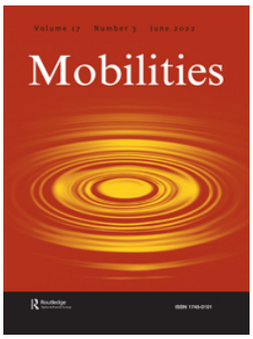

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Exploring the affective atmospheres of the threat of sexual violence in minibus taxis: the experiences of women commuters in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Growing attention has been directed by South African commuter rights groups towards the incidence of sexual violence experienced by women when commuting in minibus taxis. Against this backdrop, data was collected through a series of unstructured individual interviews with 14 South African women. Putting to work the concept of *affective atmosphere*, findings revealed that the ways in which these women articulated the threat of sexual violence in minibus taxis was co-produced through shifting taxi↔commuters↔bodies assemblages which not only informed how the threat of sexual violence was experienced, but, also, how their own bodies, men's bodies, and everyday commuting were negotiated.

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Introduction

Recently, there has been growing coverage in the South African popular press and media of the harassment, assault and rape of women who commute by means of minibus taxis[1] (Marriah-Maharaj 2021; Regter 2019). While media coverage may be increasingly common, the occurrence of such sexual violence/s is not new, especially given that the prevalence of gender-based violence directed at women (by men) in South Africa is one of the highest in the world (Abrahams et al. 2020; Fakunmoju et al. 2021). The endemic nature of sexual violence in South Africa has led several scholar-activists to describe South Africa's system of gender relations to be underwritten by a pervasive 'rape culture' in which the daily lived reality of all women and, in particular, the most structurally marginalised population of 'black'[2] women, is characterised by the prospect of facing some form of gender-based (sexual) violence (Gqola 2015).

The habitual misogynies and violence/s that South African women face in the domestic and public spaces of their everyday lives has become an area of significant academic work and activism (Boonzaier and Van Niekerk 2018); drawing attention to the ways sexual violence emerges through spatially unique configurations of geography, the built environment, as well as the gendered, racialised, and classed bodies which access and move through these spaces (Boonzaier and Zway 2015). What has, however, been subject to much less attention are the spaces, spatial relations, and spatialised experiences of South African women's everyday mobilities. This is surprising considering not only the press coverage of women being harassed and assaulted when commuting (Retief 2019), but, also, what psychological research has recognised as the 'enduringly stressful impact of minibus taxi commuting' (Eagle and Kwele 2019: 2) for women. It is, in this regard, that the present study specifically considers women's spatialised experiences of the threat of sexual violence when commuting with/in the mobile spaces of South Africa's minibus taxis.

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Minibus taxis and the minibus taxi industry in South Africa: an overview

There are more than 200,000 minibus taxis in South Africa, transporting what is estimated to be around more than 15-million commuters each day (Mndebele and Cabe 2019), the vast majority of whom are poor and working-class South Africans who live in the historically underdeveloped communities of colour established under the apartheid system. Minibus taxis are, without a doubt, 'the pillar of public transport [in South Africa], accounting for 65% [of all public transport], followed by buses at 20%, and trains at 15%' (Mndebele and Cabe 2019). It is therefore no surprise that the minibus taxi industry is estimated to generate annual profits of around 90 billion South African rand (US$ 6 billion) (Mndebele and Cabe 2019).

In South Africa, the minibus taxi industry emerged in the aftermath of the forced removal of people of colour from the cities of the apartheid state. While the apartheid government endeavoured to create 'whites-only' urban centres and cities, the reality was that the cities and suburbs of the apartheid state still required vast numbers of underpaid and exploitable black labour to fuel both domestic and industrial life. At first, the minibus taxi industry operated under severe state regulation, with few black taxi operators being granted permits to own and operate taxis (Fourie 2003). However, it was only after a massive deregulation of the public transport industry starting in 1987, during the final years of apartheid, that the minibus taxi industry began to emerge as one of the most efficient and convenient modes of public transport for the black majority (Fourie 2003). Within almost a decade of its deregulation the largely black-owned minibus taxi industry came increasingly to displace other longer standing modes of public transport, such as, bus and rail services (Fourie 2003).

Today, the South African National Taxi Association (SANTACO), the umbrella body for regional taxi associations and owners operating in South Africa, estimates that the minibus taxi industry provides employment to about 600,000 people (Mndebele and Cabe 2019). Indeed, the taxi industry sustains a number of jobs (which require little formal or post-school education) that are directly and indirectly linked to the minibus taxi system, including: taxi drivers; queue marshals; vehicle washers; as well as informal traders who operate their own businesses at all the major taxi ranks and at roadside taxi stops.

At the same time, the legacies of apartheid-era racially segregated town and urban planning has meant that South Africa's history of 'spatial injustice' (Strauss 2019: 136) has often been aggravated by, and coupled with, a persistent pattern of 'mobility injustice' (Turner 2020: 1) in which unsafe, overcrowded, and inefficient rail and bus systems service lower income and historically disadvantaged communities of colour – in effect maintaining a commuter population of 'transit captives' (Moreira and Ceccato 2021: 204) to the minibus taxi industry. In this way, the 'historical formation of unequal mobilities' (Sheller 2018: 92) in contemporary South Africa is intertwined within the mutually reinforcing and organising effects of both racial and spatial injustice, and similar to those societies with a history of white settler colonialism. What this has continued to mean is that communities of colour generally, and women from these communities specifically, continue to remain heavily reliant on minibus taxis as a far more reliable mode of daily commuter transport (Statistics South Africa 2013).

