| RESEARCH ARTICLE

(En)gendering Development: Mapping Spatial Contours of Urban Inequality in Dubai, United Arab Emirates

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| ABSTRACT

Extending feminist geographic endeavours in the present geopolitical conjuncture, this critical intervention calls into question the everyday gendered geographies of Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) in their contextual heterogeneity. In the epoch of conspicuous consumption, women-dominated shopping malls in the Gulf space can be read as material-discursive sites in and through which gendered *belonging* is (re)constructed. Paradoxically, frenetic economic development is marked by deeply entrenched logics of segregation, unearthing conditions of *unbelonging*. In particular, urbanity is predicated upon the abjection of 'bachelors' (low-wage immigrant men of South Asian descent) from the Emirati body politic. I then employ intersectional frameworks to counter-map the affective contours of Dubai's urban sexscape, where spatially and temporally provisional moments of queer existence (re)surface at nighttime. Similarly, intersectional feminist geographies of sex work grapple with existing and emergent strands of spatial inequality in ways a single-axis framework cannot hope to exhaust. Whilst sexed/gendered/racialised bodies are hierarchically stratified in Emirati moral economies of transactional sex, sex worker subjectivities at once *refuse* rigidly boxed categories by being continually reworked at the local, national and global levels.

| KEYWORDS

Dubai, UAE, Gender, Urbanisation, Spatial Inequality, Feminist geography, Intersectionality

1. Introduction

1.1 Gendered City-Making and its Discontents

To speak of spatial inequality is to reference the dramatically shifting geographies of power which differentially privilege and oppress. Through the analytical lens of spatiality, place-based identity politics are rendered perceptible in ways which inextricably connect geography with gender. At this theoretical juncture lies feminist geography - a frontier of knowledge that is attuned to the gendered spatial realities of urban lifeworlds. Conceptualising bodies and cities as "mutually defining, co-building assemblages" (Grosz, 1994: 248), this critical field examines how patterns of in/exclusion are actualised in and through space. Reconceptualising spaces as generative, reactive and experiential, feminist geographers investigate the ways in which gender(ed) identities are constitutive of and constituted by multi-scalar processes of city-making. Our locationally situated experiences tether us to a complex matrix of uneven geographical relations. Massey's concept of power-geometry advances that space, place, power and identity are co-imbricated in shaping the life trajectories of differently embodied urban subjects (Massey, 1994; Massey, 1999). Resisting grand- narratives of globalisation as inevitably homogenising, Massey illuminates how power differentials in everyday spaces reposition actors vis-à-vis geographically uneven circuits of capital and mobility. Extending Massey's insights to this analysis, deep-seated power-geometries animate the messy politics of urbanisation in Persian Gulf megacities. In particular, the metropolis of Dubai is often dubbed the "city of extremes" (Pelican, 2014: 256) for the lopsided geographies that condition its very possibility. With a penchant for superlatives, Dubai's physical and social topographies are marked by spectacles of "imagineered urbanism" (Davis, 2006: 50) - architectural gigantism, human-engineered private islands and luxury-consumer shopping complexes. Attending

to the latter, urban geographers interpret shopping malls as microcosms of broader socio-spatial arrangements in the epoch of conspicuous consumption (Miller and Laketa, 2018; Abaza, 2001). Through a critical gendered lens, women-dominated mall floors in Downtown Dubai constitute an affective stage in and through which gendered performances are (re)enacted (Baldauf, 2008). Consumer architectures of gender segregation cannot, however, be reduced to simple products of theocratic patriarchal values - rather, the everyday materialities of women in Gulf mall spaces are marked by ever-shifting constellations of power across space and time (Eeden, 2007; Massey, 1994). Engaging with Islamic body politics, Shahrokni's (2020) exploration of the urbanisation/gender nexus in post-revolution Iran approaches 'womanhood' as a spatial construct - one that is continually undone and redone in urban daily practices. Women's corporealities are bound intimately with projects of (re)producing national identity - under Iran's developmentalist agenda and its material promises of mobility, gender-segregated urban planning afforded rights of access to once-domesticated women. Gendered boundaries, both material and symbolic, are therefore tentatively sketched - the fluidly mutating political subjectivities of Tehrani women confront hegemonic constructions of gender difference. In conversation with Shahrokni's insights, everyday gendered geographies in Dubai are at once flexible and fragile. Feminised retail spaces in a globalised Dubai offer a critical medium through which consumerist models of femininity (Le Renard, 2014) are embodied and (re)articulated on the ground. Attention to these discursive sites illuminates the mutually defining, reciprocal relationship at play between gendering and city-making.

