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**Toward a Transnational Queer Futurity:
The Photography of Catherine Opie, Zanele Muholi, and Jean Brundrit**

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Abstract

North American photographer Catherine Opie and South African photographers Zanele Muholi and Jean Brundrit create art that documents the lived experiences of queer and LGBTI-identified individuals and communities. Although their varying geographic and cultural specificities contribute to diverse representations, this research applies a queer transnational methodology to analyze how each artist uses the body as a site for re-visualizing queer identities. Employing cultural theorist, José Esteban Muñoz's conception of a queer futurity reveals how these artistic projects resist the majoritarian politics of the present and envision potential utopian spaces of transformation. By embracing collectivity, belonging, and difference, the photographs enact an enduring search for meaning and resilience in alternative community. The art of Opie, Muholi, and Brundrit testifies to how contemporary queer art extends beyond national and cultural borders to foster transnational interventions into heteropatriarchal discourses.

The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.

–José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 2009

Queer contemporary art explores new, dynamic categories of being by contesting dominant homophobic and misogynist cultural norms regulating queer individuals and communities. Citing either the perpetual exclusion or the objectification of queer female, lesbian, and transgender artists and subjects in visual culture, this essay contends that North American photographer Catherine Opie and South African photographers Zanele Muholi and Jean Brundrit create art that counters current mainstream trends of representation by subverting compulsory heterosexual and patriarchal ideals propagated in hegemonic culture. These artists generate new aesthetic and representational forms by documenting the lived experiences of queer communities.¹ Through the medium of photography, they

¹ This essay uses the word “queer” as an umbrella term referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or asexual-identified individuals. In the early 1990s in the United States, gay and lesbian rights groups began to re-appropriate the term “queer,” and it became both a political and personal term problematizing strict sexual and gender binaries and advocating for fluid, nonheteronormative identities. Since then, the term continues to be adopted internationally. Conceptions of the term “queer” do differ based on location. In South Africa, the term is not employed

cultivate spaces of collective belonging for queer individuals to explore and celebrate their intersectional identities. Rather than attempt to present a singular or coherent understanding of their subjects, they use their photographs to disrupt normative narratives and temporalities that shape sexual and gender identity and allow their subjects to occupy ambiguous, fluid sexual and gender categories.

Each photographer, through photographic documentation and portraiture, intervenes in dominant scripts that subjugate the queer body, but their methods and content informing their art reflect divergent political environments and social positionalities. Although their varying geographic and cultural specificities no doubt contribute to diverse representations, each artist uses the body as a site for re-visualizing and re-creating queer identities and communities. These photographers exemplify how contemporary queer art extends beyond national and cultural borders to enact transnational interventions into hetero-patriarchal discourses.

By creating art at the site of the queer body, Opie, Muholi, and Brundrit intervene in traditional, discriminatory modes of visualizing and perceiving sexual and gender nonconforming individuals and communities. Their photographs do not seek to define a single or fixed queer identity but instead explore the potentials and limits of visually representing lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender subjectivity.

As gender theorist and philosopher Judith Butler explains in the essay “Critically

broadly in current and historical expressions of homosexuality. I therefore use the term “lesbian” or LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) where appropriate. Most consistently I deploy the term “queer,” as constructed in North American queer theory and scholarship, to account for the complexities of non normative sexualities and gender identities.

Queer," "queer" cannot ever fully recognize or describe the subject and therefore "implies the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation."² These artists' work acknowledges that the formation and representation of a minoritarian subject remain an unresolvable process open to revision. The gender and sexual identities of a subject cannot be captured in a single photograph. The documentary photographs of these artists alert the viewer to the inconclusive ambivalences inherent in identity formation by representing subjects that defy strict gender and sexual binaries.

Locating their photographs within a broader project that maps community formations testifies to how they respond to the sociopolitical environments queer individuals must collectively inhabit. Opie, Muholi, and Brundrit extend their message beyond the individual, queer body by also documenting queer partnerships, homes, public spaces, and landscapes. Attention to the spaces queer bodies occupy contributes to an understanding of how these photographic projects visualize alternative, counterhegemonic spaces outside mainstream culture. Extending interpretations of Opie's, Muholi's, and Brundrit's queer portraiture series to include photographs of partnership, home, collectivity, and public space illuminates how their art envisions and creates alternative communities.