Furthermore, the pressure that regional taxi owners and bosses place on their already underpaid drivers to transport large numbers of commuters has increasingly resulted in not only well-known unsafe driving practices and disregard for both traffic laws and vehicle safety regulations, but also the emergence of an especially toxic culture of aggressive if not outright violent driver behaviour, the overwhelming majority of whom are men (Gibbs 2014; Khosa 1998; Mndebele and Cabe 2019). In addition, the minibus taxi industry has a long history of bloody 'turf wars' between regional taxis bosses and associations for dominance of lucrative taxi routes and, with this, violence and intimidation directed towards commuters (Dugard 2001; Khosa 1992; Sekhonyane and Dugard 2004).

The result of all these historical and contemporary factors is a South African public transport sector and commuter economy not only dominated by the minibus taxi industry (Fobosi 2020;

Grootes 2020), but, moreover, a minibus taxi industry that is riddled with reports of commuter unsafety at almost every point of the commuting system, including, as was recently revealed in Statistics South Africa's (2021: 102) *National Households Travel Survey 2020*, in walking to/from taxi ranks, at taxi ranks, and in taxis.

Thus, when considering the prevalence of sexual violence in South Africa, broadly, and the history and culture of violence that has often come to characterise the life and business of the minibus taxi industry, more specifically, it is not surprising that women commuters have come to report their use of minibus taxis and their socio-spatial occupation and navigation of minibus taxi spaces as fraught with the threat of sexual violence (Eagle and Kwele 2019).

The geographies, spatialities, and mobilities of sexual violence

Sexual violence is both a form and extension of the trans-historical objectification, devaluation, and subordination of women within societies organised through patriarchal and misogynist values, practices, and power relations. Feminist work has long demonstrated how the threat of sexual violence by men has functioned as a tool for inducing fear and, with this, control over women (Brownmiller 1975). This has been extended in the research of feminist geographers who have worked to highlight how the fear of sexual violence regulates women's access to, and ability to occupy, different kinds of spaces (Johnston and Longhurst 2010; Pawson and Banks 1993; Valentine 1989). Working at the intersection of human geography, urban studies, and gender studies, Rachel Pain (1991, 1993, 1997) has developed significant empirical analyses of how women's fear (of violence) becomes spatialised with/in urban geographies and, by extension, how access to and movement through these spaces becomes regulated through gender and how women register and sense the relative threat of violence posed to them.

In mobilities scholarship, the insights of feminist geography have been extended to include how mobilities, on various scales and in varying forms, shape and become shaped by the ideologies, discourses, and forces which form gender/s (Cresswell and Uteng 2008). Indeed, the concept of 'gendered mobilities' (Cresswell and Uteng 2008; Sheller 2008) has not only brought into acute attention how systems, modes and practices of mobilities become gendered, such as, for example, as more or less masculine/feminine, but also how mobilities participate in the gendering of the subjectivities and bodies which move with/in them (Cook and Butz 2020). Mobilities are, therefore, not gender-neutral systems or transits which occur in-between or outside of those more 'fixed' spaces, places, and sites of gender/ing (Moreira and Ceccato 2021); nor are they disconnected or disembedded from the local politics and practices that inform gender and, in turn, gender-based violence (Lubitow, Abelson, and Carpenter 2020).

In South Africa, high rates of gender-based violence, rape and femicide have meant that women often come to discursively construct and experience themselves as 'inevitable victims and inherently vulnerable to [male] violence' (Shefer, Strebel, Ngabaza, et al., 2018: 65). It is therefore unsurprising that South African scholarship has found that the pervasive threat of sexual violence circumscribes and limits women's everyday access to and navigation of public and private spaces (Hallman et al. 2015). What is, however, less well-documented, and which is the focus of this study, are the ways in which South African women experience the threat of sexual violence in less 'fixed' geographies or 'static' spaces, that is, in more 'mobile' spaces, such as within commuter transport spaces and systems. To address this gap, the present study sets out to explore how women who use minibus taxis as part of their everyday commuting experience the threat of sexual violence within these spaces.

Affect, space, and affective atmospheres: A theoretico-analytical framework

From around the mid-1990s, a renewed interest in the development and application of the concept of affect entered academic literature in what has since been described as the 'turn to affect' (Leys

2011: 434).[3] While the use of affect has proven popular in the social sciences (Gregg and Seigworth 2010), its uptake in the work of non-representational and posthumanist- inflected geography has been central to the development of affective atmospheres (Ash 2013; Buser 2013; Massey 2005; Thrift 2008).

For Anderson (2009), affective atmospheres can be conceptualised as 'a class of experience that occur *before* and *alongside* the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and *in-between* subject/object distinctions' (78, emphasis original). To this effect, affective atmospheres extend the theorisation of affect beyond its initial 'individualized actualization' (Anderson and Ash 2015: 33) towards a more capacious analytic which attends to the 'relationship[s] between space and bodies and, specifically, how changes in the constitution of a space, whether in its characteristics or in the bodies within it, alter the affective experience of these spaces' (Shaw 2014: 88). It is, in this way, that affective atmospheres are especially useful in attuning to the 'lived sensation, the feel, and emotional resonance of place' (Duff 2010: 881).