City-making processes unfold in geographically uneven and unequal ways, where spatialities of power fracture the livelihoods of differently-embodied urban subjects along gendered, racialised and classed fault-lines. A preoccupation of Critical Urban Theory, capitalist economic penetration is predicated upon the *splintering* of urban space and sociality (Graham and Marvin, 2001). In piecing together "geographies of shards and fragments" (Roy, 2015: 7), a mosaic of distributive injustice emerges to capture the paradoxes of the urban condition. In a deeply fractured Gulf cityscape, imaginaries of integration are necessarily undone by realities of disintegration. Architectural excesses left in the wake of frenetic development "often ignore their context on the ground, making urban space that can be scaleless and alienating" (Kelbaugh, 2012: 86). Indeed, Dubai's expansionary fiscal stance extends insofar as bureaucratic Arab elites are concerned, exacerbating social and spatial polarisation in everyday practices. Reactionary nationalisms to 'Emiratise' the urban core reproduce the very exclusionary outcomes that aspirational politics of cosmopolitanism claim to transcend. This geopolitically volatile ideoscape has materialised into a splintered urban landscape of 'haves' and 'have-nots' - namely New Dubai and Old Dubai (Elsheshtawy, 2018). Incipient diasporas in Old Dubai are distanced both geographically (by the Dubai Creek) and socially (by logics of segregation) from inner-city networks of capital. Suspended in a fragmented state, the localities of Deira, Al Karama and Satwa embody "a moral and aesthetic decay requiring state intervention" (Kanna, 2013: 68). At a finer spatial scale, locally-situated forms of Othering are routinely invoked to protect muwāṭinīn (the citizenry) from the allegedly dangerous al-wāfidīn (the immigrants). The pejorative label 'bachelor' is affixed to unmarried, South Asian transmigrant labourers with partial or denied citizenship (Sarmadi, 2013). Abjected both literally and figuratively from the Gulf national imaginary, these second- class citizens are cloistered into near-collapse 'bachelor accommodations'. Bacchi (2009) interrogates how hegemonic representational practices in policy discourse ironically create solutions in need of problems. Solutionism deflects critical inquiry into the very power/knowledge structures which undergird "specific categories of social being" (Bacchi, 2010: 112, Bacchi, 2009). Applying Bacchi's poststructuralist lens to the Emirati context, the discursive framing of bachelors as 'problematic' is informed by ideational logics of Arab exceptionalism. What remain *unproblematised* are moral panics of 'overcrowding' that are "produced, disseminated and defended" (Bacchi, 2012: 22) by bureaucratic officials to legitimate a spatialised hierarchical order. Karoui (2021) illuminates how the phenomenon of 'bachelorisation' is also shaped by gender(ed) discourses. With "male residency rates over 90%" (Karoui, 2021: 82), migrant-majority streets in Old Dubai are rife with demographic imbalance. Migrant masculinities in Hor Al Anz, Deira are stereotyped as seedy, lascivious and unhygienic - threats to the safety of morally respectable Emirati families. Instantiating frontiers of gender-based fear (Valentine, 1989), these masculinised neighbourhoods are refashioned into no-go zones for women and children. Thus, attention to the (un)making of fragmented cityscapes offers "a constant reminder of what could be but isn't" (AbdouMaliq, 2008: 30), where the increasingly splintered and polarised lifeworlds of city-users illuminates the spatialities of urban injustice in the everyday.

2. Intersectional Geographies of Un/Belonging

In ways both known and unknown, place-specific urban identities are *multiply* inflected by gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, religion and other constructs of difference. In these fragmentary urban contexts, queer geographers deploy intersectional frameworks to grapple with multidirectional flows between the spatial, the social and the sexual. Coined by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality offers a reflexive pedagogical tool for urban theorists and activists to "make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic" (McKittrick, 2006: x). Bell and Valentine (1994) interrogate the geographical cannon and its pointillistic worldview of identity as stable, homogenous and fixed in time/space. In approaching 'gender' as a mutually exclusive category, single- axis definitions of inequality disembed and disembody subjects from their complexly variable, lived experiences. Challenging "the masculinism of the geographical imagination" (Bell and Valentine, 1994: 11) calls for scholars to embrace an intersectional sensibility - one which attends to interlocking axes of difference at multiple spatial scales. Intersectional geographies

