DESTABILIZING NATION AND CULTURE
How Zanele Muholi and Queer South African Women Are Creating Discursive Space through Visual Culture

A selection of some of the portraits in Zanele Muholi’s 2006-2010 exhibit, *Faces and Phases*.

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Abstract

In 1996, South Africa was the first country in the world to include constitutional protection for sexual orientation and sexual identity. In 2006, it became the fifth country in the world and the first in Africa to legalize gay marriage. While these progressive and inclusive foundations are indeed positive, South Africa’s queer community is still afflicted by sexism and homophobia, which for many intersects with racism and ethnic discrimination. Rejecting the status of victimhood and (re)claiming a self-articulated identity other than what homophobes deem deviant or demonized, South African LBT artists like Zanele Muholi are not only disrupting the image of nation by the very presence of their works in museums, galleries and other public venues, but they are actively carving out discursive space to articulate queer identities.
Notes on Terminology

In this thesis, I have chosen to use the terms Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans (LBT) and “queer women” interchangeably, knowing full well that the term “queer” and queer theory itself have not been widely used to discuss homosexuality and non-heteronormative sexualities in the South African context until recently (March Epprecht 2013, Henriette Gunkel 2010, Ruti Talmor 2013). I believe that the theoretical possibilities that queer theory allow are important for this thesis because, as Robert Leckey and Kim Brooks state in their introduction to *Queer Theory: Law, Culture, Empire*, “the attraction of queer theory is its resistance to definition.”¹ Born from the American queer movement of the 1990s, queer theory seeks to destabilize and deconstruct hetero-homo, male-female dichotomies as well as provide a theoretical foundation for the possibilities of thinking about gender in particular racialized, sexualized and localized ways.² My use of the terms LBT and “queer women” interchangeably is in no way meant to stabilize “queer” into an identity, but rather bring forward the multiplicities of identities (gendered, racialized, sexualized and localized) that can at times be reduced and stabilized by the terms Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans (LBT) which possess histories and connotations that are foreign to the experiences of queer South Africans.

The racial categories of “black” and “white” which I employ in this thesis require additional explication, especially in the context of a historically racialized South Africa. As Brenna Munro suggests, South apartheid’s organization of “state-inscribed fiction of racial categories” produced an ever-present social matrix of clear-cut racial and ethnic space—both symbolically and physically—that was demarcated through sexual regulation.³

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Registration Act of 1950 of the apartheid regime was the first instance of *official* racial categorization with “Whites” at the top, while those deemed “Colored” received “a modicum of relative privilege” with “Blacks” below, and “Indian” added in a later addendum. The legislation of racial hierarchization was the culmination of white supremacist ideology stemming from Dutch and British colonialism and served to preserve (white) racial purity. Since racial purity was inseparable from reproduction, these racial categories could only be shaped and informed by rules governing sex and sexual relations. The Group Areas Act of the same year functioned to not only categorize races but served to separate them further through physical demarcations. “Black Africans,” “Coloreds,” and “Indians” were expelled to locations out of “White” centers. It should be noted that the term “black African” or “Bantu” subsumed all of the Black ethnic groups in South Africa and included people from other countries such as Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Congo and Nigeria to name a few. In this thesis, I use the racial terms “black” and “white” not to reinforce the “state-inscribed fiction of racial categories” of the apartheid regime but rather to illustrate how certain subjects continued to be viewed, and treated, according to a racialized lens, and how the rigid boundaries of these inscribed categories can be used to disrupt notions of race and citizenship.

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Setting the Scene

One cannot speak of South Africa now and not speak of democracy. And yet, after over forty years of the apartheid regime—the culmination of 350 years of Dutch and British colonial rule—the vestiges of apartheid’s oppressive, systematic, and legislated racial segregation that lasted from 1948 to 1994 are still evident in the nation’s complex racial, class, and sexual relations. South Africa’s 1996 Constitution received international praise and acclaim as being the first in the world to provide protection of sexual orientation and identity, thereby enshrining the rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex [LGBTQI] citizens in the legal system. The legal protection for LGBTQI individuals is upheld on the international stage as evidence of democracy and human rights for all South Africans in the still nascent nation. Yet, as Brigitte Bagnol and others assert, apartheid rules and logic were not disposed of with the creation of the new constitution. Rather, they remain deeply entrenched and internalized within the legal system, and continue to manifest in social and sexual relations as well. South African society is “still characterized by separate living based on socially and culturally constructed identities.”\(^5\) South Africa still operates in a post-apartheid and post-colonial context—wherein remnants of both oppressive hegemonic structures impact the everyday lives of South Africans—and therefore has not realized its democratic promise of legal and social equality for all citizens, especially black and LGBTQI individuals.

Mary Hames, the director of the Gender Equity Unit at the University of the Western Cape states,

[LGBTQI] rights [will] never be properly addressed by being mainstreamed through the insertion of vague and token clauses about inclusiveness. . . mindssets cannot be

changed by litigation alone. The real challenge is for continuous education and sustained consciousness-raising and activism on all levels...It’s very important to claim the space. Raising awareness, reclaiming the words, and then taking over...

From the margins you push so that the center implodes and when the center is not there you can take over. Song and dance and poetry and drama and theatre, media, visual culture — I think we are slowly getting there... The words we speak are not from a space of victimhood. We will not speak ever from a place of victimhood.6

Drawing on Hames’ statement, I aim to interrogate the radical discursive work of carving out a space where the invisible is made visible in the South African context. As Hames states, the acceptance of queer people in the nation’s social imaginary cannot occur through legislation alone. Rather, as she implies, it requires a conscious and active reclamation of words and images imposed upon South Africa’s LGBTQI community and a simultaneous assertion of what it means to be queer. Currently, much of the journalistic rhetoric surrounding homosexuality and lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LBT) women in South Africa is focused on sexual violence and hate crimes driven by homophobia. The international media coverage, as well as national reporting of assaulted LBT individuals imposes destructive images and words upon the LBT community in two interlocking ways. Firstly, LBT women are stripped of their individuality and personhood while secondly, the experiences of the LBT community are reduced to the violence inflicted upon them, further homogenizing a complex and diverse community. In this way, the mass media has defined the space allowed for LBT women in South Africa: as a place of victimhood and marginalization. And in this space, the homosexual subject is constituted as already fully “known,” erased of personhood and representative of a generalized category of LBT.

By fully “known,” I draw on Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty’s analyses of ideologically inflected discourses that conceal and speak on behalf of certain groups of

people, specifically the “third world woman.” Spivak’s seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” addresses the disempowering narratives that converge at the site of the postcolonial Indian woman. Beginning with India’s colonial administration and extending to present-day Indian nativists and foreign liberals, Spivak points out how these narratives produced about and on behalf of women render them silent, spoken for, and unable to speak for themselves. Mohanty’s essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” is also concerned with how the categories of “woman” and the “third world woman” are ideologically articulated as “known,” rendering them unable to speak. She critiques how Western feminist texts of the 1970s and 1980s assumed the category of “woman” as homogenous and “known” as disempowered because of patriarchy. In this conception, the oppressed “woman” is white and Western by default, and imagines any “woman” from outside the U.S. as further dispossessed. In that framework, the “third world woman,” a category that subsumes a myriad of nations, cultures, socio-economic and political groups, is always “known” as victimized, dispossessed, and silent, necessitating someone to speak on her behalf. In the case of the South African black LBT subject, as depicted by the international and national popular press, she is generalized, fully “known,” and written about as victimized by definition. This silencing is significant because it occurs, through the media, in the public sphere—the space where nation is performed.

Hames writes, “from the margins you push so that the center implodes and when the center is not there you can take over.” For marginalized black queer South Africans, the challenge to confront how nation is (to be) performed is critical to securing social and even legal rights. Through the medium of visual art artists are able to redefine and create discursive spaces that make “see-able” the ways individuals in the LBT community mediate aspirations of self-assertion and entrenched perceptions of (sexual) morality and propriety. Zanele
Muholi is one such artist, and identifies as lesbian and queer.7 A black, isiZulu photographer and self-named “visual activist” from Umlazi Township in Durban, South Africa, Muholi began her photographic career in 2003 after completing a Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg. She held a solo exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery entitled *Visual Sexuality* in 2004 and received the prestigious Tollman Award for Visual Arts a year later.8

Muholi’s work stages what is at stake for black LBT subjects in South Africa, while offering a platform upon which to analyze the nexus of art, activism and sexual identity on both a national and global scale. While this essay focuses specifically on Muholi’s work, this is by no means an attempt on my part to erase those that precede her and are currently creating work in South Africa that destabilizes notions of nation or citizen by challenging racial, gender, sexual and class disparities. Jean Brundit, Dineo Seshee, Evan Oberholsten, Senzeni Marasela, Andrew Versteer, Bev Palesa Ditsie, Lerato Shadi, and Clive van den Berg are a few such artists who come to mind, the latter being an invaluable art curator who has heavily influenced Muholi’s visibility across the nation’s art scene. As an artist with considerable work showcased in South African galleries and museums, as well as in various international galleries and museums, my focus on Muholi’s work stems from its ease of access and the impact of this widespread work in its public and unwavering declaration of black homosexuality. Muholi is one of many queer artists from South Africa generating work in a vibrant art community, yet there are reasons that need interrogating for why she is presently such a “hot” artist globally.


While the bulk of Muholi’s work is inclusive of the entire LGBTQI community in South Africa, this thesis will address her photographs of black queer women, specifically the *Faces and Phases* and *Indawo Yami* exhibitions, to locate the ways in which black LBT women negotiate sexual codes in both the private and public spheres. Her photography produces a visual representation of LBT women for the LGBTQI community in empowering, recognizable, and desirable ways, and additionally serves to locate this marginalized and stigmatized community in the broader South African visual landscape. At times memorializing victims of homophobic hate crimes, and in other instances depicting LBT women engaging in quotidian activities, Muholi’s work functions to both contribute to, and disrupt the nation’s visual memory. Muholi draws from a tradition of street photography in South Africa, thus employing a grassroots approach that shifts the gaze from the omnipresent state to a more intimate, personal, and honest, yet visibly public visualization. Her artistic choice to break away from a tradition of stylized, studio portraiture, as seen in the brick walls, metal gates, parks, and tree bark that comprise the backgrounds of *Faces and Phases* accentuates her aim of creating work that is both a self-articulated assertion of black queerness (by the participants themselves) and an everyday reflection of South Africa itself. In *Indawo Yami*, meaning “my place” or “my space” in isiZulu, Muholi once again forgoes the studio photographic technique and shoots predominantly in private homes and bedrooms, photographing her subjects in what could be interpreted as couples.

