

Chapter 51

The Partial Street: gendering the everyday life of global precarity

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The street is a space seldom fully available to women. As an ambivalent public terrain, it is a place that sustains audacious social experiments and transgressions, while also hosting gendered performativities and misogynist misdoings (Lai, 2010; Kihato, 2013; Hall, Nyamnjoh and Cirolia, 2022). In our chapter we unpack the idea of the partial street to explore what it means for women to conditionally access the everyday life of the street, and how this partiality prompts methodological and political orientations. Partiality itself conjures ideas of prejudices, preferences and incompleteness, and it is this unsettled notion of a space that is simultaneously available and unavailable, convivial and violent, prevalent and ephemeral, that we wish to engage with. We begin by drawing on an array of feminist insights on gendered and sexual inhabitations of the street across varied geographies, asking what feminist studies of street life tell us about gender, place and power. This spatial and epistemological stretch offers vitally located and varied perspectives that complicate ideas of publicness (Giha, Neti and Lobo, 2021), liminality (Kihato, 2013) and the quotidian (Hall, Nyamnjoh and Cirolia, 2022), beyond the normative constructions of Anglo-American knowledge formations and theories of space (McKittrick and Peake, 2005). The rich and suggestive fields of feminist scholarship that trace and theorise the gendering of everyday life across pavements, alleyways, markets, back streets and high streets coagulate around concerns with the politics of power and position. The differing contexts and viewpoints evoked by this scholarship are broadly aligned through questioning how 'gendered spaces', as established and emergent formations of gender and sexuality, emerge socially in place (Anindita Datta, 2016). Exploratory orientations incorporate questions of: How do systems of gendered subjugation and resistance operate across space and time? Who is being

differentially positioned and how is this located?; and Who is doing the telling to what end, and how might we imagine otherwise? (Olufemi, 2021).

Being attentive to the nuanced and mercurial dimensions of the partial street requires tracing the highly attuned and specific considerations of timing, moving, waiting, avoiding, fearing and claiming that are integral to the differential gendered and sexual politics of street access. We steer our focus in a particular gendered and spatial direction, focusing primarily on women and urban space to engage with how different women differentially access the city street (Rose, 2022). We are mindful of some important analytic nuances that may be rendered invisible by this focus, and therefore raise at the outset vital aspects of analysis that warrant careful consideration. One potential analytic cul-de-sac is an over-emphasis on *the* urban as an apparently centralised and cosmopolitan spatial realm, in which it is assumed that diverse explorations of gender and sexuality are plurally located. The analytic spatial confinement of the urban is itself highly contested, and a privileging of conditions of size, density and diversity not only erases the structural and cultural interdependencies of plural landscapes, but also erases the significance of small towns, peri-urban areas and rural terrains in the varied formations of gender and sexuality (Boyce and Dasgupta, 2017). Further, it belies the relational stretch of sovereignty and capitalism across multiple territories, compounding the borders of race, class, gender and sexuality across national, local and intimate space (Camminga, 2019). Finally, we emphasise the fluidity and fixity of how being identified or identifying as a woman shifts shape, not only across a life-world but also in the intricate distinctions of time and place: whether one is on a street in the morning or evening; whether one is on the pavement or in an interior just off the street; and where the street itself is positioned in a wider register of social meaning and representation.

We reflect on the varied configurations of the partial street in two ways. Firstly, we locate the street as a realm through which to explore gender and precarity, outlining how conjunctural crises – always ambient and explosive – shape the gendered inhabitation of the street. Secondly, we build on the significance of the finely textured experience of practices of inhabitation, through delving into a particular set of street interiors shaped by migrant women in Cape Town, South Africa. This perspective of interiority, we argue, extends the

idea of the intimate as an up-close realm from which to observe the cruelties of normative disciplining that are simultaneously sovereign, material, racial, gendered and sexual. Interiority also sustains the creative possibilities of refusing the fixity of hierarchy and domination (Tayob, 2017). The interior offers more still, as an intricate realm to encounter active making in which objects are placed, practices are nurtured, ideas are explored, and intentions are marked, all within wider circuits of displacement and transgression. Interiors offer an orientation to see the intimate unfolding of deceptively small acts – individual and collective - that tell us about the processes of gender-making, that includes the orchestration of property, the arrangements of labour and family, and their contestations. Street interiors also reveal a sensory (re)surfacing of possibilities, compromises, fears, loves, and allegiances – a living ‘otherwise’ from narrow strictures. Interiority therefore offers a praxis from which to engage with Denise Ferreira Da Silva’s prompt for a ‘Feminist Poethics of Blackness, which includes the outline of a description of existence without the tools of usual reason’, one that engages with ‘the ethical mandate of opening up other ways of knowing and doing.’ (Da Silva, 2014: 81-82).

