

# Un/doing 'business' in Cape Town: Narratives of gender queer sex workers

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs)**Phoebe Kisubi Mbasalaki** 

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## Abstract

'Business' is the going professional terminology for sex work in South Africa. Often times it also doubles as a covert term due to the criminalised nature of sex work, on judicial and moral grounds, in South Africa. Yet sex work is a livelihood for bodies that have been placed outside the margins of the mainstream political economy; such bodies reside along margins of differentiation of race, gender, class and sexuality, produced through histories of disposition rooted in colonisation and apartheid in South Africa. Although this is a predominantly heterosexual and cis-gendered industry, what then does it mean to 'do business' for gender queer sex workers? How do they navigate a heavily heterosexist and violent political economy that alienates African-ness from same-sex/gender intimacies, and does not foreground sexual pleasure? This article will centre the narratives and lived experiences of gender queer sex workers in Cape Town, based on an ethnography with sex workers carried out over a period of three and a half years. Working within the framework of performance as research – a curatorial methodology and praxis – I will offer some insight on gender queer sex workers as bodies out of place. I argue street-based sex workers' narratives proliferate as a cascade of space invaders by 'un/doing business' both within a heavily criminalised, heterosexist frame and political economy in Cape Town, to contribute to the GDP as well as centre sexual pleasure. In addition, the curatorial praxis deployed as a cascade of space invasion works towards humanising sex workers by foregrounding their everyday lives as well as contributing to the collective agenda of decriminalisation and destigmatisation of sex work in South Africa.

## Keywords

Intersectionality, queer, sex work, South Africa, space invaders

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## **Introduction: a cascade of space invaders**

I do a couple of guest teaching sessions in the Department of Law, on their MA in Human Rights programme. My two classes on the course focus on the limits of human rights within the broad framework of gender and sexuality, in which I centre sex workers, among others. One of the slides I projected in class in Spring 2023 had information on the overall revenue and contributions of the sex industry to the global economy and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The statistics presented were from a policy brief written by the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, a coalition network that globally champions the rights of sex workers and is led by sex workers. In this policy brief, they present how:

Sex work is first and foremost an income-generating activity. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that sex workers support between five and eight other people with their earnings. Sex workers also contribute to the economy. In four countries surveyed, ILO found that the sex industry provides between 2 and 14 percent of gross domestic product. In Thailand, for example, the sex industry generated about US\$6.4 billion in 2015, a figure which accounted for 10 percent of Thailand's GDP. Thai sex workers send an annual average of US\$300 million to family members who reside in more rural areas of Thailand. Additionally, while 65 percent of sex industry workers are sex workers, the industry also generates employment for auxiliary cleaning, security and driving services. (Global Network for Sex Work Projects [GNSWP], 2019)

There was a gasp and disbelief from the group of students and a lot of murmuring. When I inquired what the murmur was about, the general contention was around the sex industry being painted within the frameworks of 'business' and 'profits', given that it is, after all, about sex – supposedly an intimate bodily encounter that cannot possibly be placed within the same frame as business or global economic gains or GDP for that matter. This was not the first time I got such a reaction to this particular slide; I had similar experiences in guest lectures elsewhere when that particular slide was shown. The alienation of sex work from formal economic frameworks or gains within GDP is clear. Sex, an intimate carnal bodily act that is purportedly private and associated with two (or more) people who are in love, well acquainted or mutually agreeable, is nonetheless intimate. Yet, the fact that it is capable of feeding multitudes of people and contributing to national economies brings a level of uneasiness to it. As recognised in the 'murmurs' alluded to in my classroom, among other spaces.

There are several layers embedded within this uneasiness and discomfort or murmurs as witnessed in my classrooms. I could pick up that what lay behind these murmurs was a kind of questioning: how can sex work contribute to a national economy or GDP? These murmurs signal a deauthorizing of respectability towards sex work as a form of self-investment, socioeconomic ascension and pleasure (Glover and Glover, 2019). Indeed, this kind of deauthorisation signals space invasion (Puwar, 2004) by those who are not the imagined bodies taking up spaces such as 'the body as business' or sex work contributing to the GDP of a given nation. After all, the sex workers I was talking about were street-based sex workers relegated to the margins of society, who therefore couldn't possibly be placed within the same frame or sentence as GDP. They are certainly not the imagined somatic norm nor perceived occupants of spaces which are contributing to the

GDP. As indicated by the murmurs in my class, sex workers are a mistaken identity – as Puwar articulates – metaphorical ‘bodies out of place’ in not only contributing to the GDP but also public conversations or discussions that speak about them doing so outside of activist and ally spaces.