of sexuality illuminate the ways in which homonormativity (the privileging of cis-heteronormative values and aesthetics) manifests in embodied queer life and its many spatialities. Sexed bodies in homonormative spaces are inflected by gender, race, class, religion, (dis)ability and other identity constructs (Kanai and Kenttamaa-Squires, 2015; Boyd, 2010). Counter-mappings of these subterranean geographies, against the grain of cartographic tradition, sketch out the messiness and non-linearities of queer intimacies in transnational migratory contexts. Centner's (2021) ethnographic foray into Dubai's sexscape epitomises such intersectionality, where selfhood is negotiated under structures of both oppression and privilege. As chameleonic figures, Western gay expatriate men leverage phenotypic markers of privilege (whiteness, maleness and able-bodiedness) to invisibilise their same-sex desire in heterosexist public spaces. In spite of state-led proscriptions, underground queer terrains and territories of Dubai-based homosexuals are nonetheless forged within the confines of the national closet. Geographies of queer belonging are animated at nighttime, where invites to LGBTQIA+ rooftop bars, nightclubs and home gatherings are circulated in highly elusive communication networks. These occluded 'gaybourhoods' allow for visceral expressions of queer intersubjectivity, albeit provisional and precarious. Gay nightlife geographies are temporarily undone by cis-heteronormative self-presentations in the day, demonstrating the "always-incomplete process of queering" (Centner and Neto, 2021: 100). In discovering alternate spaces of un/being, queer geographies tease out the ambivalent, contradictory and often hidden realities of non-normative bodies. A spatially intersectional lens can therefore enlarge the critical scope of urban theorists that still cling resolutely to single-axis frameworks.

Grounded in lived experiences, intersectional queer geographical scholars complicate cis-heteronormative patriarchal definitions of city and city-making as demonstrated above. Similarly, intersectional *feminist* knowledge also offers resources for mapping the spatial contours of sex trade networks and their gendered coordinates. Historical geographies of sexual commerce trace "the spaces of sex and the sexes of space" (Bell and Valentine, 1994: 1) in pre-modern(ised) cities. Projected from the psychic onto the social, the imagined grotesqueness of street prostitutes gave rise to "explicitly spatial scopic regimes" (Hubbard, 1999: 66) of sexual regulation in medieval Europe. Morally-inflected logics of purification expunged these 'contaminated' bodies from "the spiritual core of urban centres" (Hubbard, 1999: 65) In the margins of sociality, outer towns became constitutively gendered, sexualised and classed by the spectral presence of 'fallen women'. In sixteenth-century Italy, the institutionalisation of prostitution discursively reconfigured sexed/gendered bodies into receptacles of both desire and disgust. Transgressing hegemonic sexual norms, Venice's commercial sex trade constituted an integral part of local growth in port towns. Venetian courtesans were all at once morally reprehensible, sexually irresistible and economically indispensable. From the pre-modern to the present, gendered geographies of power continue to be refracted through the space/sex nexus. Today, the complex and contested terrain of neoliberal globalisation necessitates the creation of *alternative* survival strategies (Sassen, 2000). Sex tourism industries thrive in the shadows of 'licit' economies. Income-insecure women strategically manoeuvre within these "counter- geographies of globalisation" (Sassen, 2000: 523) to facilitate flows of remittance. Simultaneously, capital accumulation in labour-importing countries is disproportionately hinged upon "the backs of women" (Sassen, 2000: 506) with temporary contractual mobility. Until 1989, the legalisation of mail-order bride businesses in the Philippines constituted a lucrative development strategy for boosting municipal revenues. Albeit with unequal trade-offs for different actors, this survival circuitry must be understood as multi- directional and multi-locational. This temperamental yet co-dependent relationship between financial and sexual capital has profoundly shaped topographies of transactional sex in Dubai. Mahdavi's (2010) urban ethnography exposes how anti-blackness is writ large into local discursive structures that stratify sexualised bodies across space and place. Perceived as fair-skinned, 'higher-end' call girls of Eastern European descent are spatially concentrated in the affluent enclaves of Jumeirah. Whilst in Old Dubai, sub-Saharan sex workers are over-represented in brothels and massage parlours frequented by low-wage labourers. Alongside these *locally-*produced discourses, sex worker subjectivities are continually reworked by anti-trafficking and abolitionist rhetorics at the global level. In an increasingly interconnected world, dialectic representational tropes of sex workers as passive non-agents travel to Dubai via transnational discursive linkages (Mahdavi, 2010; Zwingel, 2011). By conflating sex trading with human trafficking, transmigrant female workers are essentialised into a spectacle of suffering for the humanitarian gaze. However, resonances and dissonances between voraciously circulating discourses also create *local* sites for counter-hegemonic moves. Moralising narratives of victimhood and vulnerability are co-opted by 'trafficked' sex workers to stake claims for social service provisions, complicating "artificial dichotomisations of force and choice" (Mahdavi, 2010: 949). Providing conceptual alternatives to normative framings of sex workers, gendered and sexual bodily identities in the shadows of capital are struggled over and challenged across spatial and temporal parameters. Intersectional attention to moral economies of sex not exposes the inter-categorical complexity of 'gender' itself, but its relationality to overlapping identity constructs.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, epistemic questions of gender are conceptually central to theorising the problems and possibilities of a rapidly urbanising humanity. This critical intervention has sought to investigate how uneven development becomes spatially translated into geographies of dis/connect, im/mobility and un/belonging. The urban conditions of Dubai are imbued with ever-shifting power geometries, which inextricably shape the life trajectories of city-users. Marked by the ebb and flow of globalisation, Dubai's urban sprawl has dramatically reconfigured social and physical topographies at different spatial scales where gender constructs