Everyday Precarity

An exploration of the partial street allows us to engage with the violence of our global present from a grounded consciousness of what it means to live each day with domination and dispossession. A central thread to our analysis of the everyday is the unrelenting and ruthless prevalence of durable precarity, the societal fixes of gender and sexuality, and how cultural recalibrations of living in and through gender are formed in the (de)stabilisation of precarious life (Butler, 2008). We work with the partial street in a figurative and physical sense, as a terrain that is proximate to the mundane practices of negotiating life and liveability on a daily basis, and tied to the ceaseless requirements of small gains within a context of looming pressures and exclusions (Hall, 2021). The span of feminist research on various forms of street-oriented work reveals the embodied considerations of women on the street, whether engaged in sex work, or trading in an array of goods and services. These embodiments surface how gendered practices of care, vigilance and co-operation are socialised. Gendered precarity incorporates the difficulties of juggling multiple

responsibilities that span homeplace and workplace, and dissolving assumed binaries of private and public life (Ayona Datta, 2016).

There are disciplining affects and strictures to the entanglements of working, caring for a homeplace, and caring for children, that is often at the expense of self-care where the arduous requirements of coping produce distinctive genderscapes. However, as Da Silva reminds us, it is the pernicious, epistemic categorisations of race, gender and class that continually produce forms of precarity, thereby emplacing subjects in stigmatised and exploited conditions. Asylum seeking women in Cape Town live with a highly apportioned access to time and space in order to contend with the intersecting violence of xenophobia, misogyny, and heteronormativity. They do this alongside contending with under-resourced asylum systems, over-exploited labour markets and over-speculated property markets (Hall, Nyamnjoh and Cirolia, 2022). When incorporating experiences of trans refugees in the South African context, the limits to life and livelihoods are further exacerbated, notwithstanding the crucial processes of finding community and resisting systemic exclusion (Camminga, 2019). Mothers who undertake sex work in the red-light district of Kamathipura in Mumbai contend with intersecting stigmatisation and ostracisation that renders them further isolated (McCloskey, Karandikar, Reno and España, 2021). These accounts of the gendered inhabitation of 'wounded cities', or places intensely shaped by sustained histories of dispossession and state-led violence (Till, 2012) are often told using the analytic stretch of ambivalent access that we refer to through the partial street. For example, entwined notions of the entrepreneurial and the political are revealed through the banal practices of trade as part of a repertoire of resistance in the context of women street vendors in occupied Palestine (Sabella and El-Fra, 2019).

In writing from the comparative understanding of how the Covid-19 pandemic effected street vendors in Delhi, New York and Los Angeles, researchers highlight the catastrophic impacts of limited income and limited state support on structurally stressed and minoritised groups (Alison, Ray and Rohel, 2021). The conception of crisis in relation to precarity is essential. Here we re-emphasise Butler's conception of precarity as a structural condition of subjugation, in which an ongoing conjuncture of crises locates within the divisive logic of capitalism and its multiple modes of extraction. What then, does an unexpected crisis such

as the Covid-19 pandemic tell us about the current milieu of structural subjugation, and how it surfaces on the street? We see an ever-tighter convergence between a revanchist capitalism and a 'pandemic nationalism' that provides an avenue for the further unravelling of civil rights (for example, Yi and Lee, 2020), and the deathly consequences of enduring discrimination. Rather than an exceptional event, the Covid conjuncture makes starkly apparent extant forms of state propelled xenophobia that have legal and rhetorical power (Hall, Nyamnjoh and Cirolia, 2022). We see the increasing drifts towards casualisation and criminalisation accompanied by regulatory control against collective organisation and protest. We see expanded forms of misogyny and anti-LGBTQ+ articulations accompanied by the legislated curtailment of sexual and reproductive rights. The ambivalence of the partial street becomes further pronounced as a space in which it is harder to pay the rent, harder to retain work, and harder to live within the assertions of nationalist, heteronormative and racial strictures. And yet...

