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Queer Infrastructures: Objects *of* and Orientations *towards* Urban Research Practice

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Abstract
Drawing on Ahmed's seminal work on queer phenomenology, this intervention proposes the concept of "queer infrastructure". Queer infrastructure, as we deploy it, reflects both an object *of* and orientation *towards* urban research practice. As an object, we discuss the function, use, and practice of (our) queer networks, specifically for research assumed to be unrelated to studies of sexuality and located in the urban African context. Here we centre questions of becoming, affect, and relationality. As an orientation, we discuss what can be "seen" both when entering the field through queer networks and by seeing urban spaces through queerness. In doing so, we suggest that sexuality is always present in urban research, even when not explicitly so.

Keywords Queer infrastructures · Research methods · Orientations · Urban Africa

Introduction

Within urban studies in and on Africa, a growing body of important scholarship explores queer(ing) infrastructure. Among other things, this work focuses on how LGBTIQA+ people and communities construct, experience, and contest particular service delivery systems, technologies, or materially constructed spaces (Ombagi, 2019; Tucker & Hassan, 2020). From digital worlds (Prinsloo et al., 2011[1]), to political events (Scott, 2017), to bureaucratic practices (Camminga, 2019), this

[1] Also see the more recent project of B. Camminga entitled "Sovereign Clicks: African Transgender Refugees, Migrating Mediascapes, and Digital Diasporic Voices" online: https://www.ici-berlin.org/people/camminga/.

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scholarship highlights contradictions and tensions—emancipatory possibility and embroiled fixtures. Even in cities that appear to have supportive legal frameworks and social discourses, such as South African cities, such infrastructures are often caught between the legacies of racialized exclusion and a presence of enduring violent masculinity and neoliberal normalization (Bhagat, 2018; Khuzwayo, this issue; Oswin, 2005; Tucker, 2009; Visser, 2003). Equally, in cities where homosexuality is illegal, vibrant (though often liminal) queer spaces and connections are constructed between and through existing material systems (Marnell, this issue; Ombagi, 2019; Ombagi, this issue). This work, focussed on the tensions and possibilities of queer spaces and places, is vital to deepening our understanding of the relationship between sexuality and the city, in Africa and beyond (Tucker & Hassan, 2020).

As researchers of urban infrastructure, in this short intervention, we consider a methodological intervention which runs parallel to this important scholarly and activist work. Notably, neither of us explicitly addresses questions relating to queerness or sexualities within our scholarship on infrastructural technologies and networks. However, Marnell (in press) usefully argues that queer methodologies need not be exclusively in service of sexuality research. In response to this methodological invitation, this piece reflects on how queer infrastructures are both "objects" and "orientations"—to use Sara Ahmed's wording (2006)—in the work we do. We focus in particular on the queer networks that provide a scaffold for research practice, orienting our relationships with the field and shaping what is "seen" and indeed how we see it. This also reflects Ahmed's adjacent work on "use"—as these networks in fact come to be made and valued through both their affect and instrumentalization (Ahmed, 2019). This commentary is therefore organized around two intersecting themes—the first related to the queering of research networks (especially for research supposedly unrelated to sexualities and gender) and the second to how such networks offer a queering of how we "see" urban infrastructure.

This notion of queer infrastructure is informed by our research across sectors (ICT, energy, housing) and geographies (Cape Town, Nairobi, Addis Ababa). Our work sees infrastructure not just as pipes or cables, but as material, social, technical, and political assemblages—as ambivalent technologies suspended between multiple possibilities (Pollio and Cirolia, 2022). This way of seeing infrastructure—informed by an STS perspective (Akrich, 1992; Feenberg, 2002)—stretches the ontological boundaries of (the) infrastructure itself and challenges strong normative biases which form invisible undercurrents in contemporary critique. At the same time, it compels methodological innovation at the frontiers of infrastructural studies. We therefore build on Lauren Berlant's expansive definition of infrastructure as "the living mediation of what organizes life" (2016, p. 393). In practice, much of our capacity to do research depends precisely on this "being in a world-sustaining relation" (ibid.: from informal networks of access that support our data-gathering and writing processes, to friendly safety nets, shared tacit knowledge and webs of word-of-mouth knowledge in cities where being queer (and safe) requires additional levels of carefulness. After all, as Ahmed (2006) reminds us, our (sexual) orientations matter to *how* we inhabit the world, but also to *with whom* we do so.