In theorising space, affective atmospheres do not treat space as an inert 'background', 'context', or 'container' of/for human activity and action. Rather, affective atmospheres render space as lively configurations of material↔discursive↔affective[4] forces through which human subjectivities and bodies become (trans)formed with/in space (Duff 2010, 2016; Ellis, Tucker, and Harper 2013). In this regard, affective atmospheres draw attention to the often-imperceptible sets of more-than-human forces of 'everyday situations' (Anderson 2009: 80) which performatively work with/in and through our bodies, co-shaping our experience of self and sense. Notably, this has been demonstrated in those spaces which make up everyday modes of commuter transit, such as Bissell's (2010) study of 'passenger mobilities' (270) in train carriages traveling between London and Edinburgh, as well as Duff and Moore's (2014) research on those 'spaces of mobility' (301) which make up different modes of public transport in Melbourne's night-time economy.

What affective atmospheres contribute to this study is a more finely tuned way of mapping not only how South African women may experience themselves and their bodies with/in the everyday commuting spaces of minibus taxis, but, moreover, how they sense, and register through their embodied sense of space, the emergence, transformation, sustainment, and dissipation of micro-cosmic atmospheres of sexual violence directed towards them and their bodies when mobile.

Material and methods

Participants and procedures

For this study, 14 women who use minibus taxis to commute on a daily basis were recruited to participate. In terms of ethnicity, all 14 participants self-identified as black. At the time of conducting the research, all the participants were university students ranging between 19 and 32 years of age and were enrolled at either the undergraduate or postgraduate level of study in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria, in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. All 14 participants, who lived in off-campus private accommodation, were totally reliant on minibus taxis to transport them to and from their places of residence and the university campuses at which they studied, as well as part-time places of work and other sites of social engagement and recreation.

All the participants reported that their use of minibus taxis for daily commuting was largely informed by a mixture of the convenience and efficiency of minibus taxis compared to public bus and rail services which were often late, cancelled with no notice, and generally unreliable. What is worth highlighting is that while all the participants here raised personal safety concerns about having to commute with minibus taxis, each participant was often more concerned about their safety on public bus and rail services – citing longer waiting periods, erratic presence of police and other safety officers, and the well-known frequency of muggings at bus and rail stations. Lastly, all the participating women had reported a wide range of (often recurrent) threatening experiences at the hands of male commuters and drivers when using minibus taxis, including, exhibitionist

behaviour, harassing catcalling and whistling, persistent and unwanted attention, unsolicited advances and requests for sex, being trailed by male drivers or commuters, and uninvited inappropriate physical contact when in transit. Three of the participants reported having been physically assaulted when not returning advances, while two reported being victims of an invasive sexual assault.

Participants were originally recruited by means of a brief one-off recruitment pitch by the researcher to an undergraduate Psychology class. From this pitch a set of 28 women students volunteered to participate, with 6 ultimately meeting the inclusion criteria for participation, namely, the regular use of minibus taxis as part of everyday commuting. A snowball sampling technique drawing on each participant's personal contacts and networks was subsequently employed with each participant doubling as a source for the recruitment of other prospective participants who would meet the inclusion criteria. Drawing from participants' personal networks of contacts who also relied on minibus taxis for their daily commuting consequently proved vital in consolidating a workable sample of 14 participants.

After recruitment, each participant took part in an unstructured individual interview, with 4 participants each taking part in an additional follow-up interview to explore aspects of their initial interviews which required further detail. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The unstructured format of the interviews helped to facilitate a broader conversational space through which each participant could discuss at length their experiences of commuting. In using an unstructured format for each interview, I sought to place each participant in the position of an expert guide whose commuting experience/s were not only valued, but, moreover, central in directing the content and pace of the interview. This proved to be an important methodological consideration given that, as a middle-class white male who had benefited from the colonial and apartheid legacies of an economically privileged upbringing in South Africa, I had relatively few commuting experiences that were based on the use of public transport, generally, and minibus taxis, specifically.

Given that the present study also dealt with personal and potentially uncomfortable and traumatic stories of each participant's experiences of sexual violence in their daily commuting, and attentive to my own concerns around the gendered/ing and hierarchical power dynamics that can be reproduced between differently gendered research participants (Holmgren 2013), I sought to ensure that each participant felt firmly in control of their narrative re-telling within the interview. What resulted was the co-creation of an organic and conversational space through which each participant's experiences could be discussed at length, as opposed to some kind of (semi-)structured and perhaps invasive interrogation of their commuting choices (or lack thereof) and practices. In addition, the unstructured format of the interview aided in promoting a relaxed conversational tone – an important consideration when discussing sensitive experiences which may provoke interviewee anxiety and hamper disclosure.

Prior to any of the interviews being conducted, participants were asked to provide written consent agreeing to be interviewed as well as having their interview audio-recorded. Each interview was then transcribed and analysed.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the University of Pretoria's Humanities Research Ethics Committee (reference: HUM033/0220), with all the standard ethical considerations for research with human participants being adhered to. Care was taken to address potential power inequalities and the prospect of multiple roles in the study, since 2 of the 14 participants were majoring in subjects hosted by the researcher's academic department but not directly taught by the researcher. Furthermore, particular care was taken to outline the free-of-charge counselling and follow-up services that would be made available by an independent service provider to each participant who felt emotionally distressed from discussing traumatic commuting experiences.