These ‘bodies out of place’ become even more glaringly obvious in a context like South Africa, where street-based sex workers are one of the most marginalised communities. Even though South Africa is said to have one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, sex work remains criminalised and stigmatised with experiences of high levels of violence. Criminalisation is based on the rather dated South Africa’s Sexual Offences Act (Act 23, 1957), which makes it illegal to exchange sex for financial reward. According to Gould and Fick (2008), this Act criminalises any activities related to the sale of sex, including living off the earnings of selling sex, persuading someone to become a sex worker, or keeping a brothel. This judicial criminalisation filters into moral criminalisation through stigma, which exacerbates gendered and structural inequality for sex workers, and hence has major implications for their wellbeing. Statistics shows that sex workers globally bear the brunt of physical and structural violence. The Institute for Security Studies commissioned research, which sheds some light on the lives of street-based sex workers in Cape Town. This study found out that street-based sex workers experience various forms of physical abuse, violence and corruption at the hands of police: ‘47% of street-based sex workers had been threatened with violence by police, 12% had been raped by police officers and 28% had been asked for sex by policemen in exchange for release from custody’ (Gould and Fick, 2008: 6). The experiences of sex workers are those of marginal and dehumanised lives in South Africa. Street-based sex workers in South Africa lack access to opportunities and numerous spaces of privilege along the lines of race, class, gender and sexuality. Against this backdrop of criminalisation and stigmatisation, they are ‘bodies out of place’ in contributing to the GDP or part of discussions relating to national economic issues for that matter.

Puwar (2004) in her ground-breaking book on ‘space invaders’ asks a crucial question, ‘what happens when those embodied differently come to occupy spaces rarely occupied by them?’ (p.141). In a context like South Africa where capital and privilege accrued through 450 years of colonisation and apartheid rests within whiteness in its intersection with cis-gendered and heteronormative masculinities. When we add Puwar’s framing to this calculus, these are the natural occupants of the national economy, primarily through the prisms of contributing to South African GDP, a point emphasised by a recent Oxfam report. Oxfam South Africa (2020) reported that the richest 20 percent of people in South Africa control almost 70 percent of the resources. This report further points out that the economy is governed by a handful of companies that were founded in the colonial and apartheid eras, and continue to benefit from their stronghold during those eras as well as government assistance. In other words, the biggest share of income in South Africa is still allotted to the white minority.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Puwar’s notion, they are the somatic norms and obvious contributors to the GDP. They are the natural occupants of big companies – mines and other cooperations – that supposedly service the nation. GDP is an indicator of the national ‘health’ of the economy of a given country, whether it is doing well or not. Within this paradigm, Sex workers are therefore space invaders to national economic contributions such as the GDP in South Africa, and

especially more so because sex work is both criminalised and stigmatised. However, the terms of co-existence relegate them to the informal economy, without labour rights and protection as well as positioning them in closer high proximity to violence and death.

The informal economy in South Africa is predominantly occupied by people of colour. Informality or the informal economy in this case is a direct opposite to formality and is comprised of economic activities that are not officially regulated, enforced or registered by the state (Boels, 2016; Chen et al., 2001; Dell'Anno, 2003; Dobovsek, 2009; Henry and Sills, 2006; Lippens and Ponsaers, 2006). When we home in on the South African context, the Africa Forbes Insights report (Africa Forbes Insights and Mastercard, 2023) highlights how the informal sector accommodates marginalised communities such as women, youth and the previously disadvantaged. It is therefore not white men taking up this informal space but persons of colour. And indeed, the majority of street-based sex workers are persons of colour. But even within the informal economic domain, sex workers are on the margins and certainly far from the centre of this economy. Sex workers are therefore space invaders in this space, especially given the fact that sex work is criminalised and stigmatised. From a stigmatised or respectability angle, Glover and Glover (2019) argue that 'respectability undergirds such an assumption by denigrating sex work as an illegitimate work form to which no self-respecting Black woman [or any other person for that matter] would aspire' (p.171). By implying that sex work is a 'forced choice' of sorts, this further emphasising that sex workers are space invaders in delegitimising the moral order or respectability in their assertion that sex work is legitimate work. Glover and Glover further add that 'respectability's appeal to hegemonic notions of decorum and propriety necessarily casts sex work as incapable of enhancing racial uplift or facilitating socioeconomic ascension' (p.172) and therefore, affirming that sex workers are space invaders in navigating oppression and liberation, violence and pleasure, victimhood and agency that goes with the sex industry (Smith et al., 2015). If we are to home in on gender queer sex work, the somatic norm within this framework is cis-heteronormative female sex workers with male clients, and not necessarily lesbian or gender queer women doing sex work with other women. Here queer women, as 'bodies out of place', who do sex work expose, interrogate and disrupt the heteronormative gender logics that underpin academic and policy debates about commercial sex (Smith et al., 2015).