The creation of this visual archive is first and foremost for, and of, the queer South African community. It also functions as a radical disruption of national and communal spaces such as museums, galleries, universities and community centers wherein LBT women previously made invisible, can now be acknowledged, seen, and known by the South African public. By so doing, her work and that of others who identify as queer challenges notions of post-apartheid nationality and citizenship (read: straight and white), calling into question the
dissonance between legal inclusion and persistent homophobia. In the exhibition catalogue of “Faces and Phases,” Muholi states that she “embarked on a journey of visual activism to ensure that there is black queer visibility. It is important to mark, map and preserve our mo(ve)ments through visual histories for reference and posterity so that future generations will note that we were here.” As seen in Muholi’s use of the word “activist” and Hames’ idea that from the “margins you push so that the center implodes and when the center is not there you can take over taking over,” both see queer visibility through the arts as a radical act of contest and conquest, an act that unsettles and puts into crisis the values of the patriarchal and heterosexual nation. Muholi’s photographic “archive” of queer South Africans focuses the lens and by extent the viewer on black queer bodies; her work explicitly and unapologetically pushes the marginalized queer body to the center of the national stage. These works additionally put into crisis sentiments of homosexuality being un-African and against South African “culture.” I am especially drawn to the photograph “Mini and Le Sishi” (Figure 1) where Muholi photographs two black persons, one of whom identifies as a trans woman, the other a gay man. One is wearing beaded Zulu tapestries as a female Zulu virgin would wear and the other dons contemporary bracelets on their arms, colorful combs in their hair and is delicately touching the other in a platonic way. This beautifully staged photograph queers male-female gendered norms in both a cultural and contemporary framework, that both affirms a queer and culturally-rooted identity. The juxtaposition of isiZulu beadwork and contemporary fashions also defies and denies the modern-tradition binary that tends to inform notions of homosexuality being un-African and against South African “culture.”

In spite of racism, sexism, homophobia and acts of violence against queer South African media makers, artists like Muholi, actively create visual space in the public sphere—the space in which nation is performed—where LGBTQI people can articulate themselves. By making visible these “culturally” deviant identities, they rupture the nation(al) and destabilize what citizen(ship) looks like, especially since Muholi’s work is oftentimes a reflection of everyday terrain.
Methodology and Chapter Overview

This thesis will discuss the various notions of nation(hood) and where LGBTQI people, specifically LBT women, are located in South Africa's conception of self. I especially consider what Zethu Matebeni calls the “great paradox” of legal representation and protection versus daily experiences of racism, sexism and homophobia all functioning within a highly patriarchal society. In Chapter 2 “The ‘Rainbow’ Nation,” I begin with a discussion surrounding sexuality and race in the context of 350 years of colonialism and 46 years of apartheid rule, showing how the accretion of race-based sexual segregation reconfigures in post-apartheid South Africa. Building upon the works of Zethu Matebeni, Henriette Gunkel, and other scholars, this essay will parse out the arguments invoked when vilifying non-heteronormative sexualities and their institutional grounding in cultural and religious frames. My extended focus on cultural and religious frames in Chapter 2 is due to the fascinating ways that cultural and religious discourses dominate public life in present-day South Africa. In Chapter 3 “Queer Media Makers Disrupting the Default,” I discuss how queer artists disrupt the default citizen by addressing the nation’s particular coinage of inclusivity and transcendence in the “rainbow” nation. By contributing to the nation’s visual culture, LBT artists disrupt ideas of nation(hood) and subject(hood) while simultaneously de-territorializing the spaces within which they can articulate queerness on their own terms. I end this thesis by troubling Susan Sontag’s claim that photography is an act of nonintervention, showing how Muholi’s photographs of black queer women are acts of radical political and social intervention.

In the POSTSCRIPT, I offer a possible analysis of the precarious role of the transnational African artist creating work within Western art markets and the implications of

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10 Ibid, p. 381.
Zanele Muholi knowingly or unknowingly playing into the tropes that at times exceptionalize suffering or vulnerability of subjects in the Global South. While this section is intentionally not part of my thesis, embarking on this thesis project brought up many questions of what it means to be an African artist whose work is globally consumed and I felt it necessary to put my findings and thoughts to paper.

My research is based on close analysis of the various textual and online resources on the formation of social and sexual relations in South Africa, and a close reading and analysis of Zanele Muholi’s *Faces and Phases* and *Indawo Yami* exhibitions as primary sources. I bring the texts, online and photographic works into conversation using the theoretical frameworks of the public sphere, the politics of representation, queer theory, and postcolonial theory. Using an intersectional lens—that is, taking into account the multiple and converging vectors of race, gender and socio-economic class of individuals—this thesis will engage with the visual works to show how they aspire to redefine and create space to articulate and assert the various identities of the queer community in distinct and politically potent ways. Throughout this thesis, I seek to answer the question of where queer, black South Africans can figure into the nation’s imaginary against the backdrop of a national history deeply entrenched in racial, gendered and sexual hierarchies. Is there space for such a person to be seen and represented? What does it mean for this citizen to publicly assert a queer identity in the “Rainbow Nation?”
At the 2009 *Innovative Women* exhibition in Johannesburg, the then South African Minister of Arts and Culture Lulu Xingwana exited the show in disgust, stating that she found some of the works “immoral, offensive and going against nation-building.” Queer photographer and activist Zanele Muholi was one of the artists whose work was on display; work that the exhibition's catalogue described as “without precedent in South Africa, where there are very few instances of black women openly portraying female same-sex practices.” While Xingwana’s spokeswoman later tried to remedy the Minister’s reaction of distaste, the incident brought to light the great paradox of South Africa: it was the first in Africa and the world to provide constitutional protection along the lines of sexual orientation, and yet the very advocates of the law target LGBTQI individuals in unconstitutionally violent and dangerous ways. What does freedom really mean or come to mean in South Africa? How is it that the nation’s democratic triumph does not fully extend to its LGBTQI population? How do social relations concretized during apartheid re-emerge in the post-apartheid state? Who is the “proper” citizen Xingwana’s language describes?

**Unity in Diversity, Freedom for All**

Taking the stage in an historic moment, celebrated in South Africa and around the world, Nelson Mandela’s inauguration speech on May 1994 heralded the rebirth of a nation that would uphold “prosperity, non-sexism, non-racialism and democracy.” In that speech he used a term (with contested origin) to refer to the nascent South African state: the

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“Rainbow Nation,” “on which profound acts of collective self-redefinition could be pinned.”

What ensued was the wholehearted embrace of this metaphor in the popular discourse of the nation to conjure feelings of hope, humor, celebration, pride and most of all, aspirations for a new and free nation. Twenty-one years later though, a history of distinct and concrete racial segregation is reconfigured in the social, political and economic topography of post-apartheid South Africa as was briefly discussed in the introduction.

The rigid racial mapping of the apartheid era created a very particular understanding of social relationships, pertaining specifically to sexual interactions. While 1948 marks the official beginning of the apartheid regime, the ruling white minority had established laws that built upon regional and ethnic affiliations and transformed them into deeper separations. The difference that emerged from the 1900s onward was the incorporation of a so-called biological basis to justify racism and segregation. For instance, the Black Land Act of 1913 expelled black Africans from fertile land, limiting black ownership to 7% and creating reserves for them. The 1927 Immorality Act outlawed extramarital sexual intercourse between whites and black Africans; in so doing “the state tried to prevent erotic and sexual desires across ‘races/colors/ethnicities’ and to punish it.”

The state-inscribed biopolitical project used biology as an alibi for economic dispossession and expropriation, as instituted by the 1945 Native Consolidation Act which forced African males to carry passes which served to prove their presence in urban areas was solely for work purposes, while a 1949

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The most recent consensus attributes the term “rainbow nation” in the South African context to the Archbishop Desmond Tutu. American reverend, Jesse L. Jackson, Sr. coined the term in the context of the United States in a speech on July 18, 1984 when he said “our flag is red, white and blue, but our nation is a rainbow—red, yellow, brown, black and white—and we're all precious in God's sight;”


amendment to the Immorality Act outlawed sexual intercourse between whites and coloreds and Asians. These two laws further delimited country and space along racial and ethnic lines, maintaining the apartheid state’s fixation on the body: firstly, of the migrant worker whose movement must be surveilled and secondly, the racialized bodies of the nation whose respective purities should be preserved by the state and law. As Ryan R. Thoreson asserts, “under apartheid, the official fear of racial mixing was closely tied to the preservation of the white, heterosexual, reproductive family, spawning unforgiving prohibitions—on miscegenation, homosexuality and non-procreative sexuality.” Moral panic surrounding miscegenation imagined this as a loss of (white) racial purity. This panic was in direct relation to “Die Swart Gevaar” or “black threat,” the perceived threat of the majority black population overthrowing the minority white government. The entirely imagined and irrational discourse of “black threat” justified racial and ethnic creation and segregation. These laws served to preserve racial purity among the various races, and ultimately uphold white supremacy. This splitting and fragmenting of South African society on the basis of alleged biology was an effective and long-lasting means of controlling the population.

The founding principles of post-apartheid South Africa were delineated in its 1996 Constitution and therefore had to accomplish two things: grant equal citizenship to its inhabitants, and redress the racial wrongdoings of the apartheid regime. The first was unprecedented and incredibly important, because until then, South Africa’s non-white peoples had been deprived of being rights-deserving-citizens on the basis of “descent and appearance,” while the second was an attempt to remedy the national social imaginary. By the latter, I mean that the Constitution sought to deconstruct the colonial constructions of

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17 Ibid. p. 285
South Africa deeply embedded in the political, economic and social governance of the nation before independence. These colonial logics, as Melissa Steyn asserts, served as the foundations of a “white cultural knowledge of the Other,” which “systematically reproduced disdain for, and fear of, the African continent and its people.” The disdain for, and fear of, the peoples of the African continent—black and colored South Africans to be more precise—chiseled the nation’s racialized social hierarchies. This accretion of bias and dispossession embodied in apartheid was the very thing that had to be dismantled. Against this backdrop, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa sought to redefine the nation by promoting unity in diversity as a concern of the personal and the public.

The Constitution, in direct opposition to its predecessor foregrounds the rhetoric of freedom with over forty clauses with reference to “freedom” thereby establishing the democratic nation as inclusive and progressive. The implications of this are vast for a once divided and presently diverse population. As of 2013, the population of South Africa was 53,675,563, with 80.2% identifying as black African, 8.8% colored, 8.4% white and 2.5% Asian (including Indian). The country boasts an impressive eleven official languages: Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu, and sees itself as the very racially, ethnically and linguistically international country it is, with the additional promotion and respect of German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu, Urdu as well as Arabic, Hebrew and Sanskrit.


19 Republic of South Africa Constitution ch. II. cl. 9.3.


All are embraced and protected by the Constitution, yet the everyday experiences of LGBTQI individuals are marred by sexism, homophobia and for many, racism. It should be mentioned that class also plays a significant role in how LGBTQI individuals experience homophobia.