As both object and orientation, the queer infrastructure that we describe and reflect on is, intentionally, only that which we know, use, and value as urban researchers engaged in the study of infrastructural systems and practices in African cities. Within this we recognize that our positions matter. Our whiteness matters. Our not being from/of many of the places where we work matters. Our gendering, genderedness, and cisness matter not only to how we see the research worlds we inhabit—but to how we are seen in these worlds. We are aware that our working lives can be easily reduced to an inner circle of global circulators, whose bodies receive a unique type of a geographical generosity and permissiveness. This reading usefully illuminates the exclusivity which often provides substance to our queer networks. Extended further, as Macharia (2016) notes, many well-cited queer researchers who have charted their careers working on African sexualities have deployed a neo-colonial gaze intent on taxonomizing experiences and practices from the outside.[2] Recognizing this frontierist fetishism, our queer experience may be illuminating, while not at all universal.

With these caveats in mind, we suggest that (our) queer infrastructures constitute one of the backbones of our methodology, the "queer craft of engagement" (Boellstorff, 2016, p. 230) that determines the gamut of possibilities framing our being in the field. Through this engagement, we have found that access, mutuality, exchange, sense-making, intimacy, and pleasure—achieved through queer research infrastructures—shape *what* we come to see and *how* we see it.[3] We scaffold these insights with Ahmed's seminal paper *Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology*, with the explicit intention of calling urban infrastructure scholars to reflect more deeply on how they are oriented to their subject matter: what exposing orientations expose about processes and insights, what sorts of blind spots and omissions this engenders, and—finally—how explicit conversations about queering infrastructure might create imaginative pathways for urban research.

Starting Points

Our orientations, writes Ahmed, "are about starting points" (2006, p. 545). Put differently, our access to the world is always shaped by what is near or within reach. Despite this being both a phenomenological argument about knowledge and a very pragmatic one, rarely are the practicalities of "starting points" discussed in social sciences work. In urban research about infrastructure and governance, for example, one often reads about the number of interviews, the policy documents, and the field sites that inform a paper's contention. This is not dissimilar to what Macharia (2016)

[2] As these scholars are already well cited, we have chosen to focus on citing scholars with whom we find political resonance. We encourage readers to focus on reading the work of scholars who promote more progressive and imaginative frameworks.

[3] In preparing this piece, we drew insights from our own experience. We triangulated these insights through discussions and debates with colleagues and friends who form part of this network. Importantly, this network is not made up exclusively (or even mostly) of academics.

describes as the "logic of the ledger" within social science studies. Pieces of information are treated as givens—data, in the etymological sense. How interviewees, documents, and places *become* accessible in the first instance remains ordinarily unspoken (Ahmed, 2019).

In truth, because of this usual unspokenness, we do not know how our "straight" colleagues orient themselves and construct access to so-called data, in doing the same kind of work as we do. It is possible that many of them use intersectional networks that we cannot see or understand and that these entry points open insights we cannot see or imagine.[4] What we do know is that our access is time and again mediated by a growing queer infrastructure—a loose network of people, places, and collectives that acts as entry points: to the informants, the papers, the archives, and the sites of our research. We differentiate—as we would—between the network and the infrastructure in that the network is one of the modes of existence of infrastructure, one that explicitly centres the connections and relationships between its singular particles. Infrastructure, in this sense, encompasses more: it includes the fixities and fluidities which become embedded in place, space, and time. It is a network becoming more than the sum of its parts.

