Zanele Muholi's Elements of Survival

Raél Jero Salley

South African Zanele Muholi's photographs directly address resistance and tension between individual and community. Specifically, Muholi refers to the lives and loves of people who are black and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI), aiming her project toward establishing and preserving "black queer visibility." In the process, Muholi produces photographic images that refer to—and critically reconsider—longstanding visual traditions, while at the same time responding to acts of violence and dehumanization. The result is an expanding archive that visualizes various complexities of community and nation.

One precedent for Muholi's use of photography in relation to black community appeared over a century ago. Deborah Willis (2003) notes that W.E.B. DuBois, then a sociology professor at Atlanta University, had a fascination with photography. For DuBois, photography played a critical role in reconstructing and shaping American visual culture at the turn of the 20th century. When assembling materials for the "American Negro" exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition, DuBois turned to black photographers to mount challenges to blatantly racist and stereotypical images that pictured people of color as inferior, unattractive, and unintelligent. Collected several years prior to DuBois's famous postulation of black racial identity as "double consciousness," the photographs displayed in Paris were meant to serve as an archive of visual evidence that would prove black people were as multifaceted as everyone else.

Unlike other exoticized collections and displays of the time, DuBois's archive of images expresses possibility through visual self-presentation. Black photographers and their black subjects defined themselves and their beauty through photography, believing it was a significant step in the fight against violently negative imagery (Harris 2003). In a time when the deliberate distortion of black images in popular culture was common, DuBois's archive offered a different view of the global black subject against a sociopolitical backdrop that made violent efforts to classify and control. Dubois's exhibit ran counter to popular de-humanizing displays by visualizing black folk as an inextricable part of the fabric of society; it was a successful effort to overturn many common ideas about black life (Willis 2003:52). These photographs of a diverse range of black people played a role in shaping ideas about identity and a sense of self. Dubois's collection of images motivated black folks, but they also informed the broader American social consciousness. Beyond racial concerns, black photographers were interested in locating and reproducing the beauty and fragility of people close to them, the humor of everyday life, and the dreams of a people (Enwezor 2006, Firstenberg 2001). The visualization of educated, working, and dreaming black people formed a visual archive that documented a diverse nation of dignified, proud, successful, and beautiful humans.

The pictures were radical because, through them, the African American community was presented as a group of spiritually, socially, and economically diverse individuals. The insistence on defining one's own identity and beauty is what Willis has termed "subversive resistance." Subversive resistance is a metaphor for strategies that produce visual images to counter dominant meanings or stereotypes (Willis 2003). It operates by offering alternative views, and its force often comes through nuanced presentation of one's self and community. Contemporary photographs may also enable the viewer to imagine how people connect with, and belong to, their communities and nations.

I use DuBois's show as a point of departure for this essay on South African artist Zanele Muholi because in the course of my research I happened upon a reproduction of a striking archi-

1 African American woman, half-length portrait, facing slightly right; African American Photographs Assembled for 1900 Paris Exposition, Prints & Photographs Division
PHOTO: COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, LC-USZ62-124631

2 Zanele Muholi
Zukiswa (2010)
Silver gelatin print; 86.5 cm x 60.5 cm
PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST

val photograph from DuBois' exhibit—an African American woman, half-length portrait, facing slightly right. The composition, subject matter, and context of that untitled portrait from 1900 (Fig. 1) gave me a way of thinking about Muholi's recent photographic forms—looking at the composition and context of that century-old photograph made me look differently at *Zukiswa* (Fig. 2), one of Muholi's black-and-white portraits made in 2010. *Zukiswa* is a head-and-shoulders portrait of a young, black African woman against a black backdrop. Zukiswa's contemporaneity is evident from short, curly, bleached locks and collared sportcoat. In her three-quarters stance, she gazes back at the viewer with an expression of confidence, intention, and determination. I am struck by the way the portrait from DuBois's American archive successfully subverted dominant paradigms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by visualizing people in ways that destroyed dominant framings. I am also impressed by how "looking again" may add conceptual complexity to that narrative. I see both impulses in Muholi's work of self-definition by means of an archive of photographic images.