What I am trying to frame here is a cascade of sorts. Drawing on Puwar's (2004) conceptualisation, I would like to propose a cascade of space invaders/invasions; a cascade in a sense that the invasion occurs in a series or succession of stages so that each stage derives from or acts upon the product of the preceding. A sort of ripple effect moves as a forceful undercurrent between several spaces yet causes shifts and discomforts within their imagined privilege. It takes on various forms, such as a slow undercurrent but at times with forceful militancy. There is, therefore, a level of interconnectedness that builds up from micro effects to macro level. This ontologically starts off at the micro level with the 'body as business' and then moves through to informal economy which subsequently leads to a sizable collective contribution to GDP in the first instance. Moving on, this cascade of space invasions disrupts heteronormativity in sex work and then religion to focus on sexual pleasure, ending up in the public domain of creative activism.

Drawing on the globalgrace research project, I centre narratives of sex workers, who were part of collaborative research with the African Gender Institute, the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town as well as the NGO SWEAT (the sex workers advocacy and education task force) in Cape Town, as part of the global gender and cultures of in/equalities project.<sup>2</sup> GlobalGRACE (2018) employed arts-based practices and curatorial research to investigate the production of cultures of equality and enable gender-positive approaches to wellbeing internationally. Our chosen methodology was participatory theatre and performance as a means of exploring gendered, sexed, racialised and classed inequalities among sex workers in Cape Town in collaboration with a group of street-based sex workers. We deployed performance as research (PaR), as the main methodological approach. PaR views practice and academic research as inherently interrelated. Lewis and Tulk (2016) posit that ‘research and practice is in radical positioning: where knowledge formed through the material process of performance can be valued as equivalent and knowledge produced through speculative and analytical modes (1)’. Indeed, PaR troubles the boundaries between method and methodology as well as knowledge production. Knowledge production is through several registers, such as academic and non-academic – including creative activism and embodied knowledges.

We worked with a group of eight street-based sex workers, as part of the Sex Workers’ Theatre Group (SW Theatre SA), who gave written consent for their narratives to be written about, filmed, or shared through other artistic means.<sup>3</sup> The SW Theatre SA comprised of a diverse group of 8 members who were trans, (gender) queer and cis-hetero. The group is mostly made up of participants from South Africa and migrants from Zimbabwe. We worked with the same group over a period of three and a half years, with almost weekly encounters. The training of the SW Theatre SA took place between early 2019 and the end of 2021 based on theatre workshops that solicited and framed their autobiographical narratives. These workshops were set up on different modules centred around four theatre techniques, namely: Forum Theatre, Physical Theatre, voice and spoken word, as well as live art. Each module lasted about three months and culminated in a public performance based on autobiographical narratives and lived experiences of sex workers. We launched the first sex workers theatre company at the end of the project, the first of its kind not only in South Africa, but on the continent. SW Theatre SA continue to do their work under the advocacy leg of the NGO SWEAT.

The subsequent sections will show and argue, through engaging with narratives of sex workers we worked with, a cascade of space invaders. The first cascade engages with ‘bodies out of place’ or ‘space invaders’ through the prisms of the nation state by locating the primary citizen who contributes to the GDP. It takes into account the ‘ideal citizen’ being framed by the historical roots of South Africa that have undergone several decades of colonisation and apartheid. Street-based sex workers are bodies out of place in contributing to the GDP through their own bodies as the main mode of business. By drawing on the lived experiences of the street-based sex workers we worked with in Cape Town, I locate business within the public domain through which heteronormativity is destabilised by the erotic labour services in exchange for money. The rap performed by the SW Theatre SA brings out these various dimensions which are analysed. From there, I home in on one specific life moment based on Nathan (pseudonym) who was part of SW

Theatre SA, whose autobiography formed the collection of stories performed during the very first public performance done by SW Theatre SA in Cape Town in May 2019. This particular life story brings to the fore another cascade of space invasion for both sex work and religion – in particular Islam – in centring non-heteronormative erotic labour that privileges sexual pleasure.