Analysis: Working with affect

Much like work with affective atmospheres has sought to disrupt the conventional boundaries we analytically circumscribe around and between human subjectivity, body and space (Anderson and Ash 2015; Michels 2015); so too has this work also moved to enact methodo-analytical practices which disrupt the traditional divides between 'the researcher' and 'the data' by engaging an attentiveness to affect(s) with/in the research process. Rather than employing a standard set of techniques which identified, codified and objectified instances of data that addressed the aims of this research, the analytical strategy employed in this study pursued a far less 'methodocentric' analysis involving a much more embodied, immersive, and affectively attuned engagement with/in the transcribed interviews (Weaver and Snaza 2017).

Thus, in (re)reading the transcripts of each interview while, at the same time, (re)listening to the audio-recordings and (re)viewing notes of each interview, I worked to attune myself to the ways in which different material (such as, the human and more-than-human bodies assembled in the analytical encounter), discursive (such as, the overarching research question(s) informing the orientation towards the analytical encounter), and affective (such as, those un/consciously embodied sensations and intensities experienced in the analytical encounter) forces gathered, flowed, congealed, and dispersed through my encounter with/in the data. To this effect, the analytical work of this study entailed what I have described elsewhere in working through the affective intensities of data analysis as a 'desire to dwell' (Martin 2019: 137) with/in particular moments of data that I found interesting, compelling, perplexing, unsettling, or moving.

By allowing affective resonances with/in the data to guide my analytical work I sought not just to treat affect as the focus of analysis, but, rather, to 'work with and through affect' (Liljeström and Paasonen 2010: 2) as a methodo↔analytical strategy. In doing so, I resisted (re)presenting generalised/able themes/discourses/narratives amongst and between the participants' accounts of sexual violence when commuting with minibus taxis. Instead, I focused on those peculiar moments with/in the transcribed data where participants articulated how the affective atmospheres of sexual violence were produced and experienced in their everyday commuting with minibus taxis. It is, for this reason, that only three extracts of data are presented in the analyses that follow.[5]

Findings and discussion

'But all I can do is try monitor what's going on': How the fear of sexual violence in minibus taxis is affectively (re)made through more-than↔human relations

One of the most significant factors which have contributed to the expansion and dominance of minibus taxis within the South African public transport sector is the way in which they have cornered the market on commuter 'convenience and accessibility' (Sauti 2006: xv). Unlike other modes of public transport, which would likely entail the commuter having to walk some distance to access a railway station or bus stop/terminal, minibus taxis offer what can be best described as a 'door-to-door' (or close-to-door) public transport service, which uses not only formally designated taxi ranks and taxi stops, but, in addition, informal roadside drop off/pickup points that operate almost 24-hours a day, 7-days a week (Sauti 2006). While convenience was an important consideration in every participant's motivation for their use of minibus taxis in daily commuting, it was Pumza,[6] a 19-year-old undergraduate student who works part-time as a waitress, whose account of the convenience of minibus taxis highlighted the multifarious agencies at work in the affective materialisation of atmospheres of risk and, in particular, the prospect of sexual violence:

> If I finish a shift [at work] at ten or eleven [at night], only [minibus] taxis are still on at that time, so it's the most convenient thing for me to use [to commute home]. But if I didn't have to use it I really wouldn't. [. . .] it's so stressful; but I don't have any option that's that convenient. You don't feel safe at all. There's only a few [commuters] going to *Mams*[7] that time, and I'm the last stop. So really, I get so stressed when the other people start getting dropped off. One-by-one people will get off, and that stress just builds because mine is the last stop

> on the route and I know it's going to be me and this driver alone for maybe 10-minutes. [. . .] That time is the worst. But all I can do is try monitor what's going on. Is he going down the right road? What turn-off does he take? Is it the usual route? Is he going slow or speeding up? If any of that changes then already this tense feeling will start because you know all he has to do is turn down some other road and if you're down there at that time [of night] there's nothing to stop him from raping you.

Notably, Pumza's account of potential risk to her personal safety draws sharp attention to a number of commuting conditions which appear to be central in co-producing her sense of her personal un/safety, including: the time of night; the smaller number of fellow commuters which ordinarily commute at this time of night; the gradual debussing of commuters as they reach their respective destinations; the speed and motion of the taxi; and, ultimately, the lone presence her body and the body of the taxi driver. At the same time, it is hard to ignore how Pumza's late night commute is also informed by the effects of South Africa's history as well as Pumza's racialized subjectivity and economic circumstances. As a working student of colour, the mode, distance, and conditions under which Pumza must make her long commute home to Mamelodi is historically predicated on the system of racially segregated town planning which originally designated Mamelodi a 'blacks-only' settlement area and located it on the far north-eastern outskirts of what was the apartheid government's capital city, Pretoria. In addition to both these historical and material dimensions of her commuting experience, the broader social discourses which may also prime Pumza's distress, and especially her experience of her 'aloneness' when commuting, should also not be ignored.

In many ways, Pumza's experience of being alone with her taxi driver, even if only for the latter period of commute, mirrors the very same fears that women have been found to experience and express when in public spaces (Madge 1997; Tandogan and Ilhan 2016). As Pain (1997) has highlighted, women typically tend to experience being alone in public spaces, especially at night, as an influential cue for personal danger and risk. This prospect of danger is also something that women taxi users are well aware of, for stories of women who have been victimised and assaulted at night when commuting with minibus taxis are not only well-transmitted amongst commuters but have also been well-publicised in the South African media and press (Moeti 2017).

