are replicated. Gill Valentine (2007) draws attention to 'intimate connections between the production of space and the systematic production of power' and urges scholars to recognise how intersectionality is 'spatially constituted and experienced' (19). Monitoring contestations *within* LGBTQ refugee spaces can trouble assumptions about the politics and practices of exclusion. In Nairobi – like many Global South cities – LGBTQ refugees are forced to live collectively because of the tenuous social, legal and economic position they occupy, yet little is known about how their domestic spaces are organised and regulated.

Closer engagement with the social and built environments in which safehouses are located can also bring new insights. Existing research emphasises the divide between LGBTQ refugees and local communities, and there is ample evidence testifying to this fact. But it is myopic to assume that LGBTQ refugees are cut-off from their surroundings. Star's connection with local vendors offers a case in point. These friendships make her feel less isolated and may even confer a level of protection, while at the same time facilitating access to goods and services. Visibility remains a concern for Star and other LGBTQ refugees, but this does not mean they fear everyone in the community. I hear stories of neighbours sharing food and resources, including a time when local women provided support to wrongfully incarcerated LGBTQ refugees. Such encounters do not happen every day, nor do they excuse the discriminatory behaviours of others in the community, but they do trouble assumptions about who is welcome within urban spaces and how support networks emerge.

Paying attention to where people stay and the type of housing they occupy is critical. Most of the LGBTQ safehouses are clustered in one part of Nairobi, but there are others scattered across the city. The fact that LGBTQ refugees live in different

areas is alluded to but generally disregarded in the literature. The result is Nairobi being depicted as a homogenous entity, with little regard for its social and spatial variations. It also means that everyday negotiations over access, visibility, navigation and belonging go unrecognised. What makes LGBTQ refugees choose one area over another? Why might certain safehouses opt to be geographically and socially isolated from their counterparts? What pushes some LGBTQ refugees to live alone or in small groups? What happens to those who live outside of Nairobi or who are homeless? How do police raids and community scrutiny shape LGBTQ refugees' experiences of domestic spaces? Are the risks and opportunities the same in every area? My research suggests that LGBTQ refugees make decisions about where and how they stay based on numerous factors, including livelihood opportunities, familiarity with the area, proximity to support structures and lifestyle needs. These decisions are constrained by social, economic and legal forces, and they often come with unexpected consequences, but they are decisions nonetheless.

A Way Forward

It needs to be remembered that the Global South hosts the 'vast majority of the world's queer refugees, many of whom remain undocumented' (Lewis and Naples 2014: 916). This reality is unlikely to change, given the current state of global migration politics and the scaling down of resettlement programmes. Pivoting attention towards these Global South locations is crucial if scholars are to better understand and respond to the needs of LGBTQ refugees. Concurrently, the scope of research must be broadened to accommodate the vast experiences, movements, strategies, networks, practices and aspirations that constitute queer and trans displacement in Africa. One way this can be achieved is by embracing interdisciplinary approaches.

My time with Star provides a useful entry point for rethinking how LGBTQ refugees move through urban location (i.e. city streets) and how they experience particular spatial arrangements (i.e. safehouses), but these are just two of the many places that LGBTQ refugees occupy. This raises serious questions. Is it possible to write about Nairobi in a way that acknowledges multifaceted and potentially contradictory experiences? Can one foreground Star's struggles, including her encounters with state violence, without diminishing other aspects of her life? Does her pleasure at visiting nightclubs and dancing to disco beats reveal something about how LGBTQ refugees adapt their bodies in different spaces or how they express solidarity, love and care? Do queer spaces serve the same purpose for refugees as they do for host populations or international visitors?

Future research can move in infinite directions, exploring not just different spatial configurations but also how everyday interactions shape community attitudes and behaviours. What does it mean for LGBTQ refugees to attend places of worship? How might LGBTQ refugees' sexual practices transform ostensibly heterosexual spaces? Do cross-border movements disrupt or enrich local activism? What opportunities arise from LGBTQ refugees' participation in local economies? How do online activities affect LGBTQ refugees' experiences of physical spaces?

It is impossible to comprehensively analyse Star's experiences or compare them with those of other participants in this short commentary. Rather than make grand claims about the social and spatial politics of Nairobi, I hope my reflections encourage other scholars to consider the full range of experiences that constitute LGBTQ refugee lives, wherever their research is located. What happens at the macro scale obviously influences what happens at the micro and meso scales, but oppressive laws, security architecture and government corruption do not mean that everyday spaces are persecutory by default.

I am certainly not advocating for research that disregards political, institutional and contextual factors or that overplays the positive aspects of participants' lives. There is always a danger that work like mine is misinterpreted as suggesting the situation in Kenya (or elsewhere) is not that bad. This is not my intention, nor would it be an accurate representation of my fieldwork data. What an appreciation of the micro and meso scales can achieve is a more nuanced reading of the drivers, practices and impacts of social exclusion. This is vital considering that LGBTQ refugees are likely to remain in Global South locations for longer and longer periods, if not indefinitely.

At the same time, scholars working in other fields would benefit from closer engagement with queer and trans migration studies. Human geography and urban studies are already interested in how conditions of displacement, asylum, bordering and transnationalism shape the production of space but often shy away from discussing the sensory, affective and embodied dimensions of such processes. Research on survival economies and migration governance can help make sense of Star's experiences, but so too can work on LGBTQ refugees expand theorisations of desire, endurance, sensuality, identity and belonging within urban environments. Cities like Nairobi remain sites of violence and insecurity, but they also offer possibilities for life, even if these possibilities are constrained and fractured. Including the micro and meso scales in our analyses can generate fresh perspectives and remind us that LGBTQ refugees are reshaping their social and spatial realities.

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