### **'I am a sex worker; my body is my business!!!'**

The title of this section comes from a rap devised and performed by members of the SW Theatre SA in Cape Town introduced in the previous section. This rap was performed numerous times during public performances by the group but also features in the short documentary made about the project 'when they see us'.<sup>4</sup> The commonly performed rap goes as follows:

*I am a sex worker (I am a sex worker), I live my own life (I live my own life) my body is my business (my body is my business), my body is my job (my body is my service) my hands, my mouth, my penis and my ass, (ooooohhhh), I love it AND I respect it AND I own it! (SW Theatre SA)*

This rap makes reference to various ways within which the 'body is business', i.e. how the body can perform sex for sale or sex as labour – erotic labour. 'Doing business' is the going term for sex work, a common terminology among sex workers in South Africa. The mainstream connotations of 'doing business' are usually two people or companies doing business with each other, selling goods or services to each other. It means having a presence in a state for the purpose of jurisdiction for legal matters and a connection to tax purposes. This is therefore entirely in the public domain, which is the somatic norm. Yet in this case, sex, an intimate act that is normally relegated to the private domain, becomes a transactable 'public' service which is not implied in any way or left to one to 'read in between the lines'. But rather, there is a clear negotiation of fee to be paid as well as what sort of service is being solicited (e.g. a hand job, blowjob etc.). An exchange of sorts, negotiation of sex in return for payment is made, such as the explicit purchase of sex outside the confines of a relationship (Crankshaw and Freedman, 2023; Elmes et al., 2017; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; McMillan et al., 2018). For the street-based sex workers we worked with, the going fee was minimum R50-upwards (for the homeless sex workers, this dropped down to as low as R10/R5). This public transaction therefore cements sex work as partaking in sexual or erotic labour, where those who participate in it defy normative conceptions of female/masculine sexuality of femininity or masculinity, and threaten to destabilise heteronormativity, which determines the social ordering of sexual acts (Pheterson, 1993; Simpson and Smith, 2021) and such sex work acts to destabilise the privilege of private aspects of intimacy within heteronormativity to become a public good. The feminist 'sex wars' in the 1980s highlighted this, when non-liberal feminists located sex work within violence and exploitation and could not possibly view it as having any 'empowering' aspects to it. The core assertion from the sex wars points to abolitionist feminism who argue that sex work is an act of violence, and that no one can ever consensually decide to engage in sex work (Barry, 1979,

1995; Dworkin, 1981, 1985, 1993; Jeffreys, 1997, 2010). Abolitionist feminists theorise that because of the inherently patriarchal structure of society in which women are not equal to men, they are forced into sex work because they do not have economic alternatives (Sloan and Wahab, 2000: 461). Yet this degrading and dehumanising language about sex work in feminist discourse contributes to further violence against the community. Granted, sex work is precarious and in close proximity to violence, death and criminalisation. But that is not the entire story, as the rap above stipulates. Sex work indeed sits within the complex dynamic which on the one hand, can offer an income and feed a household or pay bills while on the other, all forms of violence and death are always imminent due to stigma and criminalisation that dehumanises sex workers. Within this complex dynamic, street-based sex workers in South Africa mobilise their embodied knowledge, as Glover and Glover (2019) argue in the case of the US, in order to navigate safety and earn a (tax free) income.

Despite these dehumanising experiences, there are indeed aspects of agency within this dominant frame as expressed by the rap above, such as respect and owning it. Without a doubt, this complex dynamic is marred within vast elements of structural inequalities and constraints as stipulated above. The human condition of many South Africans of colour is entangled within vast inequalities and abject poverty. If we are to bring out specifics of agency through lived experiences, several of the sex workers we worked with did not have much choice in terms of work, other than sex work, with a couple choosing sex work as opposed to domestic work or a cleaning job. So, in a context like South Africa, that has remnants of 450 years of colonisation and apartheid rooted in white capital privilege that is still very much present, agency becomes questionable, or even a violent imposition by liberal feminists or neoliberal NGOs. However, for a few of sex workers we worked with, granted the frame of choice is limited but even within this, sex work offered flexibility in working hours and often times, they earned more than would have in a cleaning job. Within this complex dynamic of navigating safety, street-based sex workers engage in acts of self-investment by leveraging their embodied knowledge in a manner often illegible to individuals who do not occupy similar or adjacent subject positions by deploying strategies of self-investment that reveal how sex workers thrive despite existing in a hostile world unconcerned with their survival (Glover and Glover, 2019). This becomes a destabilisation or a cascade of ‘invasion(s)’ by sex workers in this dominant and heteronormative ‘space’ that is located within the private sphere and bound to intimacy of sorts, in addition to choosing sex work over other jobs such cleaning as well as navigating the streets and safety. Where proximity to violence and death is high for street-based sex workers in South Africa, it is facilitated by intersections of moral and judicial criminalisation that give violence legitimacy.