Zanele Muholi describes herself as a "visual-activist."[1] Born in Umlazi, Durban in 1972, she completed an Advanced Photography course at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown and held her first solo exhibit at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2004. Muholi cofounded and worked as a community relations officer for the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW), a black lesbian organization based in Gauteng, and as a photographer and reporter for *Behind the Mask,* an online magazine on lesbian and gay issues in Africa. Muholi explains her artistic approach is "a journey to ensure there is black queer visibility [because] it is important to mark, map, and preserve our mo(ve)ments
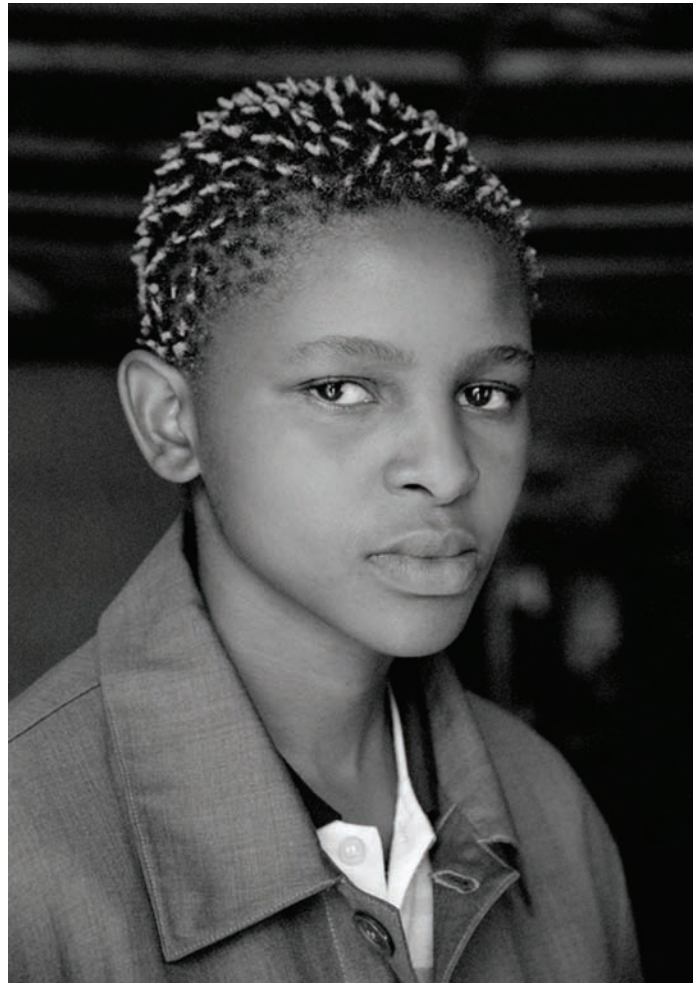
through visual histories for reference and posterity so that future generations will note that we were here" (Muholi 2012, Sullivan 2003). Muholi's intent is to leave a history that is tangible to the people of the future. She observes that black lesbian women are part of bigger sociopolitical structures, but in the specific context of South Africa, the open portrayal of black women displaying same-sex practices has been met with controversy and dismissal from top government officials. Muholi's work provides a personal take on these issues (Fig. 3). Her approach is "to try and capture that reality without looking too much to the negative, without entertaining that violence, without letting the perpetrator know that we are [the] losers [in this scenario]" (Muholi in Garb 2011:287). For Muholi, visual material helps people become aware of and begin to understand the complexity of a community.[2] Her photographic portraits record and show the aesthetics of a small nation of people.

(this page)
3 Zanele Muholi
Zanele (Self portrait) (2010)
Silver gelatin print; 86.5 cm x 60.5 cm
PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST

(opposite)
4 Zanele Muholi
Betesta Mogale (2010)
Silver gelatin print; 86.5 cm x 60.5 cm
PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST

5 Zanele Muholi
Ziyanda (2010)
Silver gelatin print; 86.5 cm x 60.5 cm
PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST

Muholi's pictures have been described as sensuous and tactile, and critics have noted the artworks offer new understandings of beauty and subjectivity. Muholi's photographs, writes Okwui Enwezor, "often capture the subtle tensions in bodies at rest; at other times her subjects appear proud, directly confront the camera's gaze, and are gathered into poses redolent of earlier portraiture" (2006:376). Muholi's efforts to image the existence, resistance, and struggles of LGBTI groups in South Africa exhibit these tensions. The way in which the tensions play through the images and the means by which they appear is what animates this analysis. But the production of a visual archive that collects, assembles, and displays diverse black lesbian women is only part of Muholi's interest.

I identify in Muholi's work *subversive resistance*, a useful metaphor for thinking about this expanding visual archive. I suggest the artworks display a dynamic process of archive production—one that visually documents the challenges of black LGBTIs in South Africa, while being equally concerned with locating and reproducing the beauty and fragility of a community, the constituent's experience of everyday life, and the dreams of a developing nation (Foster 1996). The "visual activism" of Muholi's images outlines twin impulses of negotiation: a desire for assimilation into mainstream society and internal diversification within LGBTI communities. There is a conflicting relationship between the impulses of assimilation and diversification—assimilation can mute identity, while identity often requires difference (Ghaziani 2011). A conceptual framework based on conflict seems to offer an irreconcilable oscillation between sameness and difference, but as a "visual activist," Muholi tends not to be exclusively oppositional in how she constructs collective identity. Instead, she makes strategic selections about emphasizing either the "celebration" or "suppression" of black LGBTI distinctiveness vis-à-vis mainstream audiences (Bernstein in Ghaziani 2011:100).