materialise in and through consumer architectures. The mutually constitutive dynamics between gender, space and power are also illuminated by the restricted spatial orbit of bachelors in Old Dubai. Too often, the pedagogical traditions of the masculinist geographic cannon centralise 'gender' as the primary axis along which inequalities unfold. Such reductivism foreshortens deeper analysis of inter-group and intra-group entanglements between the spatial, the social and the self - intersectional thinking and praxis offer powerful correctives for this epistemic injustice. Calling into question hegemonic conceptions of gender, intersectional frameworks bring into sharp relief the messy, power-laden and situated realities of city-making in everyday spaces. With both a level of awareness and frustration with epistemic traditions, intersectionality resists disembedding and disassociating people, capital and objects from their social and territorial contexts. In reimagining geographically asymmetrical power relations with more analytical rigour, feminist and queer geographers attend to the multiple in/exclusions which differentially privilege and disadvantage. This is exemplified by counter-mappings of transnational, yet transient, sites of queer belonging in Dubai's nighttime economy. Intersectional feminist geographic knowledge also explores the situatedness of bodies/sex at work in different socio-spatial structures. The urban lifeworlds of Dubai-based sex workers are refracted through a complex multiplicity of discourses at different scales, challenging any univocal or pre-theoretical representation of gender, body or city. Thus, attention to the spatially-specific character of inequality in the UAE foregrounds the ways in which place and identity are co-constituted and co-implicated.

4. Study Limitations and Future Research

Demystifying the complexities of gender, as a fluid and contextually-situated category, is a difficult yet necessary quest that is endlessly open to contestation. The thrust of this paper has therefore sought to displace canonically-situated forms of knowledge-production, by embracing a *plurality* of epistemic standings. In the spirit of self-reflexivity however, I as a feminist must remain vigilant against uncritically re/producing the exact hegemonic biases I seek to dismantle - whether intended or not. As such, limitations and recommendations will be explored respectively to provide much-needed direction for future literature:

Due to physical constraints limiting my methodological scope, the analysis at hand has drawn exclusively upon secondary literature - this has led to a prioritisation of breadth over depth. My critical intervention could penetrate prevalent power-structures deeper by supplementing theory with on-the-ground, ethnographic praxis. Ethnography, in its unapologetic grittiness and vulnerability, can sensitise feminist geographic inquiry beyond the purview of masculinist pedagogical traditions. In conducting longitudinal qualitative research, I myself could weave the analytic thread that interconnects understudied and uncomfortable geographies that remain imperceptible without finer data granularity. Forthcoming papers could perhaps take shape by interviewing anonymised sex workers, dedicating epistemic space for theorising about singularities *and* shared material inequalities at the same time - without engulfing the other.

Bridging theory and praxis also necessitates collective, connected efforts between scholars and activists alike to reify the possibilities of being, becoming and belonging. Feminist geographic insights must be extrapolated *beyond* the textbook for policy operationalisation in urban planning at large. This paper has potential implications in critically interrogating migrant labour abuse, human trafficking and other spatial productions of difference on a constitutional level. However, stabilising the precarious footing of intersectional feminist thinkers like myself in top-down bureaucratic spaces (beyond pandering tokenistic gestures and one-size-fits-all affirmative actions) has proven arduous both historically and presently. To forge more accountable and material conceptions of spatial inequality in real-world politics, we must move toward triangulating the expertise of feminist geographers, governmental institutions, development stakeholders, activists, NGOs and others in the public advocacy sphere.

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