Moreover, as subsequent arguments will show, the ‘body as business’ within the confines of criminality and violence is a form of resistance to relegation to the margins of society, where sex workers position their bodies as a means to earn, eat or pay children’s tuition to dignify what has been undignified by structural conditions of race, class, gender and sexuality in South Africa. Sex workers are certainly not the epitome nor the ‘natural occupants’ of heteronormativity when framed within sexual acts and by extension sexual pleasure. The invasion here is on two registers, first and foremost, the majority of sex workers service heterosexual clients, making queer sex work invaders of this

predominantly heteronormative erotic labour workspace. And second, heteronormative sexual acts or pleasure is preserved ideally for a heterosexual couple, oftentimes married and 'revered' in the confines of 'their bedroom'. This in a way drives the moral order imposed on sex work, meaning sex work falls outside the order of the 'heteronormative' sex or sexual pleasure expectation. In other words, heteronormative sex or pleasure shouldn't be tainted by the 'immorality' of selling the body for sex. The transaction of selling the body for sex i.e. 'the body as business' launches the cascade of sex workers as space invaders of the privileged space of heteronormativity, where they are not the somatic norms.

Second, moving on from 'my body is my business' to 'doing business' moves into a certain kind of economy – one classified within informality.<sup>5</sup> by the mere fact that sex work is criminalised and therefore fundamentally separate from formality or the state for that matter. Informality takes on the dichotomy of 'crisis' or 'heroism' (Roy, 2005). Where rapid expansion of cities especially in the global south has resulted in a crisis through hypergrowth revealed, for instance, in the form of slums while there heroically develops an 'informal economy [being] the people's spontaneous and creative response to the state's incapacity to satisfy the basic needs of the impoverished masses' (De Soto, 2000: 14). Roy (2005) articulates that this binary of crisis and heroism makes poverty a form of voyeurism, as well as failing to see how this so-called informality contributes to global economic processes, and rather proposes informality as a mode of urbanisation. Moreover, the informal economy is a major economic sector. For instance, world-wide, two billion people – more than 61 percent of the world's employed population – make their living in the informal economy, according to the ILO (2018), stressing that a transition to the formal economy is a condition to realising decent work for all. So in fact, given more than half of the global economy sits within the so-called informal sector, this makes the informal economy the main mode of economy.

Given the human condition in South Africa, brought on by histories of apartheid and colonialism, economic wealth and access to opportunities primarily remain in the hands of a privileged few along the grammars of race, class, gender and sexuality. This plays out through conditions such as high levels of unemployment and economic dispossession, the majority of those who experience this being people of colour in South Africa. Sex work therefore becomes part of this vast informal economy with the tight rope of economic dispossession on one hand and a dimension of agency regarding sex work as choice for some compared to other disparaging jobs with inflexible work hours. According to Stats SA, close to 4.8 million people were employed in informal or precarious work in 2020, while in the period under review (2010-2020), the number of people in informal work increased generally, peaking in 2018 at 5.79 million. However, a significant drop of around one million people was noticed in 2020 – most likely due to COVID-19 (Africa Forbes Insights and Mastercard, 2023). This report further notes that more than 60 percent of the people who start an informal business do so because they are unemployed and have no alternative source of income. Sex workers, those who employ the body to do business in an intimate sexual act, are certainly not the somatic norms in this space of informal economies. For instance, there's no mention of the sex industry whatsoever in the abovementioned Africa Forbes Insights report. Indeed, sex workers are on the periphery if not completely invisible within frameworks of informal economies.

This is the context within which I locate the second cascade of space invaders. The moral order, in addition to criminalisation, that distances sex work as business, means sex work becomes covert, alienated from the state and therefore dislocated from the notion of business within informal economies.

Third, outside of the liberal feminist camp (and allies), the dominant discourse is that sex work is neither perceived nor considered as work and by extension, is incapable of contributing to the national economy and GDP. Indeed, that refusal to ‘see’ it as work is one the reasons why sex work is criminalised in most countries, stigmatised and performed under unsafe, exploitative and unhealthy conditions with no labour rights. How then does such an abhorred form of informal economy move into formality, a conceptualisation at which it is at odds? Here I draw on Roy (2005) who proposes against the dichotomy of formal and informal but rather suggests ‘that informality is not a separate sector but rather a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another’ (p.148). For instance, we see this in the spending of money earned through sex work, whether it is buying essentials such as food, clothing or paying rent, all legal and within the formal sector. And of course, there is the muscle of numbers, through the vast nature of the sex industry, which points to the complex continuum of legality and illegality where what is earned through sex work connects to the larger economy – a kind of ‘undoing’. And when we add the notion of somatic norms to this calculus, several questions arise: who is the somatic norm within this framework of the economy, i.e. in upholding the nation? Noting that the GDP encompasses social institutions through which society’s resources (goods and services) are managed, in other words, sustaining the nation. One imagines the formal sector in that regard, and formal companies such as Amazon, Starbucks or Google come to mind. Yet, when we draw on Roy’s arguments, sex work as a series of transactions that connect different economies becomes a contributing factor. This is a space within which the third cascade, where sex workers are not the somatic norms but space invaders. Contributing 2 to 14 percent of GDP (GNSWP, 2019), is a significant proportion – an equivalent of billions of pounds.