Critics have noted that Muholi's work is thereby able to produce compelling political meanings and also be aesthetically provocative (Gqola 2006, Enwezor 2006, Garb 2011). But the means by which those meanings and provocations occur have rarely been articulated as part of a strategic theoretical framework. I hope to show that Muholi's use of subversive resistance is part of a strategy that requires neither obsessive victimization nor

iconic rebellion in order to expose and neutralize a dominant way of seeing. Instead, Muholi's images reveal ways in which one might use visual means to assert an inclusive logic of belonging. Muholi's creative endeavors tell stories about how people connect with, and belong to, their communities and nations. I was drawn to Muholi's artworks because of the sense of belonging they evoke. Historical, sociopolitical, and cultural conditions in South Africa have conspired to alienate the women pictured in Muholi's photographic images, and while these conditions are essential to Muholi's imagery, I have become fascinated by the way Muholi's series reveal a dynamic process of visualizing yet-to-be fulfilled possibilities in human relations. The images work in ways that are as nuanced and varied as the many individuals that appear in the photographs.

The signature of Muholi's work is to specify ways of seeing. She observes that of the publications that chronicled South Africa's sociopolitical history, few have included LGBTI people who contributed to the struggles for freedom and democracy. What is more, before 1994, black lesbian voices were excluded from the making of a formal queer movement (Muholi 2012). The mainstream archive and the women's canon thereby lack visual, oral, and textual materials that include black lesbians. Paradoxically, black women's bodies, black lesbian women's bodies, are *hypervisible* as they appear in popular visual culture—as manifestations of the undesirable. Regimes of visibility (whiteness,

patriarchy, heteronormativity) react to the undesirable visibility of black lesbians in the form of "curative" rapes, expulsions from families, and murderous attacks on black lesbians. Consequently, black lesbians are targets of brutal oppression in South African townships and surrounding areas. Pumla Dineo Gqola recognizes Muholi's endeavor is thereby *less* about making black lesbians visible and *more* about engaging with those regimes that have used black lesbian's hypervisibility as a way to violate them (Gqola in Muholi 2006:84). Muholi's visualization of black LGBTI people as a group of spiritually, socially, and economically diverse individuals is an effort to resist violence. Violent acts of attack, rape, and murder against black lesbian women occur in high volume in South Africa today (Rowe 2005, Moffett 2006). Muholi notes black lesbians require spaces of refuge from the rise of violent homophobia in Africa. Such spaces of refuge depend on access to education, funds, and resources, but also access to a sense of belonging and citizenship.

In an effort to produce this space of refuge at home, she aims to "project real lives and also present how people look at themselves differently." Photographs by Muholi evidence these spatial negotiations—at once, they revision archives, challenge expectations about black lesbian women, and review a supposedly familiar visual reality.

This essay takes three of Muholi's recent photographic projects as case studies: *Faces and Phases* (begun in 2006 and ongo

ing), *Difficult Love* (2010), and *Isilumo Siyaluma* (2011). In form, each project responds to dominant modes of South African photographic representation, including ethnographic, portrait and documentary imagery (Garb 2011, Hayes 2007, Richards 2008). While other of Muholi's series may have also fit this discussion, it seems to me these three are formally distinct, yet clearly relate to each other because of how they critically reformulate the aims of the representational modes through which they appear.

I begin with a sample of black and white photographic portraits from the series *Faces and Phases*. These lesbian women from her own community are made visible through portraiture directly engaging with a history of colonial, taxonomic, and contemporary visual culture. They thereby address racialized discourses of difference that offer generalized representations of what are thought to be typical characteristics, for despite similarities in pose, no two figures look the same. I then turn to Muholi's film *Difficult Love*. Produced in response to violent hate crime, the film is a documentary work intended to stand as a record of a declining community under violent attack because its existence is perceived as a threat to mainstream South African society. Subversive resistance is evident here too, though the techniques employed herein foreground Muholi's personal relationship to the participants she pictures. *Difficult Love* positions Muholi as narrator, the one who actually looks, chooses, edits, and creates stories as an insider of the community. I next elabo

6 Zanele Muholi
Faces and Phases (2010)
Installation view
PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST

rate on subversive resistance in *Isilumo Siyaluma*. In this project involving installation artwork and community engagement, menstrual blood is used as both medium and subject matter. Digitally constructed photographic prints stage a critical deviation through motifs about what constitutes acceptable female sexuality, but also work to normalize a view of black lesbians as mainstream women.

PORTRAITURE IN *FACES AND PHASES*

The black-and-white portraits comprising Muholi's *Faces and Phases* series are marked as art objects by their sharp focus and fine tonal range (Figs. 3–5).[3] Each silver gelatin print (86.5 cm x 60.5 cm) is produced in an edition of eight, plus two artist's proofs. When exhibited, they are matted, framed, and displayed in long lines or grids (Fig. 6). The images offer the appearance, pose, dress, and gaze of historical portraiture as a background. For example, *Ziyanda* (2010; Fig. 5) shows Ziyanda standing in front of a wall, head tilted, Mohawk hairstyle prominent. The dark-skinned person in this photograph meets the viewer's gaze while standing in an open, frontal pose. The arrangement allows her to proudly display her black T-shirt emblazoned with the word "Poker" and a silhouette of a figure in white that appears in a graphic style popular in truck mud-flaps. The graphic form makes a triangle as it bends