The notion of “freedom for all” is an aspiration within the nation—one that exudes a worldliness and progressivism unmatched in the Global South—which is nevertheless a freedom for those who claim a heterosexual identity and engage in heterosexual practices. In a 2003 questionnaire given by the South African Social Attitudes Survey to 4,980 respondents comprising adults aged 16 and older across province, geography (urban/rural) and population group (race), respondents were asked about “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex.” Of the group, 84% answered “always wrong” or “almost always wrong,” while a mere 7% felt that it was “not wrong at all.” As this questionnaire suggests, despite the Constitution granting progressive civil liberties for LGBTQI persons, the recognition of non-heteronormative sexual orientation and identity is not regarded favorably by the general population. Furthermore, government officials and public figures capitalize on these anxieties to further their own agendas, especially since as Marc Epprecht suggests, LGBTQI citizens are easy targets for such public figures. For politicians and religious figures, “simplistic fundamentalist ideologies and scapegoating [sexual] minorities have a powerful appeal,” often espoused with “anti-feminism, blame-the-West-for-everything and other xenophobic rhetoric.” To return to Minister Xingwana, her words are a prime example of the simplistic and populist rhetoric Epprecht points out. Xingwana stating that same-sex women are both immoral and destructive to nation-building not only feeds into existing discourse of religious morality and cultural propriety, but as Yvette Christiansé asserts: “in a


context in which homophobia has already targeted women who love women, the Minister’s statements are not simply unfortunate. They are downright dangerous.”

Her discriminatory words in that moment painted a picture of who comprised a “proper” citizen of the nation, and by extent, who was undeserving of “proper” citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa.

Despite the constitutional success for LGBTQI rights, South Africa remains a deeply conservative and heteronormative country. A late apartheid-era study showed similar anti-gay responses to the 2003 study by the South African Social Attitudes Survey. In the apartheid study, “over 70% thought that homosexuality between consenting adults should not be legalized” compared to the 2003 study with an overwhelming 84% deeming sexual relations between two adults of the same sex “‘always wrong’ or ‘almost always wrong.’” If the democratic post-apartheid state sees itself as the progressive and inclusive nation its laws profess, what then, does it mean for a public government figure to storm out of the exhibit after seeing intimate photographs of black LBT women, calling it immoral and against nation-building? What frameworks are informing her (and by extent, the public/governmental) notion of morality? What frameworks are informing her—and by extent the governments—notion of nation-building? Minister Xingwana said, “our mandate is to promote social cohesion and nation building. I left the exhibition because it expressed the very opposite of this.”

Zanele Muholi’s photographs uncompromisingly and unapologetically beckon the people of South Africa, the government and public figures alike.

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to look and see the injustices experienced amongst the nation’s queer community. More than that, they force the people of South Africa to see themselves in the faces of very people deemed unnatural, and un-African. One can only imagine the impact of making visible these “traditionally” deviant identities, especially as they challenge and they rupture the nation’s conception of self.

Cultural Frames

Accusations of deviance have real consequences and have increased on the continent in recent years. Beginning with the President of Zimbabwe Robert Mugabe deeming gay men and lesbian women “worse than pig and dogs” in 1995 to the former presidents of Namibia, and Zambia, and the King of Swaziland, African leaders have made headlines in the press for their violent homophobic rhetoric. Most recently (and infamously), the President of Nigeria Goodluck Jonathan signed a bill that criminalizes and penalizes same-sex relationships, while President Yahya Jammeh stated that he would slit the throat of any gay man wanting to marry another man in Gambia. This discourse, graphic as it appears, is also usually laced with declarations that homosexuality is un-African. Various scholars have stated that this rhetoric of the cultural foreignness of non-heterosexual desire is an effective way of distracting the public from economic and political disenfranchisement. In using the LGBTQI population as a scapegoat, thereby distracting and appealing to the masses, this discourse masks—or at the very least quells—public anxieties surrounding governmental corruption. While this thesis does not deal with the reductive and destructive consequences of such discourse, scholars


have warned against overemphasizing it, especially as articulated from a European or American perspective.\textsuperscript{30} I will, however note that Xingwana’s speech occurred around the time that the African National Congress (ANC) party was growing increasingly unhappy with newly elected President and head of the party, Jacob Zuma on counts of corruption and touting tradition for personal political ends.\textsuperscript{31} The question therefore is, was Xingwana’s speech a politically orchestrated maneuver of distraction from Zuma’s politics or a cavalier act of unwitting discrimination?

In the general public (and heralded by politicians), homosexuality is identified “directly or indirectly, as an indicator of Westernization, as being a Western product imported by the West through colonialism.”\textsuperscript{32} Many scholars have traced the existence of non-heteronormative attraction and sexualities on the continent of Africa, but have emphasized how these different modes of non-male-female sexual attraction were not labeled as “homosexuality” throughout the various histories and cultures (Gunkel 2010; Tamale 2011; Munro 2012; Epprech 2012 and 2013; Bagnol et. al. 2015). The research on pre-colonial queer relations aims to shed light on how the “homosexuality is un-African” argument is deployed in the present by various African leaders to entangle decolonization projects with anti-homosexuality, anti-feminism, anti-West and xenophobia among other such oppositional modes of self-definition. Apartheid South Africa—as mapped out through legislation—was hyper-concerned with the preservation of the white race as reproduced by heterosexual procreation. Homosexuality (as embodied by any race) in that setting was both a threat to


whiteness or the reproduction of white supremacy, and a threat to the existing roles of gender—not to mention the role of mission education in the colonizing project.\textsuperscript{33} 

In the redefinition project of post-apartheid South Africa, despite legislative protection, heteronormativity and homophobia functions on-the-ground as “a national/cultural identity-building project.”\textsuperscript{34} If the black body in the apartheid era had a sub-human status, the reclamation of self as fully human and therefore a rights-bearing-citizen, requires an aspiration to certain sexual and behavioral norms. Interestingly, there are similar reverberations between apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa in the way that the national imaginary defines itself in terms of a populist heterosexuality. The “homosexuality in un-African” discourse in the present appeals to a politically and economically disenfranchised majority who fear the unknown and more importantly, find stability and comfort in a sense of cultural or national unity. This is predicated upon ideas of reproduction and “proper” citizenship. The person who does not reproduce for the nation cannot be understood by the nation as useful and must therefore be expelled. This logic is embedded and entangled in the rhetoric of homosexuality’s immorality and un-Africanness. Knowing full well the innumerable cultures and traditions present on the continent, this myth of a single cultural and traditional understanding that spans a continent of 54 countries is invoked by African leaders themselves as a politics of distraction. In South Africa, this discourse claims a particular kind of morality which is ironically entangled in European colonial and religious tenets. This rhetoric of homosexuality as “un-African” works to exclude queer individuals from citizenship, all the while homogenizing the multiplicity of cultures and traditions in the region to a monolithic “culture.” At its most dangerous, it contributes to the erasure of the violence faced by queer people by deviating attention from pressing issues, to populist

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.} p. 30

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.} p. 46
lamentations on the supposed degradation of African culture. Minister Xingwana’s words align morality with a (Christian) God, yet this religiously-based morality is selective and additionally culturally-inflected. President Jacob Zuma’s corruption and sexual assault allegations have not been deemed “immoral” by government officials, nor have his numerous marriages—allowed under customary law—been accused of being immoral according to the precepts of Christianity. In a nation that exhibits a wealth of diversity, it is perplexing that a single moral consensus could be achieved, yet what is at the heart of the minister’s words is that it is queer sexuality and sexual identity that are against “social cohesion and nation building.”

In an interview between Letitia Smuts, a professor of sociology and gender, and Rihanna, a black woman from Soweto (an urban area of Johannesburg), Rihanna’s responses illuminate the very complex and entangled dynamics of race, sexuality, wealth and visibility, tellingly articulated through the rhetoric of culture. Her interview deserves quoting at length, especially when asked whether it is important to be involved in LGBTQI organizations:

Rihanna: No. I don't want to draw attention to myself.
Interviewer: But do you think it is important?
Rihanna: I guess so. But it's only certain types of people who can do it.
Interviewer: Like who?
Rihanna: Those who can afford to reveal their sexual preference and not be judged.
[Pause]
Interviewer: What type of lesbian women do you think that would be?
Interviewer: But there are a lot of black women who get involved in these type of organizations, so what do you think of that?
Rihanna: I don't know. I think they come from a different place than me. They don't have to live like my culture says you should. Or they are also rich. I actually don't know how they do it. It's not a 'black' thing. Not in our culture.


I quote this interview to address how ideas about culture, class, race and homosexuality play out in (inter)personal ways throughout daily life. Rihanna’s responses illustrate the complexities of publicly asserting a queer identity in a nation demarcated along racial lines, where white women or richer black women are more free to exert an overt non-heteronormative sexuality. She highlights the emptiness and simplicity in the phrase “rainbow nation,” as well as the struggles poor, black, queer women face in being visible about their sexual orientation based on culture. Rihanna’s answers bring to light the privileges that come from whiteness—which is assumed to be tradition-less. What is also illuminated from her responses is the issue of class. In the present, as other researchers have noted, class or wealth are substitutes for race. That is, wealth can be seen as a means of climbing the social ladder while simultaneously dismantling racial hierarchies. The black LBT women Rihanna perceives to be actively and visibly engaged in activism therefore must be wealthier.

A sociological study undertaken across Johannesburg by scholars Brigitte Bagnol, Zethu Matebeni, Anne Simon, Thomas M. Blaser, Sandra Manuel and Laura Moutinho discovered that queer visibility is expressed through new configurations of identities that aren’t entirely based on race. The four neighborhoods they observed consisted of very specific racial, and therefore economic distinctions. Despite Johannesburg’s cosmopolitanism, wealthier areas were predominantly white, while middle-class neighborhoods could have a minority population of black and colored people; the poorest areas were largely black. From what that the researchers observed of LGBTQI individuals at bars, nightclubs, restaurants and on college campuses was that “the notion of race is shifting from a constructed paradigm of ‘race/color/ethnicity’ to a more fluid notion that includes
access to resources, thus social class, and taste.” In Sandton, an upper-class district mainly frequented by affluent white and black people, spaces were organized by class and wealth rather than race. They found that there were a few specific bars and clubs geared towards LGBTQI individuals and that in predominantly heterosexual environments, queerness was visible and was a non-issue for patrons. Despite these seemingly racial-blind configurations, Bagnol et. al. highlight the smattering of interracial interaction and even fewer instances of interracial relationships.