These photographs operate within a queer aesthetic practice that strives to reject the oppressive conditions of the present and progress towards an unrealized, collective futurity, what visual and cultural studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz calls an unobtained "queer utopia." In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz proposes that we move to

² Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ* 1 (1993): 17-32.

a not-yet-reached “queer utopia” or futurity lying beyond the horizon. He contends that art serves a crucial role in changing the violent conditions of the present. Despite varied sociopolitical contexts, these artists’ documentary photography envisions alternative, “queer” ways of being in this world. They visualize worlds beyond the present by portraying instances or potential spaces of collective belonging, which ultimately reveals how the “inherent utopian possibility is always on the horizon.”³

A Queer Transnational Methodology

Creating documentary photographs imbued with nontraditional representational strategies of minoritarian individuals and communities, Opie, Muholi, and Brundrit effectively resist the hegemonic state structures subjugating the queer and lesbian body and challenge current, nationalistic expectations and representations. Working in different cities and countries, these artists record diverse queer, lesbian, and transgender experiences in the United States and South Africa and engender strategies of collective resistance through artistic endeavors that extend beyond the borders of their countries.

In their book *Scattered Hegemonies*, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan introduce a transnational discourse to account for existing gendered hegemonies when critiquing economic, political, or cultural systems. Grewal and Kaplan extend their transnational framework to account for new formations of gender and sexual

³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1.

identities.⁴ These scholars contend that employing a transnational feminist practice reveals how “communities are much more multiply organized than the conventional usages of these terms have implied [and] gender is crucially linked to the primary terms and concepts that structure and inform the economic and cultural theories of postmodernity.”⁵ A comparison of art by lesbian-identified artists contributes to a queer, transnational discourse by acknowledging the myriad artistic representations of nonheteronormative individuals and communities thriving around the world.⁶ The art of Opie, Muholi, and Brundrit resists the trends of modernism that mask hybridities and particularities in cultures. Rather than attempt to unite or homogenize these sexual and gender identities under one discourse, a queer transnational methodology allows for a more nuanced analysis of these photographers’ works and demonstrates how their photographs contribute to formations of transnational alliances, linking and supporting queer identities globally.

Their photographs respectfully acknowledge how gender and sexuality inform a nuanced identity amid unequal national and societal power structures.

⁴ Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, "Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational Studies of Sexuality," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7.4, (2001): 667.

⁵ Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 16-17.

⁶ I define “heteronormativity” in terms proposed by Cathy Cohen in 1997 in “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” as both the “localized practices and centralized institutions which legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and ‘natural’ within society.” Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: the Radical Potential of Queer Politics? (Identity/Space/Power: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Politics)," *GLQ: a Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. 3.4 (1997): 440.

They consequently contribute to cultures of dissent reverberating throughout the world. Focusing on the growth of international cultures of dissent, postcolonial scholars M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty illuminate how queer and lesbian women in “similar” hegemonic cultures of compulsory conformity engender spaces of resilience and difference in diverse geographic locales.⁷

Alexander’s and Mohanty’s challenge to scholars to use a transnational feminist lens in order to ask questions that are “location specific but not location bound” shows the importance of connecting the art of American and South African photographers beyond the borders of the nation.⁸ Examining the complexities of their photographs in dialogue leads to a broader discussion on the transnational dimensions of queer art as it questions established sexual and gender regimes. Working within a transnational methodology to analyze both individual and collective instances of queer embodiment and representation contributes to a deeper appreciation of how these artists foreground both individual and collective modes of queer identity formation.

Catherine Opie’s Portraiture: *Being and Having* and *Pervert/Self-Portraits*

American photographer Catherine Opie came to prominence in contemporary photography in the early 1990s by introducing bold aesthetic and representational

⁷ M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Cartographies of Knowledge and Power,” *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*, edited by Amanda L. Swarr and Richa Nagar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 26.

⁸ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 27.

techniques in documentary portraiture. During a decade already marked by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the American Culture Wars, attacks against the National Endowment for the Arts, and the rise of the Religious Right, Opie's photographs disrupt discriminatory and heteronormative narratives excluding queer subjectivities.

Retaliating against centuries of racism, sexism, and homophobia afflicting marginalized communities, America in late twentieth century saw the growth of LGBTI rights movements. The Stonewall Rebellion instigated the mobilization of LGBTI rights movements across the United States that were focused on changing sodomy statutes, employment discrimination, and police brutality against LGBTI communities. Positioned in the wake of antiwar protests, feminist movements, and continued civil rights struggles, the Stonewall Rebellion occurred in June 1969 when police raided a gay and transgender bar in New York City and faced resistance from bar patrons; a riot protesting police brutality lasted three days.⁹ This statement against institutionalized and homophobic violence reverberated throughout the country. Although responses to this uprising reflected considerable regional variations, the Stonewall Rebellion transformed multiple isolated instances of activism into a widespread and collective LGBTI movement.¹⁰ That same year, many gay liberation organizations, including Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Gay

⁹ Mary Bernstein, "Identities and Politics: Toward a Historical Understanding of the Lesbian and Gay Movement," *Social Science History*, 26.3 (2002): 544.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 545, 558.

Activist Alliance (GAA) in New York City, mobilized people around the vision of sexual and gender liberation and equality.