forward, legs spread, hair falling, and reaching to touch high-heeled toes. The backdrop is plain, diffuse, with little recession. Overall, the composition focuses attention on the young person at center, her facial expression, the image on the shirt she wears. This picture seems to adhere to conventions of the portrait mode: it conveys some information about the subject through details of dress or styling, the body expression may communicate something about Ziyanda's emotional state at the moment of shooting, and the picture brings together processes of selection and narrative conventions to weave a story. But a key feature of this image is the way in which it allows its viewer to reconsider any unearned sense of familiarity with the person viewed. We have limited information about Ziyanda from this image, which opens space for fantasy—the interpretive space necessary for reimagining humans previously defined and fixed by representational spaces of race, gender, or sexuality.

7 Duggin-Cronin Shangaan n.d.
IMAGE COURTESY THE CENTER FOR CURATING THE ARCHIVE,
UCT AND ROBBIE HART, THE MCGREGOR MUSEUM, KIMBERLEY

8 Santu Mofokeng (b. 1956)
Mosuets and Maria Letisipa with their daughter,
Minkie Letsipa
Silver bromide print, photographer: Scholtz Studio,
Lindley. Orage River Colony c.1900s
From *The Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890–1950,*
black and white slide projection, installation edition 5
IMAGE COURTESY LUNETTA BARTZ, MAKER, JOHANNESBURG;
© SANTU MOFOKENG, 1997

9 Zanele Muholi
Skipper Mogape (2010)
Silver gelatin print; 86.5 cm x 60.5 cm
PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST

because it causes people to become gay.

Petra Brink   Pra-line Hendricks

In writing about representational modes in South African photography, Tamar Garb underscores a negotiation of past and present in the work of contemporary artists. The massive archive of South African imagery offers time-bound traditions of depiction, and the sociohistorical circumstances in which photography appears in Africa are inherited from complex systems of colonialism and postcolonialism. In its earliest forms, photography in South Africa depicted people in terms of three dominant categories of representation—ethnography, portraiture, and documentary—each with its own institutional and cultural associations. Consequently, in early examples from South Africa's vexed and controversial visual archive, it is through anthropological and ethnographic frameworks that people appear. Contemporary photographers invoke, refuse, or embrace traditions of depiction "in order to position themselves in relation to the ever-pressing exigencies of the present" (Garb 2011:11; see also Auslander 2005, Miller 2005, Richards 2011, Van der Watt 2005). Muholi confronts the legacy of the camera's gaze and responds to the frameworks constructed by apartheid's rule of law and racial essentialism (Fig. 6).

The work of South African photographer Santu Mofokeng offers a precedent for confronting a legacy of photographic portraiture. Mofokeng's project *The Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890–1950* (2000) mines an archive from the early to middle twentieth century. The images are drawn from a vast body of photographs produced by Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin, who assembled ethnographic-style pictures of idealized types (Fig. 7).[4] Mofokeng's *The Black Photo Album* offers a collection of family photographs that the artist sourced, copied, scanned, retouched, and presented as an alternative to Duggan-Cronin's archive. In ways similar to DuBois's exhibit nearly a century earlier, Mofokeng's counter-archive is populated with modern and urban black people in the Victorian conventions of posture, dress, manner, and costume. Mofokeng's found portraits had been overlooked and unseen for decades (Fig. 8). They convey a sense of black pride and agency in an era when the archival purpose was to order information according to typological grids and tenets of social Darwinism (Enwezor 2010). The historical specificity of Mofokeng's project, Okwui Enwezor observes, is crucial for understanding how the emergence of photography is entwined with a dehumanizing colonial enterprise. During this period, the archives produced by the South African state were

mobilized as instruments of power over black Africans, based on pseudoscientific race theories. In contrast, Mofokeng's archive visualizes a different history of the era by bringing to light a group of portrait subjects who commissioned and posed for their own photographs. Mofokeng's images emerge from the private realm to form a community of people linked by an ongoing history of oppression.

The South African visual archive exhibits a legacy of race thinking, but Muholi also sets her sights on other points of marginality, including queerness. "Queer" has sometimes been defined as transgressive difference from what are perceived as heterosexist norms. It has also been taken to encompass a range of desires, experiences, and identities, including those of black lesbians.[5] Muholi identifies as a black lesbian woman, but her endeavor pictures constituents of the LBGTI community broadly. She refers to black queers, and black lesbians especially but not exclusively, and refers explicitly to African lesbians, transmen, women, and females. Muholi's ongoing series of portraits offer information and evidence of ways of life. Most images appear to be young black people of African descent, healthy, clothed in everyday attire. The individuals look squarely into the camera lens with unwavering and certain gazes, a feature that results from their active involvement in the project, including their choice of how to be photographed.