The apartheid regime circumscribed hierarchical positions of power onto visual characteristics (i.e. race), making interracial romantic relationships at the time, inconceivable. To change a nation’s way of seeing—in the present day—where non-white doesn’t fall below white requires an unlearning of the logics of apartheid. “Caitlin and I” (Figure 2) is a triptych in Muholi’s *Indawo Yami* exhibition that troubles (post-) apartheid’s way of seeing. If—as I have outlined—apartheid social relations reconfigure in the present, Muholi’s photograph addresses issues of race, sexuality and gender in radical way. Muholi and Caitlin are in the nude and looking directly into the camera lens, which by extent, looks directly at the viewer. Their very presence in the triptych is significant in that it challenge notions of race and racial hierarchy, as well as questions of culture. It could be read as reifying white superiority on black bodies, but I would disagree with that interpretation. While their gaze is arresting, there is something vulnerable about the way their bodies are positioned. Caitlin is almost draped on top of Muholi whose mouth is obscured by her hand. Muholi is lying on her stomach, while Caitlin, lying on her back fits perfectly on top of Muholi’s back and buttocks. The image shows an intimate moment shared between two women evoking pleasure and desire—which I maintain is a radical rupture in how the nation sees. They maintain the gaze in this

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photograph, shifting the power dynamic from viewer looking upon this intimate moment, to a white and black couple looking at the viewer. This shift doesn’t merely invite discussion, but forces it. As a marginalized community, the power of making visible queer intimacy in an image that is displayed in public spaces is an act of carving out discursive space wherein previously invisibilized issues must be discussed. These discursive spaces confront a nation whose way of seeing has historically been along the lines of heterosexuality and rigid racial separation. Work like this additionally and simultaneously enables the queer community to offset the logics of dominant groups.

Interracial relationships contain immense potential for unlearning and undoing the ways of seeing that the apartheid regime delineated. They also play a major role in the arguments espoused by proponents of the homosexuality is “un-African” rhetoric. In another interview between Letitia Smuts and Bonni, a middle-class black woman raised in a suburb of Johannesburg, Bonni recounts her relationship with a white woman and the discomfort that caused for her family and friends. She states, “homosexuality is not widely acceptable in black culture, so they think my [white] girlfriend influenced me in some way.”

Bonni’s use of the term “black culture” is similar to “African culture” in that both arguments maintain that there is a singular African or black culture that is fundamentally devoid of non-heterosexual sexuality and sexual identity. Internalizing what her friends and family may (or may not) think, she then states that they see her homosexuality as caused by a foreign and

Figure 2. “Caitlin and I.” Boston, USA, 2009 from Zanele Muholi’s *Indawo Yami* Exhibition.

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white agent. Invoking this myth of homosexuality not being acceptable in African traditions, and emphasizing its foreignness, Bonni’s comments illuminate the ways culture plays out on a personal level and how racial distinction upholds this myth.

If the colonial experience and inherited ideas of morality and sexuality shape the social, racial and sexual topography of present-day South Africa, Zanele Muholi’s photography unapologetically forces the “rainbow” nation to take a long hard look at itself for all its talk of progress and inclusivity. Indeed some progress has been made: in post-apartheid South Africa, the black body is now a rights-bearing person, and the black female body, a nation-bearing subject.

Historically, the black female body in apartheid South Africa was at the bottom of the racial/social ladder while the white woman was sacred, as she was to reproduce the nation. White masculinity was sovereign, while the soil of the nation was tilled by the sweat and blood of black people. I do not need to trace the horrors of the treatment of the black female body, perhaps best epitomized by the utter disregard for, disfigurement, and mutilation of Sara Baartman’s body in the name of science. In the post-apartheid state, the task at hand is to redress and reclaim the black female body. However, the postcolonial strides to so consists of a project to desexualize it.39 This desexualizing of black femininity is accomplished through its covering: literally with clothing, and symbolically through a performance of hyper-morality. In a conversation with Yvette Christiansë, writer, poet, professor and advisor of this thesis, she introduced me to her concept of “biomorality” which is an apt term for the hyper-morality black people (but women especially) must perform in present-day South Africa. Biomorality refers to the way in which the state depersonalizes the queer body in South Africa’s laissez-faire neoliberal economy. If the apartheid state maintained its sovereignty and defined its authority through the biopolitical project of making the black body a machine,

the post-apartheid state (through the Constitution) firstly and positively redresses the body and reclaims it as fully human, but secondly makes the black body the embodiment of morality and civility—a task unasked of the white body. Minister Xingwana’s reaction to the *Innovative Women* art exhibition is case and point of the way this new regime of biomorality plays out. Indeed, as she defines the “proper” rights-deserving-citizen, she does so through the expulsion of the improper: the black queer body. Zanele Muholi’s work reclaims this black body, and redressing this queer body that the state depersonalizes and invisibilizes. Muholi’s work celebrates non-heterosexual sexuality and her endearing, honest portraits in *Faces and Phases* halts the judgmental attitudes towards queer South Africans.

As briefly discussed in the introduction, it is in the (international and national) media that the black LBT female body is doubly stripped of its individuality and presented as fully known. Discussing the importance of ethical research when it comes to the non-heteronormative sexualities present on the African continent, Sylvia Tamale traces the long and fraught lineage of knowledge constructions about Africa wholly based on the binary/power dynamic of “knower” and the “knowable” who becomes the “known.”

Similar to colonial research that paints silent Africans as always-already known and knowable, Chandra Mohanty in “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” describes the assumption of knowing the “Third World Woman” as written about in Western feminist work. Mohanty is troubled by scholarship that assumes the category of “woman” as existing transnationally, but more-so that the “Third World Woman” is a homogenized and globally powerless category because the experiences and lived realities of individuals of disparate geographies, races and ethnicities can be reduced to a singular reality of socio-economic and political tumult.

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multiple experiences of LBT women in South Africa—as articulated by the media—are homogenized and understood as fully-known and always-already victimized. This said, it is also true that major studies and journalistic work on sexuality throughout the continent have been financially or programmatically sponsored by external donors and funding-dependent non profits (Tamale, 2011; Epprecht, 2013). This undoubtedly influences the rhetoric surrounding the continent, depicting Africa as culturally homophobic.

In direct opposition to ways mass media outlets depict LBT women in South Africa, Muholi’s images actively disallow a single narrative of queer South African lives. I am of the belief that Muholi’s work is a bold reclamation of a sexual desire and intimacy for the black body that was denied by colonialism, apartheid, and the new regime of biomorality. Her figures, at least in the moment of being captured on camera, are not concerned with hyper-performing a notion of morality that fits comfortably into what is expected of the black South African citizen, nor do they fit into the mold of what the nation hails is the norm: heterosexual and white.

**Religious Frames**

As has been outlined, anti-homosexual populist rhetoric deployed by public officials frames non-heteronormative identities as foreign to (South) African “culture.” From Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe to South African Minister Lulu Xingwana, these condemnatory sentiments of morality, nature, and culture are often enmeshed in religious discourses. Marian Burchardt writes, “Public debates on the real or alleged antagonism between religious rights and claims to sexual difference are currently capturing the attention of activists and populations worldwide.” In contemporary South Africa, these debates occur in newspapers, magazines, television and radio shows and are generally discussed in public

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life. In her study of two of South Africa’s largest media houses: the Independent Online and the Sunday Times from 1999 to March 2012, Louise Vincent categorizes the three dominant themes that arise in debates surrounding homosexuality. The first is that of homosexuality being unnatural, the second, its un-Africaness and the last, its ungodliness. Vincent suggests that, “Language plays a central role in our strategies for acquiring, demanding or refusing social goods such as rights, dignity, social status, social acceptability and in particular in the construction of that most privileged status of all, ‘normality.’”  

Given Minister Xingwana’s “against nation-building” argument—when vilifying the works of art showcased at the Innovative Women exhibition—we must ask where culture and nature converge with religion in the national debate against queer identities? How are these religious arguments deployed, and to what effect? With the largest media houses in South Africa participating in, and contributing to a particular type of national identity-building effort that privileges sexual “normalcy” as it is understood through cultural and religious frames, a deep-dive into the nations religious topography is necessary to uncover anti-LGBTQI arguments which homogenize and conceal complex faiths, histories and institutions.

The debates of non-heterosexual identity and activity being un-African, have been discussed in the context of public officials employing populist rhetoric as a politics of distraction. This paper has also illuminated how these anti-homosexuality arguments are part and parcel of the post-apartheid regime of biomorality. Within religious frames, homosexuality is viewed by various denominations as ungodly, which is meant to mean that it is against existing religious beliefs; other denominations are tolerant towards LGBTQI persons, while others still are welcoming to queer individuals. Indeed as Robert Garner asserts, “Taxonomies of the churches in South Africa are many and varied. They may be

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based on racial, linguistic, organizational or theological criteria, or any combination.’’

Eighty percent of South Africans self-identify as Christian, and for the purposes of analysis, distinct denominations—mainline churches, Evangelical churches, Pentecostal churches and “African-Initiated Churches”—will be discussed and analyzed for their responses to non-heteronormative sexuality and desire. These Christian denominations have varying and distinct relationships with homosexuality which interweave narratives of nature and culture with religion, all the while shedding light on their various histories and political engagements. Burchardt analyzes the role of liberalism, fundamentalism, and isolationism within the foundational tenets of these three Christian denominations in South Africa, and identifies how they respond to (anti) homosexuality in public national discourse.

Liberalism, in the context of religious tradition in South Africa is ascribed to mainline churches where responses to homosexuality are “embedded in broader concerns regarding social justice, transformation, and democracy.’’ For many—like public figure and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu—the LGBTQI rights movement is paralleled with the black struggle against apartheid. In the case of apartheid, non-whites were discriminated against on the basis of ontological race, so too, in the age of public anti-gay sentiment, queer people should not be discriminated against on the basis of their biologically-intrinsic sexual orientation. Discrimination in this sense refers to both a legal, societal and religious context. There are of course varying factions within mainline churches and their


acceptance and/or tolerance of non-heteronormative desire and sexuality, yet they maintain a rights-based approach in regard to homosexuality.

Fundamentalism is a register attributed to evangelical churches—and as LGBT activist group OUT suggests—demonstrates “the idea that God and the Scriptures are supreme—therefore homosexuality is a rejection of God and the Scriptures tenets.” Under fundamentalist thought, and “in evangelical understanding, South African Christianity is increasingly under siege from the onslaughts of secular liberalism.” Employing religious rhetoric and invoking the damage done by the apartheid state, these evangelical churches argue that their religious beliefs are being threatened by homosexuality. That is, under apartheid people were denied rights on the basis of race, and in the post-apartheid state, those who believe homosexuality to be a sin are the ones being persecuted. In this conception, their voices being silenced by South Africa’s liberal inclusion of rights for LGBTQI persons is analogous to the legal, political and socio-economic disenfranchisement suffered under apartheid and colonial rule. In an interview with a high-level minister of the Apostolic faith, he states “In the very first creation story in the Bible God creates Adam and Eve and he sees that it was not good for Adam to be alone and then he made Eve and not Steve.” This minister’s statement is a great example of the fundamentalism evangelical Christians employ in response to non-heterosexuality: first, the invoking of biblical stories and reading them as literal; second, insisting on a divinely-ordained procreative ability; and third, the necessity of the distinct categories of “man” and “woman” which conjure the discourse of “nature.”