For Pumza, the more-than-human agencies that she describes in her account of commuting highlight how that which is typically treated as 'the background' to human agency in fact participates in the ongoing performative work that the mobilities of her commute have with/in as well as through and across her bodily registers, (trans)forming her sense of self and space while commuting. The time of night Pumza is having to commute, the bodies (or dissipation thereof) of other commuters in the taxi, the forces of motion and speed at work as the taxi makes its way towards her residence, as well as the historical and contemporary geography of race and class in South Africa are revealed in Pumza's experience to be active agencies that shape the material and affective dimensions of her commute.

Together, these agencies co-participate with the finely attuned knowledge that Pumza has developed about the period of time it usually takes her to arrive at her designated drop-off point as well as her cartographic sense of what she describes as the 'usual route' that marks her commute. Thus, what Pumza makes clear is that it is the relationally shifting co-participation of all these agencies with/in the minibus taxi space (and with/in her body) that co-produces a materially palpable intensification in the sense of her distress and anxiety about her personal safety when commuting at night.

Going further, what Pumza makes mention of is how her atmospheric sense of potential harm constantly evolves in its affective intensities and tonalities, even with/in the close confines of a minibus taxi. At work here is Pumza's concern around the gradual emptying of the minibus taxi as other commuters reach their destinations. It is evident that as the minibus taxi empties of passengers, ultimately leaving Pumza alone with the (male) taxi driver, her sense of un/safety, while gendered, becomes ever more acute. Pumza describes that her sense of feeling 'so stressed' evolves into a 'tense feeling' as the micro-spatial agencies of her journey home shift and change. Analytically, this is interesting in three particular ways.

First, Pumza's experience of the shifting micro-climate of her commute home with/in the minibus taxi reiterates what existing research on affective atmospheres have highlighted are the spatio-temporally contingent character of affective atmospheres: they are always evolving and never sitting still (Anderson 2009), but, rather, as the participatory forces and agencies co-constituting them shift and change through new relational configurations, so too do the affective qualities of this atmosphere rematerialise.

Secondly, much of the existing research regarding this first point has been explored in relation to geographically fixed spaces, that is to say, these studies often involve a mobile human actor who (voluntarily) moves through immobile space/s, such as, when moving through different spaces of a city (Shaw 2014). In this instance, Pumza's experience highlights how a mobile space, namely, the minibus taxi, reconfigures her subjective sense of self with/in space in ways which she does not always voluntarily or wilfully instigate, choose or welcome. What this illustrates is that the (trans) formation of affective atmospheres, while co-entailing human and more-than-human agencies, does not assume any form of human(ocentric) exceptionalism, will, or the possession of agency – especially in this mode of public transport wherein freedom of movement (and escape) are virtually non-existent when the threat of violence emerges.

Thirdly, while Pumza's specific concern about the emptying of the minibus taxi demonstrates the significance of material bodies and bodily materialities in producing affective atmospheres of place, her account does so in a way which differs from much of the scholarship on affective atmospheres. While existing work on affective atmospheres often emphasises how the spatially peculiar presence and collection of bodies co-produce the atmosphere, sense, or vibe of a particular place (Frohlick 2020), for Pumza it is the absence of bodies with/in this space which forcefully conditions her increasing sense of harm and a particularly acute concern about being raped. What this demonstrates is that 'empty' or 'emptier' space, formed as such through the relative absence of bodies, is an equally potent material force in co-shaping affective atmospheres which underpin the threat of sexual violence. What is perhaps worth further consideration here is whether the very presence of commuter bodies to begin with simply 'masked' Pumza's underlying experience of the taxi space as inherently unsafe.

'You never use much space': The gendered negotiation and contestation of seat space

One of the especially unique spatial dimensions of traveling by means of minibus taxis is the crammed confines of the commute. In South Africa, minibus taxis have become notorious for overloading commuters in an effort to maximise the profitability of every single journey made along their designated routes. Coupled with relatively inconsistent policing, the standard practice amongst marshals and drivers typically entails packing passengers 'tightly' into a minibus taxi, especially during peak periods of commuting (Sauti 2006). While this practice has become the commonly accepted norm amongst minibus taxi commuters, it brings with it a series of often taken-for-granted close-contact spatial dynamics which Tebogo, a 26-year-old postgraduate student, highlighted the sometimes fraught and often careful negotiation of her body and the bodies of other (male) commuters:

> Over the years I have learnt now to keep my legs closed when I'm sitting [in the minibus taxi]. As a woman you never use much space on a seat because some guys will sit next to you and they just push their legs open. Like wide. Their one leg will push against your leg. Even if you're uncomfortable with it. He will always force his leg against yours. It can be very intimidating. You can feel that he expects you to give him that room on the seat.

What Tebogo's assertion draws attention to is the way in which the affective atmosphere of the minibus taxi becomes a territorial space inflected with gendered/gendering power dynamics. What Tebogo describes is how her experience of personal discomfort and intimidation becomes co-shaped by the differently gendered bodies with/in the close confines of the minibus taxi space and, in turn, how this space co-participates in the gendering of those bodies. For Tebogo, there exists

a gendered political geography to the seat space of the minibus taxi which is both formed and constituted through the different ways men and women's bodies take up and occupy seat space.