The photographs originate in specific human relationships within her geographical locale, and Muholi pictures herself—both literally and metaphorically—through her interactions with each model (Figs. 4–5). She maintains relationships with her collaborators in, outside of, and beyond the production of the photograph. Muholi explains the importance of having understanding of people and dynamics within a community she is photographing:

It's very important to know the people that I photograph. In the work that I do, I go and travel to different spaces, and I just freeze when I come across a community that I don't know. So it means I'm delayed for a week or two weeks just trying to understand who these people are before I take photographs of them, because then it makes life easier.[6]

12 Zanele Muholi
Isilumo siyaluma (2006–2011)
Installation detail, Blank Projects, Cape Town 2011
PHOTO: RAÉL JERO SALLEY

13 Zanele Muholi
Isilumo siyaluma (2006–2011)
Wallpaper Installation view, Blank Projects, Cape Town 2011
PHOTO: RAÉL JERO SALLEY

I believe Muholi's insistence on developing relationships humanizes the photographic encounter. Because her visual selection is informed by personal contact, she is able to tell people's stories in an intimate way.

While the works comprising *Faces and Phases* may be apprehended in terms of the values and traditions of portraiture, they are also part of Muholi's developing archive of black lesbian existence. This archive is not constituted in an attempt to assimilate individuals to normative social values or traditions. Rather, *Faces and Phases* envisions black lesbians involved in struggles for equality and against established traditions. In this sense parallels may be drawn with DuBois's and Mofokeng's visual archives of black people, images that have served as one of the primary modes through which fights for social equality come to be understood (Willis 2003).

In fights for social equality, photographs are mobilized in battles over visual representation and ideology. In the process, singular images are selected to represent a multitude of pictures—they become iconic pictures of struggle. The term *icon* refers to an image, representation, symbol, someone or something famous. Charles Sanders Peirce defined the icon within semiotics as a diagrammatic sign that exhibits a similarity or analogy to the subject of discourse, while more recently cultural theorists have used the term more broadly to refer to "an image (or person) that refers to something beyond its individual components, something (or someone) that acquires symbolic significance" (Fleetwood 2011:33). Icons are often perceived to represent universal concepts, emotions, and meanings. A photographic icon may become a form of public art that generates civic performance, the crucial function of which is to call forth a

notion of the public and collective affect. (Lucates and Hariman quoted in Fleetwood 2011:33–34). Iconicity, as Nicole Fleetwood uses it, borrows from both definitions, "an analogic or relational sign that produces affective responses in audiences by 'sticking' the thing or person signified to normative codes, meaning and value" (Fleetwood 2011:33–34). In an analysis of black visual culture, Nicole Fleetwood observes iconic images may be incorporated into the social imaginary as evidence of overcoming social and political injustice. Such narratives of inclusivity serve active political agendas meant to manage legacies of race, gender, and sexuality based subjugation as they operate in the present.[7] The danger is that, in the process, both the power of multiplicity and the force of particularity may be neutralized for easy incorporation into an existing social imaginary. The images in *Faces and Phases* resist assimilation by means of *non*-iconicity.

The portraits in *Faces and Phases* render their subject in intentionally non-iconic modes. Muholi's artworks mobilize against iconicity because if any singular image in *Faces and Phases* were to be appropriated as a definitive representation of black lesbian existence, the project would be misunderstood as a typology of black lesbian sexuality. In response, Muholi favors local collaborators and everyday scenes, an emphasis that allows alternative modes for visual engagement. Such visual alternatives are less bound by normative values or regimes of looking (Mirzoeff 2011:473–96). Muholi's descriptive images are not aimed at producing a fixed or conventional type, but rather a sense and view of a multitude (Smith 2011:67). Just as Mofokeng's images are far removed from a compendium of idealized exotic types, *Faces and Phases* resists the iconization of black lesbians, and thereby resists political endeavors that name, tame and classify.

The archival nature of the series does not suppress the individual specificity of human beings. For example, Betesta identifies as a transgender person and thereby exists outside a fixed, defined sexual or gender identity. As such, Muholi describes Betesta's experience as one of societal isolation and continual process of "coming out." Likewise, the challenge of transgender existence for Skipper (Fig. 9) goes beyond subjecting one's body to surgical adjustments and extends to teaching the viewer—indeed forcing upon the viewer—an uneasy change or reinvention of conceptual syntax (Blessing 1997, Cottingham 1996, Wilson 1997:148).

Skipper's inclusion in *Faces and Phases* contributes to the archive without over-determining his/her personhood through photographic iconicity. Through the portrait, the photograph displays local, everyday, lived experience, and in so doing, it questions the possibility of a stable classificatory system for sex or gender identity. These self-presentations use subversive resistance to articulate beauty, but also tell stories of community that would, otherwise, be unimaginable.

DIFFICULT LOVE

Faces and Phases offers portraits that challenge the exclusion of a people denied of free expression. *Difficult Love* (Zanele Muholi and Peter Goldsmid 2010) uses autobiography and the documentary form to show not only violence but also resilience.