## Un/doing business: the tomboy hotline

*‘Good morning, you have reached the Tomboy hotline, how may I help you? Yeaaaaah. Titi, you know that you can come now . . . Okay. And you require Tomboy at? I will be there at 10 o clock, Titi, Salam molakom’* Skit by Nathan, gender queer sex worker who was part of SW Theatre SA. Skit originally performed in Afrikaans, translated by Helenard Low

Here I engage with one sketch from the very first module taught,<sup>6</sup> based on Forum Theatre or popularly known as Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed which was facilitated, and final performance directed by, a specialist practitioner in the field, Delia Mayer. The training took place from April to August 2019. The first public performance that resulted from this training, entitled ‘*Ntado Yam: My choice*’, was performed at our resident theatre – Theatre Arts in Observatory<sup>7</sup> in August 2019. The scripting of the play happened after the first performance and was scripted as a WhatsApp soapie (see Gunaratnam et al., 2024).

The skit I open with here was part of *Ntado Yam: My Choice*, both a performance and WhatsApp Soapie. This skit is/was part of Nathan's (pseudonym) life narrative.<sup>8</sup> Nathan is in their late thirties (39 at the time of writing this). She is a mother of 4. She was born in a 'coloured' neighbourhood, in the Western Cape. Nathan was sexually and physically abused at home and school, resulting in her running away from home at the age of 12 and ended up living on the streets. She has been living on the streets since then. When they landed at the bus station at the age of 12, she was 'taken in' by a group of homeless people and was quickly inducted into sex work as a mode of earning. Sex work has since become her main form of livelihood. Nathan is gender queer, shifting between masculinity and femininity, but mostly expresses a masculine gender. Although she refers to herself as a mother, they often express their desire to have a wife and tell loving stories of being an uncle. In the short skit at the opening of this section, we see Nathan picking up a call asking for a 'tom boy' – where her main clients were women from the Muslim community, often married with children. Through word of mouth, the community/group of women got to know her as a Tomboy who does business/sex work with women: a very small community of clientele but nonetheless, significant in destabilising gender, sexual desire and religion. She also services men who have a tomboy fetish (such as a sex worker with a female masculinity dressed in masculine clothing with feminine heels) as well as doing all kinds of sex work.

Of course, the 'tomboy hotline' goes on covertly, but even within that, there is an undoing going on through various registers – another cascade of space invasions or space invaders. First and foremost, there is the heterosexual imposition within sex work. If we home in on gender and sexuality, the business as usual or norm in South Africa is heterosexuality. When we unpack this through the prisms of the 'modern/colonial gender system' (Lugones, 2007), this 'modern/colonial gender system' deploys gender (and race in its entanglement with capitalism) as an organising principle within which social realities in post-colonial and post-apartheid South Africa exist, resulting in the privileging of heterosexuality and a rigid gender binary. This is evidenced in its symptomatic manifestations through high levels of violence and the deaths of those who dare to challenge the imposed mode of existence that dictates which bodies are permitted to produce a masculine or feminine gender (Mbasalaki, 2020). Indeed, María Lugones (2007) warned us that 'the dark side of the gender system was and is thoroughly violent' (p.206). This mode of 'knowing' and 'being' can be traced back to the draconian social and judicial policing of sexuality, which was fundamental to the apartheid project, playing within the colonial imagination of African sexuality as synonymous with heterosexuality (Epprecht, 2008; Lewis, 2011; Mbasalaki, 2020). This imagination is firmly prevalent in most South Africa social spaces in which Nathan partakes in sex work. Many of these social spaces, such as suburbia and townships<sup>9</sup> were a result of apartheid segregation laws, and over time, these spaces evolved into a predominantly heterosexual space in which Black queer histories and experiences exist at the margins and remain invisible. This heterosexual dominance is evidenced by the overwhelming trope that positions same sex/gender intimacies as 'un-African' (Mbasalaki, 2020). South Africa has therefore constructed a certain kind of Blackness, one that is almost exclusively heterosexual. This translates into everyday encounters of heterosexism,<sup>10</sup> unemployment, food insecurity, rape, violence and death (Mbasalaki, 2020).