According to Burchardt, Pentecostal and African-Initiated churches overlap in their discourses of the ontological supreme authority of God and the Scripture. Yet, Pentecostal responses to homosexuality also fall under the category of Isolationism because they generally create boundaries between religious and secular spheres. That is, while they are vocal about their anti-gay sentiments, they also tend to isolate themselves from the public sphere, as it is a secular space and therefore satanic. African-Initiated churches which also view homosexuality through a fundamentalist lens, are isolationist as well in that they too segregate the religious and public sphere which they deem to be secular and satanic. Yet, when they publicly condemn homosexuality, they use “culturalist and nationalist arguments (same-sex sexualities as un-African) [to] replace notions of sin.”50 The insistence on cultural and national rhetoric is tied to the historical background of African-Initiated churches.

What Burchardt calls “African-Initiated churches” are also (and formerly) known as African Indigenous churches by other scholars, who describe them as congregations “belonging naturally to or being native to a certain place or environment… [They] also come to represent strong feelings of black consciousness.”51 While they are varied in their ascribing to either Christian or “indigenous” doctrine, within the context of colonialism and apartheid, as well as the West’s influence in post-apartheid South Africa, the blackness/African-ness invoked in their cultural and nationalist rhetoric is a way to combat a perceived imposition of Westernization and Western/white cultural imperialism. African-Initiated churches are not the only religious (or public) institutions that diabolize homosexuality within a cultural or nationalist frame. As addressed in the previous sub-chapter, Cultural Frames, politicians and public officials espouse anti-homosexuality discourse, claiming homosexuality to be a Western product, imported to the continent through the violence of colonialism. It is

50 Ibid. p. 255
interesting, however, to highlight how religious actors speaking from a point of Divinely-ordained and Scriptural doctrine see homosexuality as being at odds with an “authentic” and single African “culture,” given that these sources of knowledge and belief are themselves foreign colonial and missionary imports. In this manner, it is ironic that these heterosexual or otherwise understood as “‘civilized’ sexual norms can remain in place” and furthermore “be defended as authentically African.”

Indeed, the 1996 Constitution gave rights to both religious and sexual minority groups, thereby legitimizing and empowering them within the judiciary system. This is particularly important to note given the public role that various religious actors occupy on the national stage, especially in this contemporary moment of global human rights. South Africa utilizes an individualistic human rights-based model, an inheritance of a post-Cold War drive towards fundamental individual social rights overseen and protected by international bodies, such as the United Nations, and the previously disassembled League of Nations. Other countries abandoning authoritarian regimes similarly enshrined these fundamental individual human rights within their constitutions in the transition to democracy. The public and religious mobilization around demonizing queerness in South Africa therefore illuminates two key dynamics: firstly, it “exemplifies contestations over competing rights promoted in the name of liberalism, and the ways they can clash with cultural traditions and self-understandings,” and secondly, “it forms a new terrain for the construction of civilizational identities and discourses in which liberal individualism is sometimes culturalized and

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52 Hoad, Neville Wallace. *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization*. p. 57


attributed to the West and ‘moral righteousness’ to Africa.’” As seen in the rhetoric of mainline, Evangelical, Pentecostal and African-Initiated churches, sexual orientation is argued within a discourse of Christian theology and of rights denied by apartheid and afforded by the post-apartheid governance. Where an authentic African “culture” is invoked, it is similarly employed through rights discourse to put religious rights at odds with LGBTQI rights. This authentic African “culture” is also given greater moral weight than the West and their perceived liberal agenda to contaminate Africa. We also see how both anti and pro-homosexuality proponents use the very same judiciary system to claim rights and negotiate cultural understandings of themselves as citizens of the nation. Who is a “proper” citizen of South Africa? Who is rights-deserving? What is democracy if your rights are being threatened by the rights of others, who similarly see themselves as “proper” rights-deserving citizens?

To return to Louise Vincent’s research on homosexuality as it is discussed, debated and understood in the public sphere—the space where nation is performed—we can move beyond the discourse of politicians and public figures, and turn to the perspectives of ordinary citizens. A 2006 poll on same-sex marriage was administered on the Independent Online, and of 816 participants, 47% were opposed to same sex marriage. Here are some of their comments:

Mongezi: The ANC government is so arrogant, they have disappointed the Christian and those who believe in God. I doubt so much if they even believe that there is God.
Izabelle: It’s ridiculous! It’s against every religion...The passing of this bill is an insult to democracy.
Sasha: This defies every religion, every culture, everything moral.\(^{56}\)

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Once more sentiments of the immorality and ungodliness of homosexuality is bemoaned by these commentators. Izabelle in particular, attributes the passing of the Civil Union Act of 2006 as a failure of democracy. For her, the rights of LGBTQI persons directly and negatively impinge upon her rights. The government’s inclusion of LGBTQI rights is perceived as a dangerous, God-less act, wholly part and parcel of a liberal agenda. Sasha furthermore highlights the seemingly inseparable entanglement of nature, culture and religion in relation to discourse on homosexuality.

In a nation that professes a cosmopolitanism, pluralism and diversity of people, languages, cultures and religions unparalleled on the African continent, it is almost absurd the extent to which public Christian religion fashions itself “as a civil society actor, contesting the terms of citizenship, solidarity, and human dignity through democratic means.” Not only is the role of religion in delimiting homosexuality as immoral and ungodly absurd, but it is deeply worrisome that violence against queer people and the dismissal of their rights—as citizens and dignity-deserving individuals—can be justified by arguments rooted in religious doctrine. South Africa’s legal system enshrines the rights for LGBT citizens on a continent where 36 countries outlaw same-sex sexual conduct—many using similar arguments of “nature,” “culture,” and “immoral” or “ungodly”. Parsing through the particularly complex and dynamic terrain of race, culture, modernity, morality and democracy that have been discussed allows us to appreciate the work of artists like Zanele Muholi amidst the demonizing deployments of religious rhetoric against queer identities on the continent, and in South Africa specifically.


Queer Media Makers Disrupting the Default

In the catalogue for the *Innovative Women* exhibition, Zanele Muholi wrote:

> As an insider within the black lesbian community and a visual activist, I want to ensure that my community, especially those lesbian women who come from the marginalized townships, are included in the women’s ‘canon’...The overall aim to my project is to commemorate and celebrate the lives of black lesbians in South Africa from an insider’s perspective, regardless of the harsh realities and oppressions (which includes rife murders and ‘curative rapes’ of black lesbians) that we are still facing in the post-apartheid, democratic South Africa.

Zanele Muholi’s photographs of black queer women in the *Faces and Phases* and *Indawo Yami* exhibitions, allow us to locate the ways in which black queer women negotiate sexual and racial codes privately and/or publicly. Muholi understands, and engages with a nation that demonizes, degrades, and ignores black lesbians. Through her work, she is resisting the harmful understandings of, and discourses surrounding black queer women. She resists these notions by celebrating and canonizing the lives of black lesbians in the nation. By canonizing, I refer to her radical and disruptive contribution to the visual body of South Africa by centering the black lesbian body. Through pinpointing how she centralizes and redresses the black lesbian body, I am interested in the material and discursive space that must be, and is indeed chiseled by work that is undoubtedly political. Muholi’s words additionally attest to the importance of black queer women telling their stories and experiences for themselves and by themselves.

I maintain that it is through art and media-making that Muholi’s work—and other queer artists alike—can simultaneously articulate the experiences and desires of black queer persons, as well as challenge the violence of dominant heteronormativity within an overwhelmingly homophobic national terrain. I return to the harmful words Minister Xingwana spoke at the *Innovative Women* exhibition to ponder the ways that black queer
bodies are vilified: “It was immoral, offensive and going against nation-building.”

Juxtaposing Muholi’s intentions for her work at the exhibit with Xingwana’s unwitting and public homophobia, we must ask whether there exists space for queer persons to be seen and (positively) represented in South Africa. How does the work of queer artists and media-makers both demand and create discursive space through making visible queer persons? The notion of space is particularly poignant—given the existing oppression of LGBTQI persons on the streets, townships, and within churches of nation—without the added irony that the location of Innovative Women was on Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, a heritage site where political prisoners were held during apartheid.

**Nationality, Subjectivity, Carving Out Discursive Space**

In the past year, Muholi’s work has been shown at the International Center of Photography (ICP), the Brooklyn Museum, the Yancey Richardson Gallery and the Gallatin Galleries at New York University in New York City. The Institute of Contemporary Art Indian Ocean in Mauritius, the Nasher Museum of Art in North Carolina and the Williams College Museum of Art in Williamstown hosted her works, as well as the distinguished Venice and São Paolo Biennales. Her photographs additionally travelled to the United Kingdom, Norway, France, Reunion Island, Brazil, Australia, and South Africa. She was named an Honorary Professor at the University of the Arts in Bremen, Germany and has received numerous awards, the latest being the Infinity Award for Documentary and Photojournalism from the ICP on April 11, 2016. I have included this exhaustive list of institutions and spaces which have hosted Muholi’s photographs to reveal how internationally

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consumed this work is. Not only does it travel the commercial art circuits in elite gallery spaces, but it is the arena of knowledge creation by virtue of inhabiting university campuses and other such discursive spaces. Discursive spaces are defined by Macalik et al. as spaces “that foster negotiation and debate, polarize and politicize space, and invite discussion fraught with contradictory views.”

Today’s artists they argue, “Are continuously challenged to break down barriers—barriers that separate individuals from ideas. Art and design, in their truest forms, are created to fracture barriers and initiate dialogue both introspectively and socially.”

Muholi’s work seems to circulate in elite spaces, yet one gets the sense that despite these privileged circuits, she is above all, more concerned with “documenting” to “preserve,” and “contribute,” as she put it during her talk at the ICP on April 8, 2016. The work she is doing is first and foremost for the black LGBTQI community in South Africa notwithstanding its global reach. If anything, its international scope serves to destabilize fictions of South Africa’s democratic and globally-unparalleled inclusion of LGBTQI persons. Through documenting the lives of black queer persons, thereby attempting to preserve their lives in a nation that refuses to do so, she is contributing to the national imaginary, as well as creating discursive space in which the nation must reevaluate its treatment of sexual minorities.

To properly situate the discursive space work Muholi’s carves, I think it necessary to discuss the term “public sphere.” It is a contested and often incorrectly applied term, employed to demarcate a rigid binary between the public and domestic domains. Nancy Fraser in “Rethinking the Public Sphere” interrogates what is at stake when the “public

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63 *Ibid.* p. 2

sphere” is incorrectly defined. As she understands it, the “public sphere” in a Jürgen
Habermas sense designates:

A theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state.65

Some feminist scholars have used “public sphere” to refer to everything outside the domestic, which Fraser sees as problematic because of the way the “public sphere” comes to comprise the incorrect conflation of the state, the official-economy of paid employment, and spaces of public discourse. Alternately, other scholars have taken Habermas’ “public sphere” to symbolize a democratic arena wherein private citizens gather to engage with one another in matters of interest or concern.