The individuals in Muholi's artworks are the targets of unrelenting murders and "curative rapes" in South Africa. Surveys of violence against women in South Africa show higher levels of rape of women and children than any other country in the world not at war or embroiled in civil conflict. The statistics are staggering: at least one in three women will be raped in her lifetime; one in four will be beaten by her domestic partner (Moffett 2006:129–63). Since 2001, thirty-one lesbians have been reported dead, victims of targeted attacks (Fihlani 2011). In 2007 Salome Masooa and Sizakele Sigasa were raped and killed in Soweto; in 2008 Eudy Simelane was gang-raped, stabbed, and murdered in KwaThema, near Johannesburg; in 2010 Millicent Gaika was strangled, tortured, and raped by a man who told her he wanted to "turn her into a woman." In Cape Town alone, more than ten lesbians per week are raped or gang-raped but many of the cases are not reported because victims are afraid of police ridicule, repeat offenses, or public censure. As a consequence, many lesbians just suffer in silence (Fihlani 2011, Sanger 2011). Muholi's subversive resistance critiques and works to transform this present reality.

Directed by Muholi and Peter Goldsmid, *Difficult Love* uses a documentary mode to present the reality of violence, and directly links Muholi's autobiography to her visual activism and art making. This is another mode of envisioning, recording, and preserving black lesbian history, lives, and realities. The film responds to the violence of heteronormative culture from Muholi's personal viewpoint and experience.[8] Muholi explains:

> The project is about me, the community that I'm part of. I was born in the township: I grew up in that space … you have to be made to become a straight woman and work according to the heteronormative culture that is there. If you refuse, and say, "I am not what you think I am," you are more likely to experience "curative" rape, where a woman is raped in order for her to be changed and put in her place.[9]

The realities of gender-based violence in South Africa are the flash points for Muholi's work. But the visual projects have impact beyond discourses on violence. The images illuminate a wide range of lived human experience, because their subversive strategies provoke visual relationships that may reconfigure how one sees being-black, being-queer, as well as how one understands gender identities.

Early in the film, the artist documents an encounter in a township, on the street. Muholi is showing her artwork to a group of female virginity testers. After viewing images of women loving women, one of the group responds:

> I would never allow my child to take such photographs. You see something like this gives a bad picture, to us as virginity testers and black people. Our image has been dented by this thing. This whole thing is for whites, because it causes people to become gay.

This encounter uncovers the active rendering of blackness and sexuality through cultural and social conventions (Fig. 10). The viewer is offered a reaction to nonnormative gender and sexualities. The interviewee explicitly links her occupation as a virginity

tester in South Africa to her views on homosexuality, blackness, and white supremacy. The interviewee's concern is with what she calls "our" image as black Africans and a perceived danger to blackness that comes from same-sex relations. The practice of virginity testing made a comeback in South Africa in the late 1990s, after the democratic elections of 1994 (Leclerc-Madlala 2003, Vincent 2006). The resurgence coincided with the period when the HIV/AIDS pandemic began to take hold and, as Vincent (2006) points out, the testing was consequently defended as a "culturally appropriate" strategy for managing the disease. As the interviewee suggests, the practice maintains sociocultural divisions and transcribes them onto physical bodies. In this example, blackness is indirectly framed as the repository of "white" Western cultural fears and desires.

Muholi's photographs catalyze a complex range of reactions because they push the viewer to contemplate the meanings and relationships between blackness, sexuality, and power (Cooper 1996, Cohen 2005, Sobopha 2011). In the film, Muholi speaks further about her life, explaining her experience of heteronormative space:

> When I came out, I did not see, or did not have access to images that spoke to me because the spaces in which we come they are infested by heterosexist mindsets. And there is too much heterosexualism in place. We grew up in those spaces, in traditional nuclear families, [which is] the first image you see in magazines.

Muholi describes the South African space of imagination as circumscribed by dominant norms of the traditional nuclear family and its imaging in popular culture. She points to these cultural conventions as the deficits that animate violent homophobia, and personally works as a witness to and vocalist against the violence.

Difficult Love does not elect representative figures for black lesbian woman. Instead, the film probes the means by which limiting categories shape possibilities in everyday life. Muholi's observation that negotiating a space of refuge depends on access—to education, funds, and resources—resonates here. In *Difficult Love,* Petra and Praline appear in Mowbray, Cape Town, in an informal shelter, under a bridge (Fig. 11). The pair made the bridge their home after being ejected from a homeless shelter for identifying as lesbian. Praline recounts:

> At fourteen years I was a tomboy. I played games. Five months later I found I had feelings for women. I actually struggled against that, I couldn't believe I was attracted to the same sex. I didn't talk to anyone about it, I tried to hide it, but I couldn't hold it in for too long. Six months later I came out.

Rather than "package alterity," *Difficult Love* confronts heteronormativity by focusing on the human love in this couple's everyday life—they are filmed telling stories, singing together, and embracing. This is a mode of social portraiture that reveals injustice, but also documents lived experience.