Therefore, queer sex workers like Nathan in South Africa find meaningful ways to exist and belong, as they assert their same-sex/gender/queer desires and masculine gender – thereby disrupting the ‘business as usual’ of heterosexuality. In essence, they are beginning to space invade and undo the colonial legacy that has prescribed heterosexuality as the main mode of existence, towards a diversification of desires beyond the gender and heterosexual binary, as an undoing of the alienation of same sex/gender lived realities as un-African, and where the somatic norm is located within whiteness, in other words, whiteness as emblematic of queerness. This racial analysis reveals who is and has historically been emboldened within the framework of queerness, through the ‘racialization of the queer body as White and the sexualization of the Black body as “straight”’ (Livermon, 2012: 302). But in this case, we see a locating of African-ness and queerness within the same frame, in co-existence.

When we zoom in on Nathan’s narrative, this cascade of space invasion addresses the second undoing within Muslim coloured communities. Cape Town has a significant Muslim community, known to be historically militant and central to the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. The framing of gender, as discussed above, takes on a rigid binary framed within heterosexuality that devalues sexual pleasure, especially as it relates to women. In Nathan’s skit and lived experience, we see multiple crossings of space invasions, where queer female sex work inserts itself within the domain of sex work as the norm is mostly male same sex/gender sex work. And second, the small Muslim community she serviced may or may not self-identify as lesbian, but what is important is centralising sexual desire and pleasure through soliciting of Nathan’s services. Moreover, these were married Muslim women. So, the multiple layers of crossings do not only speak to rigid notions and understanding of heteronormativity but also the moral order that alienates women from sexual pleasure as well as engaging in sex outside of marriage. Where politics of respectability of a ‘good woman’ or ‘good Muslim woman’ devalue sexual pleasure and hinder extramarital affairs. The social sanctions that go with crossing these borders of respectability publicly are immense. But even though this takes place covertly, the tomboy hotline shatters through several layers of privilege by invading those spaces. A true epitome of what Glover and Glover (2019) posit as ‘erotic sovereignty’ – characterised by self-rule and the pursuit of erotic pleasure and intimacy – an ongoing ontological process through which racialised sexuality is mobilised to ‘assert complex subjecthood, inside of the overwhelming constraints of social stigma, stereotype, structural inequality, policing, divestment, segregation, and exploitation under the neoliberal state’ (p.173). If we translate this to Nathan’s skit and narrative, ‘erotic sovereignty’ crosses multiple structural borders along heteronormativity, religion, stigma, criminalisation, homelessness, politics of respectability to centre sexual pleasure.

Third, we see the cascade of space invaders through the mode of creative activism. The skit offers a transition from a private or covert arena into the public sphere. It was after all, a public performance that was both witnessed by the audience and lives on, as a WhatsApp soapie as well as on YouTube via SW Theatre SA channel. There is a space invasion or an undoing that takes place through performance, which opens up space for audience members to participate in a process of co-meaning making, where such a process opens up possibilities for the audience’s agency in and over the experience of the

performance (Mbasalaki and Matchett, 2020). With the hope that this encounter would elicit an investment in activism on the part of the audience to unbuild the singular, criminalised and stereotypical epistemologies of sex work, same-sex/gender experiences in South Africa as well as the singular dominant heterosexual narrative (Matchett and Mbasalaki, 2020). Where new epistemologies are produced that centre gender queer sex work within Muslim communities that highlight sexual pleasure and decentre heteronormativity. This process of co-meaning making then offers moments that disrupt the (colonial) archive on gender and sexuality, albeit momentarily, where same-sex/gender experiences and African-nes are seen in the same frame, in appeasement (Mbasalaki, 2022). In other words, it is hoped that the performance would inspire conversations/discussions/dialogues/debates that move the audience to ponder on their role in the situation and how they would be able to shift it from a point of personal reflection that potentially leads to personal action (Mbasalaki and Matchett, 2020). The performance therefore becomes an aesthetic grammar and agitator for activism and change. This kind of space invasion would result in new epistemologies produced on Muslim women, sexual pleasure, female queer sex work and gender queer experiences that live on and move through the audience members. And as an undercurrent, works to unbuild stereotypes and singular narratives of street-based sex workers but rather offers more rounded and humanising narratives, which we have written about extensively elsewhere (see Matchett and Mbasalaki, 2020; Mbasalaki, 2022; Mbasalaki and Matchett, 2020). All this works towards the broader agenda for the sex workers collective of decriminalisation and destigmatisation of sex work in South Africa.