Given that the rise of the “public sphere” is a product of the late capitalist European bourgeoisie, there is nothing neutral about the “public sphere” or what develops into “public opinion.” Indeed, in stratified societies whose institutional frameworks depend upon, and create unequal social hierarchies, “unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles. The result is the development of powerful informal pressures that marginalize the contributions of members of subordinated groups both in everyday life contexts and in official public spheres.”66 It is clear therefore, that the very discursive formation of the “public sphere” is built upon the marginalization of women and plebian classes. Fraser argues that these members of marginalized groups have found it advantageous to create alternative publics. These alternative groups are parallel, and not

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subordinate to the dominant “public sphere.” Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, these alternative publics allow subordinated groups to “invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.” Alternative publics are a useful tool for thinking about how black LBT artists and media-makers in South Africa create discursive space in which they can formulate and articulate their identities in direct opposition to dominant conceptions of black queer persons.

In an interview on queer media-makers and creators in South Africa between media anthropologist Ruti Talmor, and her interlocutors Zethu Matebeni, Makgano Mamabolo and Mary Hames, the importance of space was articulated by all of them as an approach to both celebrate and redress the black LBT community in a politically potent way. Zethu Matebeni, activist, writer, director of the documentary “Breaking Out of the Box” and senior researcher at the Institute for Humanities in African (HUMA) spoke to the importance of media and artistic expression as a mode of challenging dominant ideas of LGBTQI marginalization. Working on “Breaking Out of the Box,” Matebeni’s goal was to dismantle the notion of victimization so often framed (inter)nationally in (re)presentations of the South African queer community. “People say documentary is objective. It’s not; anyone who looks through a lens is manipulating, and anyway lesbians were always represented negatively before, so we manipulated [positively].” In a similar vein, Makgano Mamabolo the co-writer, co-director and co-producer of Society—the first T.V show to include a lesbian storyline for one of its four main characters—asserted that it is through the media that queer voices and stories can be articulated by and for the queer community. Indeed, as Mary Hames proclaimed, “It’s very


69 Ibid. p. 390
important to claim the space…Song and dance and poetry and drama and theatre, media,
visual culture—I think we are slowly getting there…The words we speak are not from a
space of victimhood. We will not speak ever from a place of victimhood.”
The discursive, visual and physical spaces spoken of by Talmor’s interviewees highlight the capacity for alternative publics to contest and disrupt discourses ranging from victimhood to “proper” citizenship. These alternative publics wherein the nation’s LGBTQI community can convene and engage in processes of self-articulation and empowerment serve an important role, especially since many members of the community are relegated to the periphery—economically, politically, socially, and physically.

**Spaces: Centering the Township**

Townships, formerly known as “locations” during apartheid South Africa are underdeveloped settlements built on the periphery of towns and cities. These informal settlements are the crowning achievement of apartheid architects who created the townships to relegate non-whites to the literal and physical periphery. In accordance with apartheid legislation which dispossessed blacks (and non-whites more broadly) from land, and heavily monitored their physical movement, townships have endured to the present-day—most, still comprising a majority black population. Achille Mbembe considers the formation of townships as enforced through “brute force, dispossession and expropriation” which aimed to put the rights of blacks and their visibility under constant threat and surveillance. By the establishment and existence of townships, we see how black lives were always a part of South Africa’s urban topography, yet forcefully separate from it. The apartheid city, Mbembe

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states, “became one of the sites through which the state ensured the spatial distribution of black bodies and the organization, around those bodies, of a regime of visibility… Their aim was to increase the productive force of black labor in the least costly way possible” through technologies of surveillance, inspections and hierarchies. Indeed, the post-apartheid nation is faced with critical questions about how to inhabit urbanity. That is, given decades of systemic exclusion from the center—in this case, the physical urban center, legislative rights and desires—black South Africans are presently engaging in a spatial, social and psychic process which very much has to do with the reclaiming of a right to be urban. Muholi herself engages with and within this constant process of negotiating, and contesting the space of urbanity in her work. Hailing from Umlazi Township in Durban—the second-largest township after Soweto—Muholi strives to bring to the center black queer subjectivities, as well as black subjects who have been, and continue to be relegated to the national periphery.

Carol Magee argues that African photographic production is in fact a reading of African urban life. The content and context of African-produced imagery is what creates meaning and belonging—in this case, the claiming of an urban citizenship. “A photograph may tell these people's story, or it may tell the story of the places through which they move in which case, the stories are shared,” adding that a photograph may similarly “tell the story of how its maker moves; here, the story is personal. In either instance, a photograph reveals how people connect with, and belong to, their cities.” In *Indawo Yami*, meaning “my place” or “my

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space” in isiZulu, Muholi photographs intimate moments, sharing her environment with all who will consume her work (inter)nationally. Muholi’s photography engages in a claim for urbanity through creating a shared community. She writes, “Indawo Yami is where I work, where I share an environment with others, where I act on the issues marking our lives through visual documentation. My focus is mainly on being queer (LGBTI) in South Africa and beyond. This is the realm in which I deal with my identity, as a citizen of my country and of the world.”76 Her explicit focus on township life, and queer life in the townships is a site for exploring the self-understandings of blackness, queerness, and citizenship in the present South African state that continues to dispossess those living within informal settlements. Through her work she is also bringing to the center the previously marginalized; those who have physically, socially, and psychically been banished to the periphery are the sole focal point of her images. Photographing intimate moments between her photographic participants—in homes, in beds, out in the natural environments of various townships in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town—Muholi engages in a radical disruption of the ways of seeing. Because the apartheid state’s spatial organization invisibilized the black body, while the post-apartheid state disempowers the black queer body, Muholi exposes the presence of black queer life in the township, and intimate moments that (post)apartheid logics could neither envision, nor care for.

As Zethu Matebeni remarked in her interview with Ruti Talmor, the issue (to a lesser extent) is not that there are LGBTQI people in the nation, but rather, there is a fear surrounding the publicness of one’s queerness: “People know same-sex unions have always existed. They are worried that now you are coming out and claiming these spaces publicly. It is a difficult conversation, trying to rework a language around what it means to be African, what is Africa, and what belongs to Africa and not. And that is the part we have not figured

Muholi’s work forces the viewer to interact with, and engage in a reworking of a language that can have the space for “Africanness” and queerness. It also serves as an interrogation and critique of the state’s (and society’s) attempts to invisibilize the black queer body. If biomorality is the covering, and masking of the black female body and its (sexual) desires, then Muholi’s work destabilizes notions of sexuality, privacy and publicness, especially as it is embodied by the black queer subjects she portrays. Biomorality requires the black female to reverently and continually practice a hyper-morality and civility in the public sphere—the space where nation is performed. Speaking to Matebeni’s remarks on publicness and queerness, this sovereign biomoral apparatus is upheld by its own constant performance of the erasure of the black female—and I would add, queer—body from the public sphere. Mbembe maintains that within post-colonial Africa, “the blurring of the distinctions between what is public and what is private, the transformation and deformation of inherited urban shapes, is one of the ways by which urban citizens generate meaning and memory.”

Muholi and her photographic subjects are engaging in such processes of transformation, mutilation and creation of material and discursive urban spaces.

We can glean the subtle blurring of the private and public in Muholi’s image “Refilwe and Vuyiswa II,” (Figure 3) from *Indawo Yami*. Muholi captures an intimate moment between these two women; Refilwe and Vuyiswa are hugging affectionately against a weathered stucco wall. Vuyiswa is in a striped sleeveless dress, while Refilwe is in a sports bra, which may be interpreted as an undergarment. Muholi captures their gazes; neither stoic nor playful, but inviting and posed. They are clearly outside of a home—one we might assume from Muholi’s other photos of Refilwe is in the Johannesburg township of Thokoza. It is in this moment of public queer affection, coupled with Refilwe’s clothing outside of the home and her photographic subjects are engaging in such processes of transformation, mutilation and creation of material and discursive urban spaces.

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wherein the blurring of the public and private occurs. Keeping in mind the history of queer exclusion from South Africa’s collective memory, Muholi’s photography—however subtly—is always engaging in histories of racial, sexual and social exclusion.

The township backgrounds in Muholi’s work reveal, and are informed by the urban economic realities of contemporary South Africa. The subjects she photographs who live in, and around these spaces illuminate how subjects make these spaces homes and places of belonging. Belonging here refers to the queer South African community and belonging to South African nation by way of full citizenship. She is actively carving out discursive and physical space for
the queer bodies she photographs. In this image we can glean the ways that the inherited space of the township home—however underserved by the (post)apartheid state—is reformulated into a space wherein queerness and queer affection can exist, where what the biomoral state deems private can exist publicly and unapologetically.

Photographing the Unspectacular to Spectacular Ends

In her book *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness*, Nicole Fleetwood examines the work of black artists and media-makers across time and space to interrogate dominant representations of blackness in the United States. I am particularly interested in her theory of the “Photographic Practice of Non-Iconicity.” Non-iconicity is a mode of creating images that render “black subjects in non-iconic modes—favoring localized, everyday scenes and moments of the mundane and ephemera” to consider “alternative modes of black visual engagement, not framed by iconicity and spectacular blackness that dominate visual culture.”

Writing about Charles ‘Teenie’ Harris, an African-American photographer from the early to mid-20th century, Fleetwood is interested in how Harris’s practice of non-iconicity departed from mainstream photographs of black people at the time. Fleetwood argues that depictions of black Americans were predominantly in the documentary photography format which either celebrated icons like Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, or portrayed spectacular black suffering. In both cases of representing spectacular blackness, photography of that era “centered white spectatorship and appealed to white sympathies for civil rights reform in the United States.”

I would argue that Zanele Muholi’s *Faces and Phases* and *Indawo Yami*—like Harris’ work—are a photographic index of black

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life that “does not rely on the familiar device of photographic iconicity.” The work and practice of normalcy or non-iconicity is interventionist, in that it produces visual subjects who have been excluded from the dominant public memory, rendering them intelligible to the very society that invisibilizes them in society. The discursive power of Muholi’s *Faces and Phases* and *Indawo Yami* exhibitions lie in the ways that they center the experiences of black queer women in South Africa: as self-articulated by that very community—as opposed to the demonizing and/or pitiful way black lesbians are portrayed in the national and international media. Muholi’s photographic approach is a grassroots one that resists the omnipresent surveillance of the state and celebrates, as well as preserves the otherwise illegible experiences of the black queer community. In this manner, her practice of normalcy and non-iconicity contests the space given to the black lesbian body and resists the racist, heteropatriarchal state.