By documenting her own lesbian experience in relation to the social spaces of South Africa, Muholi mobilizes autobiography and social documentary modes for subversive resistance. At the same time, she imagines less desperate situations for herself and others. The interlocutors who appear in *Difficult Love* are visualized exhibiting the human qualities of intimacy, tenderness, respect, and love.
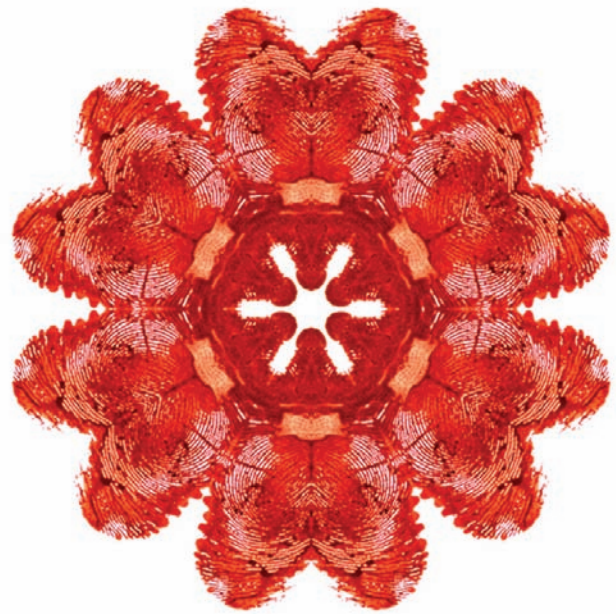
ISILUMO SIYALUMA

Through visual projects Muholi attempts to cope with the pain and loss she hears and feels as she bears witness to human suffering. *Faces and Phases* forms community and offers beauty by means of noniconicity. *Difficult Love* resists by shifting spaces of heteronormativity while proposing new horizons of possibility. *Isilumo Siyaluma* (2011) deviates from what constitutes acceptable female sexuality in mainstream South Africa. As it appeared in Cape Town in 2011, this project involved digital photographic prints, installation artwork, and community engagement.

Isilumo Siyaluma's installation is anchored by a newspaper headline and article from April 2011. The headline reads: "Another 'Lesbian' Raped and Murdered." The report chronicles Noxolo Nogwaza, who was found lying in an alley in the Kwa-Thema Township (Fig. 12). Nogwaza's violated body was deformed beyond recognition: eyes out of sockets, brain split, teeth scattered, beer bottle and used condom lodged in her genitals, and the brick used as a weapon next to her body. Alongside the news article is a poem, accompanied by two medium format abstract motifs on paper. The adjoining wall is plastered from floor to ceiling with digitally printed, patterned wallpaper tiles (Fig. 13). Each square has rows of a repeating, circular pattern, and each row offers three rows of four designs. The designs are dark, brown-red in color and repeat on a white background (Fig. 14). From a distance, the designs may be taken as circular drips, dotted cross the surface. On a third wall hang three prints, bright red forms emanate from a central axis in complexly layered patterns in these digitally rendered, kaleidoscopic images (Fig. 15).

Throughout *Isilumo Siyaluma,* menstrual blood is used as medium and subject matter. It is Muholi's own, photographed and digitally manipulated. *Isilumo Siyaluma* is a Zulu expression can be loosely translated as "period pains/periods pain."

The phrase has an added element of secrecy—there is something secretive in and about this blood and temporal period. The artist explains the blood symbolizes the physical and spiritual blood that was shed from the bodies of survivors and victims, but it is combined with symbols of strength and bravery. In the kaleidoscopic images, menstrual blood appears in a stylized manner. Muholi describes each pattern piece as representative of an act of violence against women, a rape survivor or the victim of a hate crime. She explains her purpose is to express the pain and loss she feels as she witnesses the pain of "curative rapes" carried out on girls and women in her community. Some of the complex shapes refer to floral arrangements or animals. Others refer to masks, masking, and shields—objects and symbols that feature as elements in traditional Zulu culture.

It is not the first time Muholi uses blood, menstrual blood in particular, as a central motif. Menstruation is "registered closely and fully" in the photographic series and exhibition *Period* (2006), which includes photographic images of menstrual blood on a pad, in a bath, and a soiled pad on a plate (Ngcobo 2006, Baderoon 2011). In tackling the taboo of menstruation, Muholi forces a confrontation with the limited perimeters of what constitutes acceptable female sexuality (Smith in Muholi 2011:67). *Isilumo Siyaluma* extends Muholi's engagement with menstruation by questioning the ways in which menstruation is represented and articulated in the public realm.

On November 4, 2011 in Cape Town, Muholi gathered a group of women for a discussion on the topic. The conversation centered on South African society, violence against women, the exhibition, and periods/pain. The gathering included women of various ages and positions in society and afforded an opportunity for each woman to relate her own relationship with blood, menstruation, fears or survivals of sexual assault, and the functions of "female bodied beings" (Muholi 2010:287). For many of the women present, it was the first opportunity to speak openly about these issues.