Despite these advances, in the decades following the Stonewall Rebellion, government political agendas continued to disregard the demands of LGBTI groups. The HIV/AIDS epidemic, emerging in the early 1980s, disproportionately affected gay, transgender, and other marginalized sectors of society around the nation. The United States government did little to address this stigmatized epidemic by refusing to advance research initiatives or by denying victims access to adequate health care. This neglect on the part of the government catalyzed the formation of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash the Power) in 1987. This radical and provocative action group in New York City held demonstrations aimed at generating awareness about the reality of HIV/AIDS and created the iconic Silence=Death Project, a media campaign featuring an upside-down, pink triangle and the text SILENCE=DEATH on posters and fliers.¹¹ Another group called Queer Nation formed in 1989 to enact guerilla actions promoting queer visibility. Queer nation also committed to representing a multiplicity of queer identities.¹²

LGBTI rights coalitions such as ACT UP and Queer Nation sought to combat institutionalized homophobic legislation. Yet legislation such as Don't Ask Don't Tell in 1993, which outlawed gays and lesbians from serving in the military; the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) of 1996 endorsing state's denial of

¹¹ Ibid., 563.

¹² Ian Barnard, "Queer Race," *Social Semiotics*. 9.2 (1999): 207.

same-sex marriage; or the failure of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) prohibiting discrimination in the workplace on the basis of sexual orientation in 1996 each points to the prevailing homophobic and conservative political sentiment in the United States. This series of legislation demonstrates how, despite various gains forged across political, economic, and social landscapes by LGBTI groups, the government continued to deny LGBTI and queer individuals' basic rights. Don't Ask Don't Tell and DOMA have since been repealed, but these legislative changes still overlook legal, political, and social inequities faced by LGBTI and queer people.

Another reality impacting LGBTI rights movement in late twentieth century America involves the sexism, racism, and classism plaguing gay and lesbian movements. Campaigns for LGBTI rights or their political constituencies in the 1990s often were dominated by white, male, upper-class activists, and therefore did not redress the inequalities facing the broader LGBTI and queer community (such as accessible healthcare, quality education, or secure employment). Twenty-first century scholarship on LGBTI and queer rights continues to emphasize the limits of LGBTI movement assimilationist agendas that forego the rights of certain queer communities and instead call for a radical and transformative queer politics.¹³

Discrimination against nonconforming sexual and gender identities in late twentieth century America also impacted LGBTI artists. The censorship controversy

¹³ Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, "Building an Abolitionist Trans Queer Movement with Everything We've Got," from Stanley, Eric A, and Nat Smith, *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011), 16.

surrounding gay artist Robert Mapplethorpe evinces the social and political conditions operating at the beginning of Opie's artistic career. The publically funded exhibition *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington D.C. in 1989 sparked outrage among senators and conservative organizations such as the American Family Association; they criticized the National Endowment of the Arts for its sponsorship of artwork showcasing provocative homoerotic and S/M themes. The conservative political and social sentiments dominating national policy and culture inform Opie's decision to center her photography on queer individuals and communities. Her artwork should be analyzed within a social and political context that highlights the issues of homophobia and censorship in American society.

Opie's initial foray, *Being and Having* of 1991 (Figure 1) exhibited at the 494 Gallery in New York, gained immediate and widespread recognition.¹⁴ *Being and Having* consists of thirteen portraits featuring members of lesbian, transgender, and S/M communities in Los Angeles. In this series, Opie upends the universalizing stereotypes constructing the lesbian and transgender body through intimate, photographic portrayals of queer communities in America. In *Being and Having*, the individuals each don androgynous clothing, mustaches, tattoos, and piercings. Their accouterments flirt with normative masculine and feminine tropes that classify individuals within a gender binary. The subjects create new dimensions of gender identity by refusing to assimilate and present as strictly masculine or feminine.

¹⁴ Jean Dykstra, "Catherine Opie." *Art in America*. 1 Dec. 2008. Accessed online, 8 Feb. 2014, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com>.

Taken with a 4x5 camera, these photographs capture subject's face in meticulous detail; their frontal and central compositions resemble mug shots. Through this aesthetic choice, Opie refers to the historical and current pattern of criminalizing and outlawing individuals who deviate from gender and sexual norms. Lacking legal protection, these individuals are rendered culturally unintelligible by mainstream society through denial of their basic rights. The bright, gold background of Opie's photographs dignifies the subjects by appropriating a color associated with royalty or divinity.

Opie takes the photographs in close proximity to the subject and exhibits them at the viewer's eye-level to confrontationally implore viewers to participate in an intimate and honest exchange with these subjects, who gaze back with a direct, assertive stare. These subjects, who often experience being stared at, take the opportunity to stare back and thereby reclaim the gaze. As Opie states, "I try to present people with an extreme amount of dignity. I mean, they're always going to be stared at, but I try to make the portraits stare back. That's what the relationship is all about."¹⁵ By leaving the subjects' gender ambiguous, these portraits challenge the gender profiling a viewer typically engages in when meeting a gender non-conforming individual.