Although it has long been acknowledged that gender is 'not … what one is, but … something that one *does*, and does recurrently, in interaction with others' (West and Zimmerman 1987: 140, emphasis original), there is often less of an acknowledgement of the ways in which performances of gender 'are necessarily spatial performances' (Norman 2013: 411). For Raewyn Connell, this is most acutely seen in the ways that biologically male bodies are typically expected to 'distinctively … occupy space, to have a physical presence in the world' (1983: 19). In many ways, this is what Tebogo experiences when corporeally sparring with the bodies of men for the material occupation of seat space.

For Tebogo, it is clear that differently gendered bodies bring into the minibus taxi space the socio-cultural body politics of gender and, in this instance, the socio-cultural expectations of how men and women, through bodily carriage and comportment, hold material volume and space in relation to one another. Here, Tebogo makes mention that women are expected to occupy as little space as possible when in a taxi; so much so that she has, in her words, 'learnt' to minimise her occupation of seat space through strategic adjustments in how her biologically female body sits, namely, by keeping her legs closed.

Tebogo's words here mark a striking and contemporary echo of Iris Marion Young's (1980) assertion that patriarchal culture ingrains into women a very corporeal sense that their gender or, in particular, their femininity, must be embodied and performed through their bodily comportment and, with this, the gender-delimited 'spatial … potentialities' (142) of their gendered bodies. It is perhaps for this reason that when there is even the slightest degree of resistance on her part to a male commuter occupying more seat space on entering the taxi that the ensuing jostle of gendered bodies and legs affectively charges a gendered contestation for seat space.

Notably, Tebogo's description of her sense of intimidation that (e)merges through the forceful friction between her leg and that of a male commuter highlights how such micro-practices are intimately implicated in the coercive reproduction of gender by means of daily habitual misogynies that often take the form of gendered 'micro-aggressions'. Yet, while such microaggressions are often largely thought of as beginning and ending in their immediate behavioural execution between differently gendered/racialised/abled bodies (Sue et al. 2007), Tebogo's experience highlights that micro-aggressions are performed with/in space and carry with them atmospheric effects which are both spatial and spatially embodied – they are sensed not only within the corporeal and embodied sense of her gendered self but, moreover, in her gendered experience and occupation of space.

'A man can get you anywhere': How the threat of sexual violence is spatially indifferent

Much of the work on affective atmospheres has highlighted how the material and social architecture of different places forms spatially peculiar affective experiences unique to those places (Stewart 2011). It was, for this very reason, that I was partly motivated to pursue an exploration of how the unique spatial environment and forces of minibus taxis informed women commuters' experiences of the threat of violence. Yet, in sharp contrast to my assumption, Thandiwe, a 25-year-old postgraduate student, pointed to how her subjective sense of safety when commuting was in fact no different from her sense of safety in any other place:

> Researcher: I was interested then to know if you would think then that there is something different about whether or not you feel less safe when taking a [minibus] taxi?
>
> Thandiwe: There is nothing special about taxis, *neh*.[8] As a South African woman I'm always being on guard, you know? Taxi, bus, train – it's just like any other place in this country. You can get raped anywhere. Even if you're just at the post office, like Uyinene. A man can get you anywhere. It's come to that point where you must automatically that who sits next to wants to

In this interview extract, Thandiwe describes how the experiential sense of being unsafe or 'on guard' is a feeling that is always already ever-present. In doing so, Thandiwe discursively identifies and positions herself not just in gendered terms, as a woman, but, more pointedly, as a South African woman – in effect bringing her material geographic emplacement and, with this, the well-known prevalence of gender-based violence in South Africa to bear on her affective experience of space. It is here that Thandiwe gently rebukes the premise of my question that the spatial peculiarities of a minibus taxi would somehow make it different in its degree of safety compared to, in her words, 'any other place in this country'.

Thandiwe's invocation of her status as a South African woman as an inherent marker of her susceptibility to sexual violence, by virtue of her gender, is not unusual. According to Dosekun (2007) almost every South African woman has their 'sense of safety, agency and belonging' (89) informed by, to a greater or lesser extent, the prospect of sexual violence from men. For Thandiwe, it is evident that she assumes herself to be at greater risk because of the material presence of male commuters in the taxi. It is not uncommon (nor perhaps unreasonable) for biologically male bodies to be socially coded as more capable of committing acts of (sexual) violence in light of '[t]he essentialist gendering of rape as an act men commit and women suffer … in [the] dominant discourses and imaginations' (Dosekun 2007: 90) of the South African public.

What Thandiwe experiences as the omnipresent threat of sexual violence from men seemingly neuters any particular sense of affective atmosphere unique to the confines of a minibus taxi or, for that matter, any other mode of public transport. It is worth emphasising here that the gendered fear of rape by men which Thandiwe expresses cannot be seen as unbound from with/in the legacies and discourses of anti-black racism in South Africa's colonial and apartheid history. Over 400 years of colonial era and apartheid white supremacy in South Africa have worked to caricature the bodies of black and, more specifically, African men in overly sexualised ways (Martin 2019) – the legacies of which continue to render black men's bodies in the South African imaginary as 'naturally' inclined toward violence and, in particular, sexual violence. In addition to this, given both the still highly racialised patterns of commuter transport in South Africa as well as the social and structural factors which largely render 'minibus taxis … a "black" cultural space' (Fletcher 2010: 87, quotations original), the male bodies that Thandiwe is likely to encounter in minibus taxis will be black and, in particular, African.