The partial street is also the space in which the rising up of vital collectives of solidarity, mutual aid and revolutionary movements are nurtured. From the streets of Minneapolis, we witness how rage at racist policing and killing transmutes into a distinctive politics of abolition towards the dismantling of state systems of violence (Chua, 2020). Transnational feminist solidarities emerge onto the street to contest the everyday dimensions of our stark reproductive crisis (Al-Ali, 2020). The embodied strictures of living with and contesting everyday precarity on the partial street offers crucial understandings of gender as an unfolding process of inhabitation, in which oppression, reconfiguration and transgression are co-constituted. Street life affirms the vital sensory and un-categoric modes of understanding and representation. The shape-shifting forms of gender that are incorporated into feminist approaches allow us to see the emergence of street life, from the 'embodied archive' of coloniality and modernity in the 1966 film *La Noire de...* directed by Ousmane Sembène (see Tayob, 2021); to the 'unruly spaces' of varied forms of feminist writing in China, that make room to consider sexual subversions, translocal counter cultures, and exploratory activism (Schaffer, Kay and Xianlin, 2007). These simultaneously poetic and political or 'poethic' engagements with gender and space suggest ways of reading the partial street in the fullness of its grounded condition, and as always entangled with a series of worlds beyond.

Street Interiors

If the street is always only partially available to women, the street is also always partially constituted by a world of adjacent interiors. In drawing attention to street interiors, we suggest looking to the entwined spaces of home and work that are intimately connected to and made through the street. Feminist approaches to urban studies ask us to think beyond normative categories which mark the public realm as distinct from domestic space (Kihato, 2013). For asylum-seeking or migrant women, moving often means the displacement of domesticity from a home that is lost, to the world beyond. Yet street interiors simultaneously call attention to the intimate spaces beyond the immediate visibility of the streetscape, and the entangled and complex web of power and violence which extends beyond the street. These are spaces which are shaped by the street and in turn shape the street. Kihato (2013, 16) suggests that beyond a world of flows, a closer look at migrant women's lives, 'reveals a stickiness to space characterised by structural obstacles that limit migrant women's social, spatial and economic mobility.' She draws attention to practices of bordering, everyday bureaucratic struggles for papers, and daily negotiations with police that are part of surviving the street. This 'stickiness' can be extended to thinking about spaces that cohere to the street beyond the sidewalks and urban markets: a series of closed, sometimes deep less-visible sites, which might extend from domestic homes, whether shared or individual, to the interiors of small clothes shops, vegetable stalls, hair salons, beauty parlours and restaurants, among others. Street interiors ask us to draw into the space of the street the entangled worlds of borders, home-making, caring responsibilities, and domestic violence; to pay attention to how women make lives and homes, with partial access to streetscapes, and through constant negotiation.

In 2014 Haseena was running a small shop in the Cape Town suburb of Bellville, to the north east of the city centre, an area increasingly known for its pan-African population. Haseena spoke at length about her experiences in various parts of the city before starting the small shop we were speaking in, a grocery and cosmetics store that was part of a larger subdivided market space. She had travelled to South Africa from Mogadishu in 2004, initially on her own, and was later joined by her children and husband. On arriving in Cape Town she

was offered a temporary place to stay by extended family and some guidance on how to navigate and negotiate the city. Her first foothold was through starting to hawk goods in Bellville. Soon after arriving, Haseena was offered a street-facing room to rent in a house of a woman who had also migrated from Somalia, in the northern suburb of Kraaifontein, not far from Bellville. Haseena described having no money for rental at the time. The room was extended to her on the basis of trust, and with an agreement that she would begin to pay rent once she began earning. In describing the kind of house this was, Haseena noted, 'in that small room, I made a small shop, and that's where I lived also.' She explained that she had started a small street trade out of the window of the single room, selling socks, umbrellas and caps, while slowly expanding her trade and stock over time. She lived and worked in this small space from 2004 and 2007. This was Haseena's first home and trading space in the city. It was also the place where she had her first significant encounter with the violence of the city. On the 1st of July 2005, she was robbed - all her goods were stolen and she was beaten by the perpetrators. Haseena described reporting the incident to the police, but noted several times that they did nothing. This was the first of a series of similar encounters.