These portraits subvert stereotypes associated with the queer subject by demonstrating the multiple dimensions and possibilities contributing to a queer identity. Each portrait includes an engraved nameplate on the frame that associates

¹⁵ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998): 32.

the face with a nickname. These satirical, gender-neutral names (such as Chicken, Bo, Wolf, or Pig Pen) allude to the performativity of their characters and consequently expose the process of identity constructions. The nicknames also become a token of the subject's agency as they diverge from legal names just as gender expression here deviates from the strict norms associated with the gender category assigned at birth.

In *Being and Having*, each subject carries a unique individuality; despite belonging to a larger subculture, the lesbian body cannot be stereotyped or homogenized. Instead, viewers are encouraged to acknowledge the multiple identities in these representations. Rather than propagate a "quintessential" lesbian identity, Opie invites a fluid range of identity. She allows subjects to occupy unfixed sexual and gender categories and, as a result, present various ways of being lesbian and/or queer. The portraits feature thirteen racially and ethnically diverse lesbian-identified subjects. In their article "Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs," art historians Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser explore photographic work specifically featuring the lesbian subject and identity. Their analysis avoids "attempting [to] naturalize a 'lesbian aesthetic'" and instead acknowledges the diversity of lesbian expression: "There is no easy way to define a lesbian photograph."¹⁶ They note that visualizing lesbian identity is a political act and a continuous process. Opie's portraits similarly deny the viewer any concrete, stable, or universal truths

¹⁶ Jean Fraser and Tessa Boffin, "Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs," *Feminist Review*, 38 (1991): 32.

regarding gender or sexuality. *Being and Having* engages in a practice of resistance that disrupts the continual “naturalization” of sex as well as the limited categorization of gender.

An understanding of American gender theorist and philosopher Judith Butler’s theories presented in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, elucidates how Opie’s photographs undermine artificial binaries of gender and sex. Butler critiques these hierarchical binaries in an effort to destabilize the limiting categorical constructions upholding institutions of compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism. She asserts that heterosexual discourses function as regimes of power to regulate identity and mask the ubiquitous discontinuities in heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts.¹⁷ Butler sees a “true,” “stable,” and “primary” gender as a fictitious concept fabricated to sustain heterosexual discourse within the reproductive realm. Instead, gender “is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real.”¹⁸

Butler demonstrates how subversion of this heteropatriarchal order happens at the site of performance within the very identities the mainstream heteropatriarchy wishes to refuse. Gender gradually gains social meaning and categorization through repeated performative actions and desires. Performative acts, gestures, and desires including drag, parody, and cross-dressing can potentially trouble the heterosexual,

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge): 1990, 135.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, x.

male/female gender binary.¹⁹ Subversive performance subsequently mocks the false naturalization and unification of gender that compulsory heterosexual discourses propose. The subjects in *Being and Having* engage in practices of resistance that create dissonance and consequently disrupt the continual “naturalization” of sex and gender. Through the drama of drag, gender becomes denaturalized. For example, the facial hair on the subjects of *Being and Having* appears artificial; excessive piercings, facial tattoos, and even a half smoked cigarette all contribute to a campy aesthetic that exposes the theatrical and fantastical dimensions of gender identity. The costumes and adopted personas reinforce how gender remains a constructed identity open to play and adaptation.

As Butler argues in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.”²⁰ Opie’s photographs expose the insufficiency of static, normative conceptions of gender and respond by operating within and beyond the established codes of gender to debunk the objectification of the lesbian female body.

Gender codes depend on the latent perpetuation of established scripts of gender expression. The subjects’ performative “female masculinities” expose the inadequacy of this construction and endeavor to counter its destructive normalcy. In their book *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam, a gender and sexuality theorist

¹⁹ Ibid., 137.

²⁰ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal*. 40.4 (1988): 519.

specializing in visual culture, introduces the concept of a “queer female masculinity” or gender-ambiguous female body and non-male masculinity. Halberstam contends that Opie’s portraits create a “powerful visual aesthetic for alternative and minority masculinities.”²¹ Opie’s art subverts the signifying practice of gender by visually representing non male masculinity. Halberstam notes the importance of viewing the represented figures as operating in the larger production of female masculinities.²² The subjects blur and destabilize the binaries of masculine/feminine by adopting a female masculinity that does not align with this socially constructed dichotomy. *Being and Having* alerts viewers to the existence of gender categories outside the male/female binary. In response to society’s “obsession” with defining gender within this strict male/female binary, this photographic series compels the viewer to reconsider judgments or stereotypes applied to lesbian, transgender, or S/M communities.

The title of the series critiques psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan’s assertion that the phallus signifies power. In “The Meaning of the Phallus,” an essay written in 1958, Lacan argues that “it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the other, that the woman will reject an essential part of her femininity, notably all its attributes through masquerade.”²³ According to Lacan, women exist to “be” the phallus and symbolize man’s desire; in contrast, men can

²¹ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998): 32.