This queer infrastructure is not predominantly built around academics we encounter (although there are lots of queer academics working in urban studies who also tend towards each other and whom we mostly adore) nor does it centre on spaces which are explicitly queer. From talk show hosts to gym instructors, activists, and content creators, the network includes a mix of people and spaces that are at once local and global, exist across global south–global north divides, operate both inside and outside the academy, and transcend many common binaries within LGBTIQA+ networks, for example, between gay and lesbian people. In the simplest form, as narrated in the diary entry below, it is often a single queer person who orients how we find our feet in a new city—or how we reconnoitre the empirical ground of a new research project.

> In a city in southern Africa, I am sitting on a velvet-upholstered armchair in a hotel bar reminiscent of a colonial museum, awaiting Ace[5], the close friend and business partner of a Cape Town-based colleague, who, over the years, has also become my friend. I have already Googled Ace – he is involved in entertainment and imports South African wine for local bottling and regional distribution. As he appears, backdropped by torrential rain and dazzling with the excited energy of someone who enjoys meeting strangers, I know that he will be the one who helps me connect the dots, scribe the wiggles and balance the wobbles during my time in this city and beyond. From hunting down lost PCR tests to meeting his father – a lifelong civil servant and astute city planner – Ace shared with me the joys, frustrations and networks that animate life in this African city (Author's field notes, 2022).

[4] We know, for example, that some Chinese scholars working in African cities have dense networks on which they draw, offering them mediated access and engendering specific insights.

[5] Pseudonyms used throughout the piece, for obvious reasons.

A single contact often becomes the thread leading towards a much bigger world—a set of connections which might appear completely casual, but in fact holds within it a particular logic. Some social scientists refer to this practice as "snowballing" and turn up their noses at the evident sampling bias of this recruitment technique. We see it differently, more as a road map bringing us to our field(s) and our field(s) to us. When recounting the encounter described in the field notes above to another queer colleague weeks later, it was met with laughter: "as long as I can find one or two gays in a city, I can find my way".

Functions of Queer Infrastructure

One of the compelling points made by Ahmed's paper (2006) concerns the way in which the functionality of the object—its use and purpose—is fundamental to the way we understand and name it. An object that is brought into our view is also brought within the context of its place, and its uses, in both our own lives and wider social worlds.

So, what do we make of the function and purpose of queer infrastructure? In this commentary, we narrow queer infrastructure to its function as a specific object within urban research on areas decidedly unrelated to questions of sexuality or queerness. This contrasts with the use of similar sorts of queer networks to research urban spaces (such as gay or lesbian bars) and practices (such as sex work) that are more often considered to be related to sexuality studies and activism. This specificity, we think, lies in the fact that the majority of our time spent in the field is spent in places where queerness is unacknowledged—both in the subject matter (e.g. the policies, plans, material systems, algorithms) we are researching and in us as researchers in the space. As mentioned earlier, the settings of our research are never openly queer. In these spaces, we engage bureaucrats at flailing utilities, investors driving smart city projects, entrepreneurs imagining decentralized digital platforms, and community representatives concerned with all manner of municipal service provision. We will return later to consider what this means for how we *see* these spaces.

The implications of the function of this network are that it provides a respite from the work and also a different *way to work*. It means that, while queerness does not need to be explicit to operate as an orientation, the choice of disclosure to the people with whom we work is always around the corner (of course, for cis- people—like us—this is particular). It might seem that in such places, the fact of queerness would not come up or even be relevant; but it does, all the time—at events, on long bus rides, over lunches between meetings, probing questions about partnership and lifestyle which would require outright lies or dialogical stealth. Our research politics and practice demand that we show up in research partnerships as ourselves, in order to—as much as possible—humanize our peers and colleagues. However, there remains much to lose in those awkward moments of stunned silence and confusion.

These risks and losses exist equally (though not uniformly) for all those who find themselves outside of conventional family structures (such as single women older than 30, many of whom have fought harder than we can imagine to justify their wholeness). We are perpetually asked to consider whether unsettling what is

assumed to be the "right order" is something for which there is sufficient energy and in which the risks and losses can be managed or absorbed. At the same time, queerness begets ironic privileges: having a queer family structure affords us a degree of mobility, socially and geographically, that more traditional arrangements may not. We, therefore, find ourselves in a contradiction, in the degree to which we can be in and with the fields we work while being both enabled and circumscribed. Our way finding, by extension, is replete with unsaid pathways and mysterious stories of encounter.