Haseena's small shop in Kraaifontein was one of several, which reveal her trajectory of living and working in Cape Town's racially segregated landscape. On first arriving in the city, she was a street-trader outside Bellville station. When she moved to Kraaifontein, she sold goods from her home from Monday to Friday, and had a small stall in a lane next to Parow Main Road on weekends. When her family arrived, Haseena moved to what is referred to as a "spaza shop" or makeshift convenience store in Khayelitsha, to the south west of Cape Town city centre. Haseena's navigation of Cape Town speaks to the continued racial segregation and associated disinvestment which marks the urban landscape in post-Apartheid South Africa. Areas such as Bellville train station and Parow street markets are important trading sites in former "White" areas, which continue to see high foot traffic from labourers commuting between central business districts and former distant 'Black' and 'Coloured' townships. The places where Haseena lived, such as Kraaifontein and Khayelitsha are two significant areas formerly designated "Coloured" and "Black" which remain primarily residential areas with limited resources. The absence of formal infrastructure has led to many migrants setting up businesses and trading spaces in these townships. For many

migrant women in Cape Town, street hawking or running small shops or stalls is a central way to earn a meagre living, with limited options in formal employment in the absence of the right “papers”. Opening a small shop is made possible with a community of support. In the case of Haseena, it was a fellow Somali woman who offered her the rental of a room in a shared house in Kraaifontein, initially on credit, that gave her a foothold in the city. For many others, it may be the advice on where to buy goods, or how to avoid police in street trading, that is essential to survival. Trading as a woman migrant is a tricky business, there are no safety nets. There are difficult customers to navigate, police raids which may be for goods or “papers”, and the common occurrence of theft. Developing networks of support on the street is therefore essential to women, including looking after goods if you need to step away, and keeping an eye out for unwelcome visitors. Interior spaces, as opposed to pavement spaces, tend to offer a minor reprieve from the constant vigilance required of the hawker, a space to retreat to even if only momentarily. For the women working the city, contending with precarious labour, misogyny and xenophobia, they form one vital space among a repertoire of partial sanctuary where women attempt to gain and hold onto a foothold in the city to make a living, and to make liveability.

Haseena’s small trading space was both on the street, and an extension of the place she lived with several other Somali women. Her room as both domestic interior and trading site was also the space from which she carefully negotiated being a Somali woman in South Africa, confronting the daily xenophobic and urban violence, insecurity, and the absence of any state support. As a trading space, it is also the space through which she set her hopes on a future domesticity that at the time she was saving and planning for, with the arrival of her children and husband. Her home, adjacent to and of the street, was therefore a malleable resource and space which did not only supplement her household income, but also contained the hope and possibility of another home. Inevitably, these networks of support that are essential to survival also come with an obligation of support.

Responsibilities might extend to neighbours and fellow traders, but also immediate families and extended families back home. The street is part of a series of moral exchanges that occur in the context of migration, particularly when socially gendered hierarchies shift, and women might bear the weight of financial responsibilities, caring and remittances.

The street interiors do not only tell us about how women survive with and through trade, but also how they make a sense of home and retain a sense of self. In the market stalls in Bellville for instance, among the generic goods are a range of food items, household goods and clothing that speak to Somali and east African experiences. These shops sit alongside a series of other interiors, where women run and manage hair and beauty salons, coffee shops and restaurants. As Mpho Matsipa (2013) notes in Bree Street, Johannesburg, the proliferation of hair salons are spaces where subjects and the city are actively re-made. Former offices, basements, sheds and storage rooms are turned into dry salons which speak both to and beyond the narrative of 'crisis' through which African cities are often inscribed. Instead, these small spaces are intimately connected through style, pattern and language to other parts of the African continent. Henrietta Nyamnjoh points out in that Cape Town restaurants serving African food are largely frequented by male customers, but food practices whether the sourcing of ingredients or the cooking of meals, is primarily the responsibility of women (2017, 28). These restaurants often take the place of kitchens at home, and are spaces of sociality and maintaining a sense of belonging at a distance. Street interiors are spaces where women can partially reclaim a sense of self and home, and these tastes and smells are core to a sensory affinity that is actively maintained through the sourcing of particular food products from diasporic networks. These lively repertoires of the street are simultaneously forged in relation to the constant negotiation of by-laws, municipal policing, security concerns and the threat of nights in jail. Accusations of health and safety violations for eating places, raids for 'counterfeit goods', and fines for trading in the wrong part of the street are part of the daily ubiquity of precarity and the permanence of crisis.