²² *Ibid.*, 35.

²³ Jennifer Blessing, Judith Halberstam and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum [distributed by H. N. Abrams], 1997), 16.

claim the phallus and consolidate power.²⁴ The individuals performing “female masculinities” in Opie’s photographs transgress Lacanian logics of sexual differentiation. Opie rejects this heterosexual male/female binary as *Being and Having* allows subjects to occupy dynamic slippages from heteronormative binaries.

Opie creates visual representations of lesbian individuals counter the ideological and discursive oppressions enacted against sexual minorities in visual culture. Art historian Jennifer Blessing responds to *Being and Having* by stating, “[these subjects], they don’t want to be men or to pass as men all the time. They just want to borrow male fantasies and play with them.”²⁵ The figures candidly enact both artifice and authenticity as weapons to undermine stereotypes regulating bodies and identities. Despite the theatricality and performativity enacted by these subjects in *Being and Having*, these photographs speak to the lived experiences of people in Opie’s community.

José Esteban Muñoz’s book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, introduces the strategy of disidentification to describe instances when a minoritarian artist takes “damaging stereotypes and recycles them to create a powerful and seductive site of self-creation.”²⁶ Disidentification constitutes a dimension of art that works along and against the public and dominant realm as artists create performative acts that do more than diverge from mere

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁵ Catherine Opie and Nat Trotman, and Russell Ferguson, *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York, N.Y.: Guggenheim Museum, 2008), 12.

²⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

repetition by giving social agency to minoritarian groups. The diverse subjects of *Being and Having* embrace stereotypes associated with the “butch” lesbian only to undermine them and re-stage the possibilities of the queer body. Their stern expressions, mustaches, buzz cuts, facial tattoos, and cigarettes rely on signifiers associated with the butch lesbian, yet small inconsistencies (such as the faint glimpse of the glue behind the mustaches) reveal the performativity of these gestures. By occupying a hybridized space between the extremes of rejection and acceptance of oppressive scripts of society, disidentification allows these minoritarian subjects to survive and express themselves by inscribing their own identity into performative artworks. They challenge the hierarchical male/female binary through drag in an effort to destabilize the limiting categorical identities upholding institutions of compulsory heterosexuality.

In *Being and Having*, Opie chose to incorporate her own body as subject and presents a female masculinity in the guise of her alter ego, Bo. Opie clarifies that the photograph *Bo* cannot be considered a self-portrait. She playfully describes the personality of this character as “a used aluminum-siding salesman from Sandusky, Ohio.”²⁷ Opie aligns herself with the communities she archives and claims the experiences as her own, stating, “I thought it was important if I was going to document my community, to document myself within that community.”²⁸ By positioning herself in the photographs, Opie injects a personal and intimate conversation about identity. *Bo* reveals the performativity and fluidity of gender and

²⁷ Opie, Trotman, and Ferguson, *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

sexuality. Ultimately, *Being and Having* encourages a space where transformation, celebration, and re invention of identity transpire outside socially prescribed norms.

The artist's own body also appears in *Pervert/Self-Portrait* (Figure 2) of 1993; the integration of Opie's own identity and body into the photograph collapses the division between subject and artist. Opie's strategic inclusion of her body as subject subverts the dichotomy between subject and Other—a divide characteristic in traditional photographic practices. In "In Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)," writer and artist Martha Rosler describes how documentary photography perpetuates systems of oppression between the subject and Other; she describes how this genre of photography historically functioned to solidify the divide separating those in positions in power from "the Other."²⁹ Documentary photography insists "on the tangible reality" and ignores the voyeuristic and objectifying influence of the photographer in constructing a narrative about a marginalized group. As scholar Anna Marie Smith noted in "The Feminine Gaze: Photographer Catherine Opie Documents a Lesbian Daddy/Boy Subculture," Opie's work is "rooted in documentary reality, yet formally rigorous and conceptually self-conscious."³⁰ Opie intentionally undermines these historical techniques by adopting the identity of the exoticized subject typically exploited in historical documentary photography. By engaging directly in the practice of documentation, often used in a discriminatory mode against her communities, Opie

²⁹ Martha Rosler, "In Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)," in *3 Works* (Halifax, N.S: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), 2006.

³⁰ Anna Marie Smith, "The Feminine Gaze: Photographer Catherine Opie Documents a Lesbian Daddy/Boy Subculture," *The Advocate*, (1991): 82.

reverses the power dynamic controlled by the white, heterosexual male artist and viewer and decides to claim and define it as her own.