Thus, Thandiwe's powerful assertion that '[a] man can get you anywhere', draws attention to how her experience of the minibus taxi space and un/safety with/in this space is not only gendered and perhaps racialised, but, also, conditioned by the gendered and racialised histories of those bodies which board the minibus taxi, (trans)forming this space into one of/for potential sexual violence and inherent un/safety. What Thandiwe is therefore pointing out here is that unsafety, and not safety, is in fact the norm in this commuting space. It is in this sense that, at least for Thandiwe, the minibus taxi space becomes just *another* place where South African women can be raped and murdered by South African men. Thandiwe's experience here alludes to Gill Valentine's (1989) work in *The Geography of Women's Fear* that what may at first appear to be women's fear of place, may in fact be women's fear of men or women's fear of men in that place.

The 'anywhere-ing' of the minibus taxi space by Thandiwe should, however, not just be seen as a discursive manoeuvre which erases the spatial boundaries of the minibus taxi, but, in addition, as a material↔affective sense of space and safety in which the perception and feeling of the threat of sexual violence is not geographically localised and is not ontologically anchored with/in any particular place. What Thandiwe appears to articulate here is the metastasising quality of the threat of sexual violence as it (b)reaches into all spaces, occupying and marking the affective experience and tonalities of every(day) space in South Africa. Thandiwe reiterates this by making explicit reference to 'the post office, like Uyinene' and, in so doing, invokes the memory of Uyinene Mrwetyana, a 19-year-old University of Cape Town student who, in 2019, was raped and bludgeoned to death while collecting a parcel at a local post office (Cloete 2019) – sparking a series of nationwide protests by South African university students.

Conclusion

By drawing from unstructured individual interviews with a sample of South African women who use minibus taxis as their primary mode of commuting, the present study engaged affective atmospheres as an analytical tool to explore how women commuters experience the threat of sexual violence with/in these spaces.

While the study of violence against women in South Africa has certainly not ignored the influence of place in creating the spatial conditions which enable spatially localised forms of violence against women (Canham 2017; Maotoana, Govender, and Nel 2019; Salo et al. 2010), for the most part, this work has often treated the space/s of sexual violence as analytically secondary, that is, as 'context' or 'setting'. Thus, while this work has helped to focus attention to the peculiar patterns of spatially localised violence/s women are subjected to – in effect demonstrating that there is almost no space in which South African women can feel completely safe and free from the threat of sexual violence (Gqola 2015) – it has also had the effect of narrowing the analytical lens to the human subjects, bodies, and discourses under study.

What the findings of the present study point to is the need to consider also how the material, discursive and affective forces of space can become active co-participants in the (re)production of gender-based sexual violence/s. Space, in this instance, is not an inert 'backdrop' to violence, but, rather, does powerful work in relationally co-constituting the affective materialisation of the experience of the everyday threat of sexual violence against women. Thus, for this study, the use of affective atmospheres proved remarkably productive in exploring how women commuters both experience and navigate, in intimately embodied and embodying ways, the threat of sexual violence with/in minibus taxis. This brings to direct attention how minibus taxis are themselves gendered and gendering mobilities, with/in which 'gendered subjectivities and spaces are relationally reconstituted' (Cook and Butz 2020: 3).

In looking across all the extracts of data featured here, it is evident that the daily commute for South African women (of colour) who use minibus taxis is often marked by both a real and anticipated sense of unsafety being the rule, not the exception. Thus, while each of the data extracts in this study highlight how different senses of unsafety are constituted for these women, the spatial dimensions of the minibus taxi space become intimately intertwined with/in these experiences: for Pumza, space feels unsafe when she is commuting alone at night; for Tebogo, space feels unsafe when she is commuting in a crowded taxi surrounded by men; and, for Thandiwe, all space/s feel unsafe regardless of whether she is commuting or not. In addition to this, what all three data extracts yield is an insightful account of the kinds of gendered commuter resilience and safety strategies that these women commuters employ on a day-to-day basis in meeting the demands and violence/s of what it is to be not only a woman of colour in South Africa, but, moreover, a women of colour commuter who, through economic circumstance and historical-structural marginalisation, is unlikely to possess the kinds of commuter choice and agency more available in the Global West/North and by those more privileged (and typically white) South African women.

The experiential accounts offered by the women participating in this study highlighted how the threat of sexual violence with/in the peculiar spatialities of the confined yet mobile minibus taxi are made and unmade in gendered/ing ways through affective intensities coproduced by the jostling of gendered commuter bodies to occupy seat space, the recurrent boarding and debussing of commuter bodies, and the tempo and forces of motion as the taxi hurriedly navigates its way through South Africa's urban roadways. Yet, at the same time, these 'mobility assemblages' (Sheller 2018: 11) do not just entail the here-and-now agencies or forces of the commute but also co-implicate the historical and material weight of South Africa's racialized and classed geography. Through these shifting relational configurations, the material↔discursive↔affective forces of minibus taxi commuting (e)merge together in complex more-than↔human assemblages of taxi↔commuters↔bodies that affectively charge the commuting space, generating momentary as well as more prolonged micro-spatial atmospheres of and for the threat of sexual violence.