For some women domesticity is displaced to the street or the adjacent spaces, yet for others domestic spaces are maintained at a distance. For women who take on the majority of caring responsibilities for families, domestic spaces remain integral to how the street is negotiated. Domesticity shapes urban life and urban relationships, and is shaped by urban violence and related insecurities and precarities. In a photography workshop with migrant women in Johannesburg, Kihato notes how contrary to her expectation, domestic space was an important subject for street traders. Many of the women chose to photograph families watching television, celebrating birthdays and eating an evening meal together. These were

precious moments that offered a moment of respite from the harshness of the city. The ability to retreat from the public is understood as a privilege and at times is an aspiration more than reality (Kihato, 2013). On the other hand, when domestic spaces are sites of violence, women often have limited options beyond turning to communities for support who may assist or may shelter perpetrators. For migrant women in particular, reporting to the police or seeking shelter, counselling services or medical support is not easy, as it may open an entire community to legal scrutiny. Interpersonal and intimate violence are often handled by communities of nationals. As Ayona Datta (2016, 325) reminds us, the intimate city is, “a site of exchange between a violence of urban exclusion and a violence of everyday life.” Street interiors are not always safe, and the fear of sexual violence across public and private spheres is part of the consideration of planning the day, where to set up shop and when to return home (Hall, Nyamnjoh and Cirolia, 2022). The domestic spaces that form in and through the partial street are sites of ambiguity and contradictions, fear and safety.

Conclusion

Precarity is the operative process through which borders of all sorts are produced and exacerbated. While the intersectional feminist frame remains a vital resource for comprehending how compounded structures of extraction and subjugation reproduce gender strictures, the partial street reveals how gender is grounded. In the intricacies of everyday street life that involves making work, claiming space, juggling care, avoiding harm, and forging liveability, we learn not only how gender is organised, but how it is activated as a constitutive affirmation of being. Feminist readings of the partial street prompt us to reflect, with care, on how we see these gendered structures, transgressions and affirmations, and how we tell it. In our brief chapter we do this essentially through an approach to space, as relational, as varied, as sensory and as intimate. The gendered street is partial and fragmented, always constituted by a series of associated interiors and worlds beyond. These are spaces of trade and work, but also domestic spaces and homes. Feminist readings ask us to consider how a radical approach might address the politics of the street as legal, economic and symbolic, and as peopled, sensory and transgressive (Da Silva, 2014). This requires attention to the spaces which cohere and make the partial street, revealing

the intimate and structural dimensions of social reproduction that stretch across from the pavement to associated interiors.

Drawing out street interiors requires an attention to the limits of language, of listening to silences and reading bodily practices (Kihato, 2013). It requires a recognition of the small and large tactics of hiding and evading social discipline where possible, even when larger structures of containment and violence are unavoidable. As McKittrick and Peake write (2005, 46), 'The difference "difference(s)" make to geography is not only about mapping unjust spaces and places of subordination, but is also an indicator of the ways in which geography, as an analytical tool and an experiential process, makes available a place of resistance.' Feminist approaches to reading the street also ask us to consider practices of research, including how female researchers navigate the city by forging alliances with interviewees and research participants. This may be the advice from a street trader on the best route to take through an area on a particular day, or the avoidance of travelling alone past a police checkpoint. Staying safe as a female researcher is often made possible with the guidance of those who intimately know the street and how to navigate it. This form of feminist street research requires building trust, and a sense of mutual recognition.

The partial street is a space where ethics are actively negotiated. Survival requires a constant weighing up of an embodied understanding of right and wrong, which may not map onto legal regulations or mechanisms, particularly as these frequently limit where one can trade and work, and also limit access to recourse to justice. Instead, there is a consistent assessment of obligations measured by social accountability, meeting the caring needs of family, and the moral responsibility of providing for extended families. These practices of care and obligation extend further to the maintenance of certain ideas of respectability, or the appearance of this which may be tied to a sense of aspiration. The street is the site of possibility for provision through trade and earning a living, yet it is also the site of negotiating the ethical practices of urban inhabitation. Paying attention to how women negotiate the street speaks to an embodied ethics, that is attuned to how subjugated individuals negotiate values and self-hood on a daily basis. The precarity of street life means that this is a working around forms of violence that lead to structural exclusion, with the hope of being able to refigure arrangements and possibilities for future generations.

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