In *Pervert/Self-Portrait*, Opie sits topless with forty-six needles puncturing her arms; the word “Pervert,” scripted in a regal font, cuts into the flesh of her chest. A black leather hood covers her head and denies the viewer full access to her face. Sitting in a poised and formal composure against an elegant Baroque tapestry, Opie attracts the viewer’s attention yet disallows full exposure to her identity. *Pervert* rejects the assumption that a photograph can disclose or reveal a subject’s “true” identity. In her photographs, the viewer no longer exercises the privilege of constructing the subject’s representation. Placing a hood on her head also constitutes an act submission in S/M culture. Opie unapologetically presents herself as a participant in a subculture that participates in acts of consensual, ertoic violence and sexual pleasure.

Opie references Hans Holbein, a German Northern Renaissance portrait painter of the sixteenth century, as an influence to her photography. Although Holbein painted upper class, aristocratic subjects, Opie applies this portrait legacy to members of her community—individuals often excluded, degraded, or stereotyped in mainstream society. By employing traditional portraiture techniques Opie elevates the status of her subjects. The opulent colors in her photographs glorify and insert this subculture into Western canonical art history, as queer bodies occupy spaces typically assigned to privileged straight, white, male bodies.

Opie's deliberate self-mutilation also seeks to demystify the taboos surrounding non normative sexual lifestyles or transgressive body modification practices such as bondage, tattooing, and sadomasochism in queer subcultures. Mainstream society typically condemns these activities and marginalizes those who choose to participate. Opie describes that she "wanted to push the whole realm of beauty and elegance, but also make people scared out of their wits."³¹ By visualizing practices such as bondage or tattooing by individuals with nonconforming sexualities and genders, Opie humanizes her community and also ensures the visual materialization of alternative sexual practices. This photograph involved an intimate, moving collaboration with her community: friends carved "Pervert" into her chest and inserted needles into her arms. Her body bares the markings of family.³²

Through its disruption of dominant sexual and gender codes and exposure of the instability of both the subject and the spectator, Opie's art also applies what cultural critic Kobena Mercer, in "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," calls an "aesthetic ambivalence."³³ Mercer presents a contemporary critique of Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial photographs of black, male nudes to demonstrate how ambivalent racial and sexual relations throughout these photographs remain situated in the history and context of the reader. Mercer

³¹ Opie, Trotman, Ferguson, *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, 160.

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

³³ Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary." edited by Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: International Center of Photography in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2003), 237.

argues that Mapplethorpe's artwork contains a "radically polyvocal quality" that allows the viewer to derive contradictory readings from the same photograph.³⁴ Instead of viewing photographs as "context bound" or "historically specific," Mercer suggests that different readers will present different interpretations of a work of art based on their own cultural positionality and identity. When examining works of art that involve the politics of marginalized identities, the roles of authorship and spectatorship must be brought "back to play." Photographs such as Mapplethorpe's acknowledge the heterogeneity of universally constructed identities and disrupt traditional roles prescribed to the author, subject, and viewer. Pointing to the strategic "shock" of Mapplethorpe's art, "effected by the promiscuous textual intercourse between the elements drawn from opposite ends of the hierarchy of cultural value," Mercer contends that the photographs offer an effective decentering of "ideological fixities" carried by the viewer. When viewed in a contemporary context, Mapplethorpe's photographs "say more about the white male subject behind the camera than they do about the black men whose beautiful bodies we see depicted."³⁵ Likewise, Opie's photographs challenge viewers to implicate their own ambiguous sexual identity in dialogue with the subject. In an interview, Opie notes how influential Mapplethorpe became to her art:

Mapplethorpe was always important to me. He was who I could look at when I was in my early 20s. Not only did he model my own life in the leather community, he showed me that this mode of representation was

³⁴ Ibid., 245

³⁵ Ibid., 238.

possible. In the 80s I was really involved in queer culture, but I never made it my artwork. Then in the late 80s and early 90s I consciously made the erotic become part of my artwork, inspired in part by Mapplethorpe.³⁶

Whether through the representation of androgynous figures that do not fit within the female/male binary or through the candid visualization of S/M practice, Opie's photographs hold a "shock" of ambivalence similar to Mapplethorpe's photographs that disrupts the "aesthetic equation" dominant representational narratives use to stereotype or categorize the lesbian and transgender body. Depending on the relative positionalities across artist, subject, and spectator, Opie's photographs at times hold contradictory readings or discordant identifications. This aesthetic strategy presented by Mercer and applied in Opie's art introduces a counter narrative to traditional images that degrade, criminalize, or fetishize the non heterosexual body. *Being and Having* and *Portraits* emphasize ambivalence and consequently displace the subjugating representations of identity narrowly posited by the hegemonic culture.