In her book on state violence in Brazil and the ways Afro-Brazilians respond to, and resist oppression through the practice and performance of Capoeira, Christen Smith argues that the systemic killing and oppression of the black body is the way modern nation-states engage in global politics, declaring themselves as a “heteropatriarchal society that is true to the global politics of white ascendancy to world leadership.” I would add to her analysis that the black queer body is further disempowered—which in the South African context, as has been outlined, is certainly true. Smith argues that it is through art and media-making that Afro-Brazilians build community and create discursive space to celebrate and mourn the lives lost

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at the hands of the state. Their self-articulated acts of resistance through dance, poetry and theatre combat the racism and economic dispossession they face daily. Indeed Muholi’s photographs of black LBT women are the visual products of a self-representation of the queer community, by the queer community, and for the queer community. The alternative publics created by and for marginalized subjects, are the locus where these minoritarian subjects engage with and within the dominant sphere to claim their right to exist. Similarly, Muholi’s work and the alternative publics she creates and captures engage with, and within a dangerous, hetero-patriarchal and judgmental nation, to claim a queer and South African citizenship.

Muholi’s work, which serves as a visual memory of black lesbians, is unprecedented in South African visual culture. The very presence of these photographs in galleries and museums functions to carve out discursive space where these marginalized and invisibilized individuals can be seen by the people of the nation. Her active choice to photograph black lesbians in townships or informal settlements is another way that she creates space on the national stage for marginalized beings. Thokoza, the township wherein the participants Refilwe and Vuyiswa (Figure 3) live and were photographed, is a poor and dangerous township south of Johannesburg and the location of four other portraits. Johannesburg, hailed one of the only first-class metropolises’ in Africa is a very socioeconomically stratified area, and due to years of economic dispossession along the lines of race (colonialism and apartheid), those who are poorest are also black. Indeed, by employing a street photography tradition and using townships as the backgrounds for her photos, not only does Muholi shift the way of seeing by bringing to the center the marginalized black queer person, but she is literally bringing to the center those physically and spatially marginalized. In spite of her

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work being exhibited and consumed on a national and international level, Muholi’s photographs function as an archive for black queer South Africans, making her photographs a mode of intervention. With death and discrimination looming above the heads of far too many queer South Africans, images such as “Refilwe and Vuyiswa II” are a testament to these subjects’ will to survive, and struggle to combat dominant perceptions and dangerous ideologies. Muholi is memorializing and furthermore, canonizing subjects who might otherwise be invisibilized and/or targeted for their sexuality. The canonizing of black queer South Africans through the practice and process of non-iconicity is a radical departure from, and disruption of ideas of “proper” citizenship, personhood and sexuality. Indeed, Muholi stresses the importance of labeling each photograph with the names of the participants and the shooting location to claim the visibility and personhood of each participant she photographs. Combatting the apartheid era custom of stripping the individuality of non-white persons, and simultaneously resisting the post-apartheid era of rendering invisible queer subjects, Muholi’s naming practices further illuminate her aims to contribute to the national imaginary, rupture the nation’s ways of seeing, and canonize black queer subjectivities. The very fact of a subject standing before Muholi to be photographed is to claim that queer South Africans exist, here they are, see and know them.

*Faces and Phases*, is an ongoing collection of photographic works that presently consists of over 70 images. They are all portraits of self-identifying lesbian, bisexual and trans women. While many of the backgrounds are visibly outdoor scenes, participants are at times photographed in front of patterned cloths. Most are shot from the stomach-upwards, while others are photographed from the thighs-upwards. Each of the subjects look straight into the camera lens—many solemn, very few smiling—for the portrait series. The history of photography in Africa has come to be a history of portraiture: from Malian photographers
Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibe, to Cameroonian Samuel Fosso and South African apartheid photographer Ernest Cole.

As Carol Magee states, “It is unsurprising that Africans are the predominant subjects of African photographs that are exhibited and published in Western art circles, for such photographs fit easily into established conventions of photography, both in general and of Africa.”

Employing Emmanuel Levinas’ ethical theory, Paula Horta considers this history of portraiture within the context of Africa and more specifically, the (post) apartheid nation: “during the photographic encounter, the photographer first, and later the viewer, is placed in an active position of having to respond to what Levinas calls ‘le visage d’Autrui/the face of the Other.’”

Le visage does not only refer to the anatomical face, rather, it represents a moment. This moment, or “the figure of the face,” comprises “a means of address or form of engaging a specific mode of ethical–political response,” which when applied to photographic portraiture “proposes a radical change in the way we engage with a photograph.” She adds, “to take cognizance of the photographed other’s face is to be receptive to the other; it is to enter into dialogue with the other; it implies an experience that transcends that first assessment of the component features of the face and branches out into an understanding of something that cannot be seen, that goes beyond visual perception.”

The portraits of the black LBT women Muholi captures form a photographic encounter: first between photographer and participant, then later between viewer and image. The viewer in this encounter is placed in an active position where they must respond; le visage beckons.

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87 Ibid. p. 76

88 Ibid. p. 76-77
the viewer to be seen, “it expresses, signifies and speaks, addressing both photographer and
viewer.” No longer can the government claim to not hear the cries of the black queer
community: here they are, see and know them. The photographic form of portraiture
necessitates a dialogue between photographer and subject, subject and audience; and from
this encounter Muholi’s images dare the state to deny its black queer subjects protection as
citizens.

The images in *Faces and Phases* and *Indawo Yami* not only force the viewer to engage
with the queer bodies that are invisibilized by the South African state, but they also serve to
reclaim the desires and intimacies of the black queer body. Muholi’s work is a reclamation of
sexual pleasure and intimacy for a population that has historically, and continually been
deprived of that. Under apartheid, black women were denied sexual pleasure on the basis of
race, and in the post-apartheid nation, black women are denied sexual pleasure through the
mechanisms of biomorality. Black LBT women are further deprived of sexual desires in this
post-apartheid state through socially regulated homophobia and norms surrounding the
publicness of sexuality and intimacy. One must not forget that biomorality is—to an extent—a
response to the ways that black female bodies were inscribed with an excessive and freely-
accessible sexuality under apartheid, thus its obsession with covering the black female body.
Yet, to instill a hyper-civility—unasked of other women in the nation—is to in fact punish
black women, and to deprive them of sexual pleasure, intimacy and dignity. It is this
desexualization of black women’s bodies that Muholi’s works thwart.

Consider the image of Tshidi Legobye and Pam Limekhaya (Figure 4). In this black and
white photograph, the two women lie in bed under a thick blanket. They appear to be naked,
but one cannot be certain. Neither are looking at the camera; rather, Limekhaya looks
lovingly at Legobye while Legobye looks into the air. Both women are smiling as what feels

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89 *Ibid.* p. 76
like the rising sun, disperses its rays through the window-bars onto the warm black and white image. The frame of the image is cuboid, a feature that is present on only three other photographs in the collection. It makes the subjects seem larger or the frame smaller, thus creating a closeness between participants, but also the viewer. This aesthetically pleasing

![Photo of two individuals lying on a bed, smiling warmly at the viewer.](image)

Figure 4. “Tshidi Legobye and Pam Limekhaya.” Meadowlands, Soweto, Johannesburg, 2006 from Zanele Muholi’s *Indawo Yami* Exhibition.

photo is undoubtedly intimate, but less so because of the fact that there are two nude women in a bed. Rather, this image is intimate because of the tenderness of all the elements of the photograph—the light, the tender looks, the fluffy blanket, the golden rays of the sun—converging to manifest a feeling. As part of the *Indawo Yami* series, the feeling of the photograph is in all the ways it invokes home, space, and queer love: unabashedly proud and tender; the image is about claiming desire and belonging. I am particularly drawn to this photograph because of the humanity and dignity it repays to the subjects within it—subjects who are deemed immoral, unnatural and un-African.
These dangerous and homophobic sentiments arise in response to Muholi’s photographs frequently. Muholi has been known to organize bus transportation from various townships in South Africa to the galleries in which her work is being displayed, so as to democratize the gallery and art-viewing experience. In this manner, people who otherwise wouldn’t inhabit these elite environments are also looking at and engaging with the artwork. Muholi also lets the viewers write down their opinions on her work, some of which Henriette Gunkel published:

Anonymous #1: “It is truly unacceptable for you to undermine our race’s especially black portraying nudity and sexual explicit content images as if they are the only one who are involved these inhuman activities. After all Black was African and proud of its roots and cultures until you inflicted pain and trash to our community. Get a life you people.”

Anonymous #2: “yes, art is an African thing. However, when degrading of women’s (make that black woman) bodies, it is no longer a question of art and beauty but of discrimination - the nation cries.”

On one level Anonymous #1 is concerned with the respectability/civility of black South Africans given the history of colonialism and apartheid that deemed blacks as hypersexual and savage animals. On another level, Anonymous #1 is proud of the “authentic” and indeed distinguished African cultures that are being disparaged by the works they are viewing. The “pain and trash” comment may stem from the fact that the images are displaying black queer bodies in the nude, supposedly in sexually explicit postures. In their conception, black LBT women claiming sexual desire in such a public setting works to further implicate black South Africans in animalistic or “inhuman” activities—a rhetoric similar to those of nature in the present-day state, and previously espoused by white colonialists. Anonymous #2 is similarly celebratory about African cultures and their contribution to arts, but interprets the public

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images of black women as degrading and discriminatory. For them, it is unacceptable that
black women’s bodies be displayed in the nude in public; in fact this public assertion is
coupled with the tears of the nation. This association between a public black queerness and
ideas of nationality, citizenship and subjectivity resonates with Minister Xingwana’s
comments. From Anonymous #1 and #2, we are once more confronted with negotiations of
African identity, African culture, nature, blackness and the supposed threat of homosexuality
or queerness on those various authenticities. We additionally see how deeply entrenched the
workings of biomorality are in South African society in these statements and therefore how
important Muholi’s work is in carving discursive space upon which to show black queerness,
claim citizenship, dignity and pleasure.

Figure 5. “Gazi T Zuma.” Umlazi, Durban, 2010 from Zanele Muholi’s *Faces and Phases* Exhibition.
Gazi T Zuma (Figure 5) dons a solemn, serious, yet vulnerable facial expression, as if to ask, “what do you see when you look at me (a black lesbian)?” This question, by extension, also begs the question “what do we (South Africans) see when we look at ourselves?” The first question attests to the radical ways Muholi’s visual archive of black queer women contributes to the visual landscape of the nation by including those erased from history and invisibilized in the present. The latter question speaks to the disruptive power of these images which work to rupture the nation’s existing ways of seeing. Apartheid logics and the biopolitical project of biomorality are put into crisis by these photographs which unapologetically celebrate and publicly display black queerness, reclaim queer intimacy, desire, and above all, human dignity. Both the *Faces and Phases* and *Indawo Yami* series, are a conscious and active reclamation of images and ways of seeing which assert that black lesbians exist and are not merely victims of a deeply racialized and sexualized society. *Here they are, see and know them.*
Conclusion: The Photograph is Never Still

In her seminal work *On Photography*, Susan Sontag writes: “Photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention.”91 Recounting the most memorable photographs in contemporary photojournalism, she adds, “The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene.”92 In the moment of an altercation, Sontag understands the photographer’s role as that of documenter, which to her is inaction: the photographer chooses to capture the image and therefore choose life. Yet, as I hope this thesis has shown, Zanele Muholi’s photographs are acts of radical political and social intervention. Not only does Muholi record—to use Sontag’s language—but it is this recording that is the intervention. Her visual archive of black LBT women resists the silencing and invisibilizing mechanisms of the South African state. These photographs put into crisis the dissonances between South Africa’s legal inclusion of LGBTQI rights and the rampant homophobia—which for many includes racism and ethnic discrimination. Through her work, black queer South Africans resist victimization and self-articulate their aspirations of self-assertion within a nation that denies them “proper” citizenship. The *Faces and Phases* and *Indawo Yami* exhibitions in particular, canonize queer subjectivities that are otherwise deemed deviant, immoral, unnatural and un-African. The very fact of standing before Zanele Muholi to have your photograph taken is a public and unwavering assertion of queerness that unsettles the nations ways of seeing—which are still heavily informed by apartheid logics. Muholi’s work, by virtue of inhabiting galleries, museums and university campuses functions to actively and radically carve discursive space where these marginalized and invisibilized persons can be recognized and seen. Drawing on Levinas’ ethical theory once more, the portrait illuminates the photographic encounter where the photographer and participant, as well as the viewer and


92 Ibid.
image, must enter a (discursive) dialogue with one another. The marginalized and invisibilized bodies displayed on the walls of galleries and campuses necessitate a response from all those who encounter these images. In this manner, for Muholi, “the camera is more like a weapon.”