Infrastructural Becoming

Returning to the object itself: in reflecting on the making—or becoming—of queer orientations, Ahmed (2006) reminds us that queerness itself is something that is always shifting—made not through a stiff act or essential trait, but through repetition and time. The same is true, urban scholars would say, for infrastructure more generally and the practices of maintenance which sustain its function (Baptista, 2019): that it is always in the making—coming into effect and given affect through practices of maintenance and care, accounting, and speculation. In this sense, both the object and the orientation of queer infrastructure can be best seen in the practices and performances that develop, sustain, and fragment—as well as make visible and invisible (Ombagi, 2019)—the lattice of connections and movements.

In the case of our queer networks, these practices are many. They involve ongoing work to ensure that connections are made and energized. WhatsApp messages to people around the world at odd hours and intervals; meetings in places deemed to be safe; engagement with a level of intimacy often reserved for friends (rather than colleagues). Information shared not only about professional life, but about mental health challenges, relationship dynamics with intimate partners, deep insecurities faced in the workplace, anger at things both petty and consequential... A becoming forged between the personal, the political and the professional.

Queerness, after all, is about constant seepage, the blurring of the categories, and the geographies that shape our experiences. In practice, this means that being queer and using queer networks for our urban research softens the boundaries between researcher and informant, friendship and collegiality, life and the field, observation, and participation. Within this network, there are multiple sites of encounter—bars, lecture halls, event spaces, familial domains, and digital groups—all fundamental to the making of urban space and research.

Micro-worlds

Ahmed's (2006) "multiple sites of encounter"—through which (this) queer infrastructure is given meaning and substance—reflect its relationality. What urban scholars in different contexts might call "micro-worlds" (Amin, 2004) or "worlding" (Simone, 2001) can help us to imagine how networks are formed at once in and beyond place—intersecting global and local processes and creating multi-scalar

lived realities which hold currency and conviction. Core to this is also how one's own identity is given a sense of breath, complexity, pride, and supra-connectedness, all much needed to combat pervasive homophobia.

These micro-worlds of queer infrastructures do two things. The first is to create new sites of belonging—however fleeting—through which life can be lived as a researcher. This is vital in contexts where the rest of one's time and day can imply we are straightened by other orientations intent on unseeing queerness at large. They create moments of breath when being queer holds so many risks and liabilities, and in institutions that are not designed to welcome queerness (Ahmed, 2021). At the same time, these micro-worlds provide a fresh orientation towards the city itself—and towards the various urban inquiries that shape our official field sites. In other words, working on issues which have no explicit relationship to sexuality research does not mean that we "unqueer"—or "straighten"—in our orientations. It means that we see spaces differently.

By entering the field through a very particular set of potentially transgressive or marginalized experiences, blind spots come into view. There is huge value in this process. A queer orientation challenges taxonomies and binaries common to urban studies in Africa—for example, of the slum/enclave or elites/poor narrative. New entry points create space for recognition of more blurred and in-between configurations. At the same time, as queer studies begs, such a view foregrounds insights often ignored within infrastructure studies, such as those relating to pleasure or performance. For example, what is seen by attending a party where the Instagram flyer reads "queer only – no cis/het men allowed"?

> The party, shared with me by a content creator at a small research centre in Nairobi, moves locations and changes themes. Costing around 20 US dollars a ticket, it is advertised only on Instagram. This time it is an 'all white theme' and located on the 9th floor of a multi-storey plaza most known for its courtyard of Indian restaurants. I had been to the ground floor many times to eat, but never really considered what was on the other levels. Trying to find the party involved several lifts and hidden staircases: to get there we passed small legal firms, tailors, and many seemingly empty glass cubicles. Arriving at a ballroom, the aesthetic merges highschool dance and garish wedding. An undergraduate psychology student told me and my girlfriend: 'millennials are so old and out of touch'. Born in the late 1980s, I giggle at the GenZ/X rivalry. The students go on to tell us about their lives in the 'res' (short for resident halls) of their campus, how they move through the city, save money together, and feel about visiting their family homes both locally and 'up-country' (Author's notes, 2022).