Ultimately, Opie demonstrates the power of visualizing and representing gender non conforming bodies through queer documentary photography and breaks down limitations associated with identity and being. Her art exposes the artificial naturalization and fixity of sexuality and gender categories. By showing the

³⁶ Megan Driscoll. "Staring: An Interview with Catherine Opie," *Portland Art*. 3 Feb. 2011. Accessed online, 20 March. 2014, http://www.portlandart.net/archives/2011/02/staring_an_inte.html.

resilience and complexity of queer lives, she debunks compulsory heterosexual expectations that punish transgressive behavior. Her subjects can enact disjointed or seamless masculine, feminine, and androgynous tropes that oscillate between reality and theatricality. Using the surface of the body, the subjects tap into established gender norms to create the illusion of an integral or organized core identity. Yet, because the act remains performative, and therefore fabricated, the subjects overturn the fantasy that a “true” gender exists within a subject.

Catherine Opie’s decision to use documentary photography to support queer communities and generate awareness emphasizes the impact of this representational strategy. South African artist and activist Zanele Muholi’s series *Faces and Phases* of 2010 and *Only Half the Picture* of 2003 explore the process of documenting histories of lesbian and transgender individuals in post-apartheid and post-colonial South Africa. Muholi interweaves similar strategies of documentary photography employed by Opie into her art. Muholi’s and Opie’s use of documentary photography to honor their communities speaks to the power of this medium.

Zanele Muholi’s Portraiture: *Only Half the Picture* and *Faces and Phases*

Zanele Muholi is a visual activist and artist in Johannesburg who studied photography at the Market Photo Workshop and founded the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW). She holds numerous awards for her photography, including the recent Freedom of Expression Index Award, Tollman Award for the Visual Arts, the Casa Africa award for best female photographer, and a Foundation

Blachère award at Les Rencontres de Bamako biennial of African photography. Her documentary photography seeks to represent the black lesbian subjectivity and community in post apartheid South Africa. Over the past decade, Muholi produced numerous series, including, but not limited to, *Only Half the Picture* (2006), *Being* (2007), *Miss D'vine* (2007), *Faces and Phases* (2006-10), *Inkanyiso* (2011), *Mo(u)rning* (2012), and *Of Love & Loss* (2014). Her photographs deliberately respond to South African social and political inequalities, discrimination, and violence. Her art disidentifies with dominant canonical formations of LGBTI individuals by South African society and demonstrates how these discourses perpetuate a violent trend of marginalization and discrimination.

In the 1980s, South African gay and lesbian rights groups began emerging in response to South Africa's history of criminalization, regulation, and racialization of sexuality. South Africa's National Party came to power in 1948 and formalized apartheid laws dependent on strict racial segregation and white supremacy. The government reinforced systems of segregation and inequality through numerous legislative acts that disproportionately impacted the rights of black South Africans.³⁷ While acts such as the Immorality Act of 1927 (criminalizing sexual activity between whites and black Africans) were already instated, the white, minority National Party continued to enact discriminatory legislation to further police citizens along racial and sexual lines. For example, the revision of the Immorality Act of 1957 formally criminalized sexual activity between individuals of different racial classifications

³⁷ Neville W, Hoad, Karen Martin, and Graeme Reid, *Sex and Politics in South Africa* (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2005), 72.

while amendments that followed shortly after this revision also made sexual activity, including homosexual activity, prohibited and punishable. One such change (Section 20A) explicitly criminalized sexual activity: two men were prohibited from engaging in sexual activity at a “party” or a place where two or more people were present. South Africa’s common law prohibited men from having sex with other men, but this amendment extended the authority of police officers into the private realm.³⁸

The Gay Association of South Africa (GASA) formed in 1982 in Johannesburg when three gay organizations merged together. Although membership reached over a thousand people by 1983, the organization remained dominated by white, gay men of the middle class. This racial exclusivity became apparent when a black member of GASA, Simon Nkoli, was arrested with other activists during anti-apartheid protests and was put on trial. GASA failed to support Nkoli through this legal process. At the time of his release in 1988, Nkoli decided to form the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of Witwatersrand (GLOW), whose manifesto sought the unification of “all South Africans who are Committed to a Non-Racist, Non-Sexist, Non-Discriminatory Democratic Future.”³⁹ In 1986, activists, also frustrated with GASA’s reluctance to take political stances, formed Lesbians and Gays against Oppression (LAGO), which was soon replaced by the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists (OLGA). These groups took an anti-apartheid position, believing that

³⁸ Manon Tremblay, David Paternotte, and Carol Johnson, *The Lesbian and Gay Movement and the State: Comparative Insights into a Transformed Relationship* (Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2011): 155.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

the gay and lesbian rights movement should be situated within a broader liberation struggle.⁴⁰

During South Africa's transition to democracy, President P. W. Botha repealed the Immorality Act in 1985. In 1994 the post apartheid government introduced a clause explicitly prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and subsequently in 1996 enacted the Equality Clause, thereby including sexual orientation in the constitution. Despite these legislative victories, LGBTI individuals continue to face violent homophobia in addition to inequality in terms of education, employment, housing, and health care.⁴¹ The pervasive economic, social, and spatial marginalization of black lesbians highlights the importance of Muholi's initiatives. Her visual activist projects strive to problematize this overdetermined history that overlooks the voices of black, lesbian activists and communities.