While, in some instances, the minibus taxi was constructed and experienced as a spatially unique space with/in which the threat of sexual violence (e)merges, in other instances, it was presented as just another place where South African women are at risk of rape and femicide. Yet, in all instances, the codification of male/men's bodies as objects of/for (sexual) violence appear integral to the threat of sexual violence when commuting with/in minibus taxis.

In sum, the findings of this study highlight how minibus taxis in South Africa need to be explicitly named as focal points for a gender-focused mobility justice which is particularly attentive to how women commuters from black and brown communities continue to face significant burdens and dangers in daily commuting, largely by virtue of their economic position as well as their spatial and geographic emplacement. This starts with ensuring that these women's daily commuter mobilities are not rendered as either gender-neutral spaces or neglected from inclusion within the 'everyday spaces' that women have to navigate strategically to avoid sexual harassment and violence. Indeed, the tendency to erase gender from South African public transport policy has been recently highlighted by the South African-based gender advocacy and non-profit organisation Sonke Gender Justice. In their brief, *Combatting gender-based violence through safer public transport: A policy shift*, they contend that ' … there has been no thorough consideration of commuters-specific experiences or a gendered perspective of public transport addressing strategies to mitigate gender-based violence, sexual harassment and crimes perpetrated against women … while commuting and utilizing public transport.' (Sonke Gender Justice 2019: 3).

By clearly recognising the need for a gender-focused mobility justice within the South Africa's commuter transport sector, broadly, and the minibus taxi industry, in particular, it becomes possible to extend academic, policy, and activist discourses on gendered spatial justice and so-called 'safer space' interventions to include the systems, networks, and modalities of commuter transport. What this ultimately points to is a far more capacious understanding of the psycho-social and spatial effects of South Africa's rape culture; namely, that South African women's experience of sexual violence and the threat thereof does not begin and end at the physical boundaries of specific localities or emplacements, but, rather, transits and moves with them.

Recommendations for future research

While this study focussed on women's spatialised experiences of the threat of sexual violence when commuting with minibus taxis, it is difficult to ignore the ever-present threat that men's bodies seemingly play in underwriting these experiences. Throughout the findings, male/men's bodies come to play both explicit and implicit roles in shaping the gendered mobilities of minibus taxi commuting for women as well as their experiences of the threat of sexual violence with/in these mobilities and the practices they employ to navigate these mobilities spatially.

Thus, in cultivating further critical work on gendered commuter mobilities broadly, and the minibus taxi system in particular, local research would need to be equally attentive to how South African men experience their commuter mobilities, commuting spaces, and commuting practices in gendered ways. Opportunities for focused and targeted interventions with men could perhaps become more possible by exploring how they engage and (corporeally) reproduce patriarchal ideologies or toxic forms of masculinity in the experience of both their bodies and the bodies of women when in the close confines of minibus taxi commuting.

Yet, solely concentrating on the men who commute with minibus taxis would be too narrow a focus because the experience of unsafety is systemic throughout this mode of commuting (Statistics South Africa 2021), and, furthermore, because men predominate all the strategic positions of this industry in South Africa. In this regard, it would also be necessary to engage the men who occupy different levels of the minibus taxi industry, including, drivers, regional bosses, and owners. The perspectives of different men from within this hierarchical and feudal commuting industry could be valuable in understanding (and disrupting) how gendered patterns and relations of transit

victimization that women are subjected to (by different men at different points in the system) become ingrained and normalized.

Notes

1. In South Africa, a 'minibus taxi' is a commuter-carrying motor vehicle that is designed to carry between 12 and 16 passengers, although typically overloaded with many more (Sauti 2006). They are not to be confused with smaller motor vehicle or metered taxi 'cabs' and do not operate along the lines of e-hailing taxis.
2. The continued use of apartheid-era racial terminology remains highly contested. In this study, the term 'black' is used in place of the ethno-cultural label of 'African' to emphasize political solidarity between all those people and communities of colour historically marginalised and segregated under apartheid, including those ethnically classified as 'Africans', 'Indians' and so-called 'Coloured' (or 'mixed race') South Africans.
3. According to Lorimer (2008), affect(s) can be best thought of as the 'properties, competencies, modalities, energies, attunements, arrangements and intensities of differing texture, temporality, velocity and spatiality, that act on bodies, are produced through bodies and transmitted by bodies' (552).
4. I employ the double arrow with the aim of disrupting the ontological boundedness we typically install between materiality, discourse, and affect, as well as between the human subject/body and the more-than-human world.
5. Although this article focuses on extracts of data from three participants, it is worth noting for context the preliminary results of a thematic analysis conducted for the purpose of another article. Through this analysis it has been evident that the participants shared many of the experiences brought to light here, including, but not limited to: a fear of commuting after sunset; the identification of any male commuter or driver as a potential assailant; the use of a range of behavioural strategies to navigate unwanted sexual advances when commuting; the use of personal safety measures to mitigate the risk of assault; and laissez-faire responses from male taxi drivers, fellow commuters, and law-enforcement officials when reporting incidences of sexual harassment.
6. Pseudonyms are used to identify all participants.
7. A colloquial reference to Mamelodi, a township originally established by the then apartheid government northeast of Pretoria (now Tshwane). It is now a formally demarcated but poorly resourced and generally low-income community which forms part of the City of Tshwane municipality.
8. A South African colloquialism, roughly translated: Do you know what I mean?

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