Like these middle-class students' lives, this mundane floor in a regular office block is invisible—lacking the spectacular nature of spaces generally seen to be the field of urban research in Africa, such as slums or elite enclaves. Through alternative vectors of a queer urban marginality, different experiences of service delivery, infrastructural adoption, and joys and pains of everyday life are exposed and can be integrated into more whole and multiple accounts of urban experiences. In these micro-worlds, it is hardly possible to separate the researcher from

either the object of research (the network) or the orientation (towards ways of seeing the city). Moreover, it is even less possible to imagine infrastructure outside of the real and tangible services it allows people, real people with full lives, to access. In doing so, the infrastructures people require become more than a "development project", but a set of life-sustaining relations that straddle practical needs and more poetic aspirations.

Bodily Senses

In a final turn, we look at the body—a common entry point into the study of queerness and a less explored (and sometimes very problematically referenced) point of departure within contemporary urban studies. Ahmed (2006) usefully points out that in coming to see objects, the body cannot be isolated from the processes of knowing. In refusing to separate the body from these processes, one also celebrates the senses through which the object (in this case queer infrastructure) is constructed and sustained. It is here, in the centrality of sensing *with* one another that we find value, in the practice and related feeling of exploring taste, touch—music and food—feelings both pleasurable and unsettling.

The methodological implications of these seepages are numerous. First, they require reflexive carefulness, a going back and forth between our own selves, the networks, and the research field, to find validity and not just take data as given. Arguably, there is little room for this back and forth in current academic publishing. But behind the scenes, our practice entails careful consideration of the ethical and practical repercussions of being always, through queerness, a little more than researchers to the people and the places we research. Second, our queer networks demand mutuality. What do we give back, in exchange for access, in exchange for being part of queer infrastructures? This question is both political and epistemic. Producing knowledge about people we know, with whom we are friends, whom we have trained, mentored, and who in turn help, mentor, and befriend us, means that we "owe" them a debt of care that must be balanced with the demand for normative critique that academic work imposes upon us. This brings out the problematic of work itself.

Through queer networks that make work siloes leak, our research interfaces with both emotional labours and non-productive forms of leisure and rest. From government offices and corporate headquarters, our queer infrastructures often shift into clubs, bars, art spaces, music venues, hiking trails, and beach shacks. These spaces, once again, are about privilege but also survival. In a methodological sense, they call on us to reflect on how our research is always coproduced, ironically, through connections that are not strictly productive, but, as Lorde (1978) put it, affective, erotic, and joyful. These connections, Macharia writes (2016, p. 504), make it possible to "value beauty, desire, pleasure, and play, to imagine creating liveable and shareable worlds where these elements are more than simply incidental, but are, instead, foundational to how those worlds are invented, inhabited, and sustained".

A Word of Conclusion

Overall, our queer practice—supported by the queer infrastructure we make and use—creates a scaffold for undertaking research, opens up new pathways into supposedly non-queer fields and contacts, and allows us to incorporate a queer sensibility into the study of urban infrastructure. In this work, the sexuality of a city is ever present, even when we do not set out to research it—there is always some kind of "queerness" to the infrastructures we are interested in understanding.

This orientation allows us to ask important (and different) questions. For example: what (and whose) micro-worlds are being erased by contemporary urban debates? How would we want our own body or home or place of worship described by urban scholars? What sorts of insights on water or energy come to the fore when intimacy, privacy, and pleasure are foregrounded? And what sorts of queerness exist in or are created through bureaucratic and technocratic systems? Overall, this has immense value for the study of infrastructure. We hope that, by making visible the pathways we have tended towards, and the openings we believe this has engendered, both the value of a queer orientation can be celebrated and that others—who use other entry points and networks—might also feel emboldened to make visible the infrastructures upon which they rely.

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