In *Isilumo Siyaluma* blood becomes the social representative of violence and taboo. The viewer becomes active in completing the work by responding to the blood as medium. This may be the point—if the response appears in a public exchange of disgust toward the person or thing which deviates from acceptable social behavior, it makes apparent, negatively, the normativity of violent masculinity. The images evoke conflicting reactions, including pleasure and applause, fear and violence, and thereby become vehicles for making looking reflexive (Mitchell 2009, Scott 2010).

The kaleidoscopes of *Isilumo Siyaluma* provide an analogous way of glimpsing the right to subjectivity denied by violence. *Isilumo Siyaluma* endeavors to "articulate ways in which the visual can be used as a 'site of resistance' by producing moments of introspection and the capacity to look at one's own thoughts, feelings and mental condition" (Muholi 2011:45). Introspective thought yields knowledge of one's own current mental states, and more than one type of process fits this activity. When a viewer peers into a kaleidoscope, that observer has a type of privileged perspective on the shapes and colors it presents (Schwitzgebel 2010). The kaleidoscopic form suggests certain aspects of mental life are different for each individual. The images therefore suggest deviant, introspective space, through which the artists ponders her own mental states and the viewer observes the normative framework that marginalizes Muholi and her interlocutors.

The kaleidoscope of realities to which Muholi refers is framed in ways that are public and private, punishing and reassuring, physical and violent. It is as if *Isilumo Siyaluma* functions to offer the information in stages—there is immediate sensory attraction to complex design, kaleidoscopic pattern, recognition and reaction to the medium, which gives way to a deeper "privilege" of sharing the artist's detection process. *Isilumo Siyaluma* counters a world in which gender is a univocal signifier, making images and situations generate spaces in which gender constitution is destabilized and depolarized, where self-analysis is connected and communicated with fluency.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have tried to point to Muholi's use of subversive resistance as both a theoretical and practical strategy. Rather than excessive visibility or obsessive victimization, Muholi revisions the quotidian from her personal perspective as a citizen of South Africa. The artist is determined to demystify the violence against black lesbians and shift it to the center of social life. Gabeba Baderoon rightly characterizes this violence as an "attack on ordinariness that matters to everyone," because it exposes and neutralizes the power in dominant ways of seeing (Baderoon 2011). Instead of capturing that reality by focusing on the negative or submitting to it, Muholi uses pleasure and beauty to script a sense of belonging. This inclusiveness extends beyond her social circle. As is evident in the works discussed above, Muholi's developing visual archive negotiates the past in the present by invoking, refusing and/or embracing traditions of depiction. The artworks also critically engage the institutional and cultural associations attached to dominant modes of representation. Muholi's endeavor thereby embraces conflicts that pervade human history, tradition and everyday lived experience. In sum, the artworks provide ways of reimagining human existence and enable their viewer to imagine how people connect with, and belong to, their own communities and nations.

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Notes

1   One evening in late April 2012 Zanele and I spoke by phone. She was in crisis, having just learned about a break in at her flat. No one was physically injured, but the flat was ransacked. Few things were stolen from the flat, but twenty external hard drives were removed. These drives housed Zanele's visual work produced between 2008 and 2012, much of which is irreplaceable. The loss of this visual archive is most traumatic for Zanele. She suspects that the invaders mean to disrupt and disable her work to archive the

visual history of black lesbians in South Africa. If this is the case—and it seems to be, given that none of Zanele's partner's belongings were stolen—it is a profound loss, one that is at once private and public.

2 Zanele Muholi, interview with the author, Cape Town, South Africa, November 15, 2011.

3 The photographs in *Faces and Phases* were exhibited at Michael Stevenson, Cape Town in 2010.

4 Duggan-Cronin's images were published as *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa* between 1928 and 1954. The images were organized into eleven population groups, and were "intended to stand as 'records' of declining communities whose 'racial purity' and tribal customs were perceived as threatened by modernity and misce-genation" (Garb 2011:21–25; see also Jacobson in Garb 2011). To preserve the expected image of traditional sub-jects, Duggan-Cronin routinely supplied the props and costumes that his figures lacked to produce a mythic image of an idealized natural world, habituated by groups of "typical" people. Mofokeng's *The Black Photo Album* was developed while he was a researcher at the Institute for Advanced Social Research at the University of the Witwatersrand (1988–1998).

5 Judith Butler argues that lesbianism does not operate by expressing an inner essence, but is rather meaning produced in opposition to dominant forms of gender that by virtue of their repetition and perfor-mance, appear natural (Butler 1990; see also Horne and Lewis 1996).

6 Zanele Muholi, interview with the author, Cape Town, South Africa, November 15, 2011.

7 Earlier artworks by Muholi inflamed passions and revealed political agendas. In 2009, then South African Minister of Arts and Culture Lulu Xingwana walked out of Muholi's exhibition that featured sensual images of black lesbian women. The Minister described the images as "crude misrepresentations of women (both black and white) masquerading as artworks rather than engaged in questioning or interrogating—which I believe is what art is about. Those particular works of art stereotyped women" (Smith 2011:67).

8 www.imdb.com/video/wab/vi3128728089/

9 Zanele Muholi, interview with the author, Cape Town, South Africa, November 15, 2011.

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