Muholi’s interventionist strategy is akin to José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of “disidentifications.” Muñoz’s work in the field of cultural, feminist, race and queer theory is incredibly helpful for theorizing the political significance of contemporary art such as Muholi’s photographic canon. He points out that “with hate crimes and legislation aimed at queers and people of color institutionalized as state protocols, the act of performing and theatricalizing queerness in public takes on ever multiplying significance.” Muholi’s public assertion of blackness and queerness is a subversive strategy to memorialize black queer South Africans, all the while contesting and resisting dominant state and societal logics and practices of harm. Munoz warns, “let me be clear about one thing: disidentification is about cultural, material and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation. These routinized protocols of subjugation are brutal and painful. Disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence.” Muholi’s work engages with, and within the dangerous, heteropatriarchal and judgmental nation to claim a queer and South African citizenship for the black LBT persons she memorializes and canonizes. By focusing the camera lens—and by extent the focus of the nation—on those who are physically, socially and psychically marginalized, she brings to the center the black queer subjectivities whose

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lives are otherwise disregarded by the nation. Zethu Matebeni concludes her book *Black lesbian sexualities and identity in South Africa: An ethnography of black lesbian urban life*, by stating:

Claiming space is a crucial aspect of black lesbian life. It is both about challenging the ways spaces are assumed to be heteronormative as well as reconfiguring spaces for the inclusion of sexual diversity. This operates as a way of crafting political claims to inclusion.⁹⁶

Indeed Zanele Muholi’s work actively carves out physical and discursive space that allows black queer bodies to occupy national and international topographies. These spaces put into crisis the values of the patriarchal and heterosexual South African nation, as well as dangerous and unfounded ideas of (im)morality, nature and African culture.

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POSTSCRIPT: African Artists in the Global Art Market

I began this project with the aim of locating the ways queer South African artists and media-makers unapologetically declare black queerness to combat a deeply racist and hetero-patriarchal society, despite the nation boasting a nonpareil constitutional inclusion of LGBTQI rights. I had the pleasure of seeing Muholi’s work in Cape Town and New York City before embarking on this thesis and was struck by the beauty and braveness of the subjects in the images. My focus on her work in this thesis is due to its ease of access and global reach. But I do have to wonder what it is exactly about her work that is so appealing on the international stage. In this postscript, I ask the question: why it is that Muholi is so “hot” on the international art scene right now? While I do not have the time nor space to fully interrogate the myriad of explanations that may contribute to Muholi’s appeal, it is clear to me that her work is digestible by the Western capitalistic art circuits because of the suffering it comes to represent. That is, Muholi’s images and the intentions that ground them are about resistance—thereby easily malleable to discourses invoking black suffering and pain. While her work actively combats and resists the trope of victim, it simultaneously has the potential to be read by the capitalistic art scene as representing victimhood, which I argue is favorable in Western markets.

Authentic Suffering, Authentic Darkness

In her essay on the work of Nigerian media-artist Fatimah Tuggar, Nicole Fleetwood is similarly interested in the reasons Tuggar’s work resonates in the Western art world. As an African artist, Fleetwood believes that Tuggar’s work is construed in a particularly raced and cultural formulation. Fleetwood relays, “As a way of explaining her positioning and art within familiar and racialized terms, some critics frame her work with overdetermined
conventions of autobiographical narrative or indigenous concerns.” While Tuggar’s media-art interrogates digital technology and capitalistic systems that are unequally distributed globally, her work is often interpreted as autobiographical. By virtue of being an African artist, she is expected to create work that is “authentic” (i.e., folkloric or indigenous), always attesting to the continents’ barrenness (i.e., underdeveloped), which fits comfortably into dominant Western narratives of the continent. Even when her work doesn’t subscribe to these parameters, it is nevertheless read hand-in-hand with these discourses. I would argue that Muholi, as an African artist is similarly placed into the position of having to create “authentic” work that ascribes to Western ideas of Africa being a dark and empty mass. Within the dark barren continent exists eternal suffering, a suffering Muholi’s work captures and disseminates internationally. In Muholi’s work specifically, the suffering of the black LBT women she photographs grants her the status of “authentic” “African” artist within Western art understandings. As discussed in the “Cultural Frames” chapter, it is often within the externally-funded journalistic and non profit work where black queer subjects are painted as silent victims, and the continent, depicted as culturally homophobic. Let me be clear, we cannot deny the harsh realities many LGBTQI persons face in South Africa, and in other nations on the continent. However, I am wary of the ways these rhetorics of violence and victimization dangerously impact the same queer communities that journalistic and non-profit programming is supposed to help. In addition to stripping queer individuals of personhood, the LGBTQI community is reduced to the violence inflicted upon them.

As interdisciplinary artist and writer Coco Fusco suggests in her book English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas, the Western fascination with otherness is firmly rooted in the spectacle of otherness. Tracing the symbiotic relationship between

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Western conquest and the public displays of non-Western bodies from the 1400s to 1900s for the purposes of “public education,” Fusco sheds light on how we might read the palpability of many non-Western artists in the transnational art market. She articulates:

These shows were where most whites ‘discovered’ the non-Western sector of humanity. I like to call them the origins of intercultural performance in the West. The displays were living expressions of colonial fantasies and helped to forge a special place in the European and Euro-American imagination for nonwhite peoples and their cultures. Both Tuggar and Muholi’s artistic practices exist within histories, discourses and performances of otherness because of their raced, gendered and localized identities. In the same way that the living and breathing bodies of non-white persons were displayed for the consumption of Euro-American peoples, artists of color are always expected to display and perform their otherness. Because histories of imperialism, colonialism and exploitation have shaped Euro-American conceptions of the global south, artists from the global south are only legible in the Euro-American imagination when they display their otherness; in many cases, this is achieved through depicting suffering. Let me clear here, I do not claim that Muholi knowingly plays into tropes that exceptionalize suffering and vulnerability of persons in the global south. However, I read part of her success in the Western art market as being due to the particular ways her photographs are consumed and interpreted (as images of black and African suffering) within international art circuits. Additionally, with Muholi’s explicit focus on LGBTQI bodies—situated in the current moment of fundamental individual social rights overseen and protected by international bodies—the Euro-American savior complex comes heavily into play. However, that is another essay for another day.

Returning to the Western legibility of Muholi’s work within the mechanisms of the global art market, I draw on Dereck Murray and his work on high art and this specific

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moment in contemporary art: “the high art world has simultaneously begun to celebrate and make spectacles of black bodies in the global marketplace.”\textsuperscript{99} The reverberations from histories of displaying “otherness” are evident in the high art circulations of the present-day; yet in the same sentence, Murray states that there is a celebratory aspect to the presence of black bodies in the transnational art circuits. Speaking to “capitalism’s uncanny ability to absorb,” Murray declares, “the aesthetics of resistance once employed by oppositional artists has become branded by capitalism’s global reach.”\textsuperscript{100} While the presence of black bodies and artists within the global art scene is reason to celebrate, Murray is of the belief that their resistant arts are being co-opted and thus diluted by capitalism and globalization. I would argue that Muholi’s work has been wholly embraced by “capitalism’s global reach,” but has not lost its oppositional and resistant politics. By her work being embraced by “capitalism’s global reach,” I refer to the murky terrain of capitalism, commodification and the circuits of global art markets. Muholi’s work actively combats the harms of the hetero-patriarchal South African nation by destabilizing notions of “proper” citizenship and subjectivity. By virtue of this body of work traveling the globe, it troubles the fictitious image of a truly democratic South Africa, all the while creating a visual archive for, and by the South African queer community.

**High Art, Oppositional Art and World-making**

Other artists of color face a similar conundrum where their oppositional art-making practices are (at times) embraced by transnational art markets in ways that (may) dilute their resistant possibilities. On such artist is Kehinde Wiley, a New York-based portrait painter whose works have been critically acclaimed and well received in the U.S. and internationally.


—so favorably that his curriculum vitae is twelve pages long. Raised in Los Angeles, Wiley’s estranged father is Nigerian and his mother, African-American. While Wiley may not identify as African, his work allows for a fruitful discussion on how artists of color are received in the global art scene. Wiley’s works are larger than life portraits in the tradition of the Old Masters, usually featuring a single heroic black (male) figure dressed in urban, hip hop-influenced fashions against modernized interpretations of the highly intricate backgrounds of traditional European portraiture. According to André Carrington, Wiley’s work and his existence within the global capitalistic art circuit are rooted in the practice of world-making. Wiley’s work engages in the practice of world-making: his paintings “demonstrate how black diasporic cosmopolitanism reconfigures the relationship between visual culture and subjectivity, offering a powerful response to the norms of racial, gendered, and class representation that we have inherited from modernity.”

World-making is characterized as the ways historical setting(s) inform the manner work is looked at and understood. Wiley engages in practices of world-making by invoking the past and present through his artistic practice. Put more clearly, “Wiley’s portraiture provides instructive examples of a world-making practice that continues to develop in relation to his identification with—and disidentification with—prevailing concepts about what it means to be black, American, and male.” Wiley’s work signals the awareness of past and present racial segregation, in addition to broader histories of racial discrimination. His work demonstrates these demarcations through placing black (male) subjects within historical spaces that would have, at the time, been unavailable to them. Muholi like Wiley interacts with boundaries and


103 Ibid. p. 247
demarcations, as seen in the disruptive potentiality present in her work that physically, psychically and socio-politically centers the marginalized. Both artists engage in practices of world-making by negotiating and mediating contemporary conditions through centering and celebrating bodies that have been, and continue to be vilified and demonized.
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