In conclusion, both sex work and gender queer sex workers proliferate as cascades of space invaders and disruptors. Through multiple layers of un/doings and disruptions of privileges that go with heteronormativity, the economy, private sexual acts, the body as business, the sex/gender binary, sexual pleasure, religion, marriage and the list goes on. These invasions do not only take on whiteness and masculinities but invade spaces of colour that are cis-heteronormative. Which means they are a force to be reckoned with, this level of invasion and undoing is a cascade that can be read as militant. It is militant because the terms of coexistence are heavily located within violence and alienation from rights or 'being human'. The terms of coexistence dehumanise through criminalisation, stigmatisation of sex work that manifests through police brutality, physical and structural violence, homelessness, economic depravity, sexual assault and death. This is why they take on a militancy and cascade of space invasion because the stakes are high, it is a matter of life and death. They are trespassers who refuse to be pushed out and claim visibility that cascades from the micro level to macro. By claiming erotic sovereignty through sexual pleasure, such as Nathan's narrative with a community of married Muslim women cascading through heteronormativity, religion, politics of respectability and stigma. To foregrounding 'the body as business' in earning an income for their livelihoods albeit informally and subsequently contributing to the GDP of South Africa. They will keep at it, with the ultimate aim of decriminalising and destigmatising sex work. They are space invaders who will keep pushing till they are recognised as somatic norms in their own right. A point where uneasiness and murmurs alluded to in the introduction will stop and sex work is recognised as work with labour rights and protection from various forms of violence.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available at <https://www.globalgrace.net/>

## Notes

1. The white minority are about 7.3 percent of the entire country population of over 59 million inhabitants.
2. The Global Gender and Cultures of Equality (GlobalGRACE, 2018) was a 51-month programme of research and capacity-strengthening funded by the UKRI's Global Challenge Research Fund (GCRF) delivered through the Arts and Humanities Research Council. GlobalGRACE employed multi-sensory artistic interventions, curatorial research practice and public exhibitions to investigate and enable gender positive approaches to wellbeing internationally, addressing two key UN global Sustainable Development Goals, Gender Equality (SDG5) and Health and Wellbeing (SDG3). Led by a team of researchers at Goldsmiths, University of London, GlobalGRACE brought together academic and non-academic partners from Bangladesh, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, South Africa and the United Kingdom as well as consultants from Europe and the United States of America, to work collaboratively on six interlinked research work packages. South Africa formed part of Work Package 1 (see [www.globalgrace.net](http://www.globalgrace.net), 2018).
3. The SW Theatre SA was formulated through a selection process by professional performance makers based at the Centre for Theatre, Dance & Performance Studies after a call for auditions was put out in February 2019. A call for auditions was circulated through SWEAT's safe spaces and outreach programmes that see a number of sex workers gathering together. The auditions took place over a period of two days and were workshopped based on various performance and theatre elements. Written consent was given by all members of the theatre group, this was re-visited and re-evaluated throughout the three and a half years of the project. Ethical approval (by a designated university review board) was granted at both University of Cape Town and Goldsmiths, University of London, both of which have their own institutional data management protection and storage policies.
4. This short film was one of the 'out-puts' from the globalgrace project and can be found here: <https://exhibition.globalgrace.net/films/sw-theatre-sa-presents-they-see-us/>
5. The ILO understands the informal economy as:

All activities that are, in law or practice, not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements; the notion of exclusion lies at the heart of these parameters – that it refers to working people who are largely excluded from the exchanges that take place in the recognized system. (Africa Forbes Insights and Mastercard, 2023)

6. There were several sketches based on moments of lived experiences from members of the SW Theatre SA but I only focus on this one particular moment/sketch in this article. The entire performance(s) from the theatre group can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9KzorX7vOI>
7. Theatre Arts is a community-based theatre, which became the resident theatre for SW Theatre SA. This was a space where both training took place as well as the public performances. Our chosen residence community theatre is the Theatre Arts (TA), which is found within the same neighbourhood as the NGO SWEAT. At the time of the project, they were both located in Observatory, Cape Town.
8. Nathan's life narrative being described here is based on autobiographies developed over the 3.5 years of the project. Nathan's narrative/autobiography like all sex workers we worked were publicly performed in various versions of public performances by the sex workers theatre group.
9. During the apartheid era, South Africa saw the implementation of a plethora of laws, mostly geared towards segregation and privileging of the white – then perceived as the 'superior' race. According to Leonard Thompson (2000), it is estimated that 3,548,900 people were removed between 1960 and 1983 (p.194). Thompson adds that the Population Registration Act (1950) was the machinery used to assign a racial category to every person.
10. I engage with everyday heterosexism, placing emphasis on heterosexism rather than prejudice or discrimination, because it captures the role of heterosexual privilege in the acts of prejudice and discrimination. It also enables a perspective on how lesbian and bisexual people internalise heterosexist thought and action.

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