In her essay "Mapping Our Histories: A Visual History of Black Lesbians in Post-Apartheid South Africa," the artist underscores how white, gay male leadership dominates these movements, often omitting consideration of intersectional racial and gendered identities impacting black, lesbian citizens. In the groundbreaking essay, "Queer Race," of 1999, scholar Ian Barnard also criticizes white-centered and white-dominated queer scholarship and activism that operates under the assumption that the construction of sexuality remains separate from the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 159.

⁴¹ Zanele Muholi, "Mapping Our Histories: A Visual History of Black Lesbians in Post-apartheid South Africa," Self-published essay. 2009. Accessed online. 14 April, 2014, www.zanelemuholi.com, 5.

construction of race.⁴² Instead, Barnard posits that race remains just as constructed and unstable as sexuality, and sexuality often plays a role in racial appellations. He calls for a new approach to queer theory and activism that “interrogates the role that queer sexualities play in understandings of race, and exploring the limits of the productive potential of ‘queer’ to signify race as much as it signifies sexuality.”⁴³ Interrogating the intersections between racial and sexual identity remain integral to Muholi who notes how black lesbians in South Africa continue to fight for sexual citizenship, visibility, recognition, and safety in public domains.⁴⁴ Her photographs consequently contribute to LGBTI rights movements as they serve as vehicles to catalyze activist-based change; they compel society to listen to the stories depicted in the images and take action against the homophobic and transphobic violence committed against those in her community.

In the ongoing series *Faces and Phases* of 2011 (Figures 3–5), which she dedicates “to all the black lesbian survivors and victims of hate crimes,” Muholi constructs a visual statement and archive of more than sixty portraits of lesbian and transgender people she connected with through her activism.⁴⁵ She explains that she presents an “insider’s perspective that both commemorates and celebrates the lives of black queers.”⁴⁶ Each portrait introduces the viewer to a new person and

⁴² Ian, Barnard, "Queer Race," *Social Semiotics*. 9.2 (1999): 200.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁵ Zanele Muholi, “*Faces and Phases*,” Stevenson Gallery Website. 9 Dec. 2013.

Accessed online. 26 Feb. 2014,

www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/index_faces2011.html

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

narrative. The face looks back with a direct, confident, and strong gaze. These portraits are titled with the name of the individual represented (*Sunday Francis, Amanda Mapuma, Siya Mcuta, "TK" Tekanyo, Babalwa Nani, Des're Higa*) to counter anonymous renderings of the lesbian subject and instead acknowledge her nuanced individuality. Muholi respects the subjects' ownership and agency over their own representation; she describes herself as a visual activist and upholds rigorous ethical standards when interacting with subjects of her photographs, establishing a trusting, mutual relationship with each participant. Muholi states, "these are not only subjects, these are my people, this describes the person I am."⁴⁷ She listens to their stories and responds by offering respectful, moving photographs that commemorate the individual's lived experiences. In an interview, Muholi remarks how "each and every person in the photos has a story to tell, so it becomes a visual narrative of some sort, in which we have to think beyond just the framed image on the wall in the gallery."⁴⁸ During the process of taking the photographs, Muholi chooses not to use any artificial lights or "fancy" equipment, instead seeking "the most natural manner" to feature her participants.⁴⁹ Her photographs intervene in the traditional role of portraiture: instead of serving as the object of the viewer's desire, the subject tells a visual story that centers the voices of the participant. They defy the authority

⁴⁷ Henriette Gunkel, *The Cultural Politics of Female Sexuality in South Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 141.

⁴⁸ Zanele Muholi, "Faces and Phases," Stevenson Gallery Website. 9 Dec. 2013. Accessed online. 26 Feb. 2014, www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/index_faces2011.html.

⁴⁹ Zanele Muholi, "Mapping our Histories: A Visual History of Black Lesbians in Post-apartheid South Africa," Self-published essay, 2009. Accessed online. April, 2014, www.zanelemuholi.com.

of the colonial, racist gaze and patriarchal fantasy by forging a space of support and visibility for the black, queer body.

The title of Muholi's series, *Faces and Phases*, reflects how Muholi captures the face of a participant in one moment in time yet also acknowledges the fluid identity transitions experienced by the participants extending beyond one photograph.⁵⁰ Muholi crafts an empowering space where these subjects reinvent their multiple identities. These photographs invite the viewer into an intimate, and honest dialogue with a community rendered invisible and unrecognized by dominant culture. She also strategically attends to the cultural objectification of her community in post apartheid discourses and reclaims the representation of the black lesbian body. Cultural and queer studies scholar, Henriette Gunkel describes the legacy of using documentary photography to exploit people of color during colonial and apartheid. As early as the nineteenth century, colonial forces used photography for "surveillance and standardization." Colonizers utilized image production to universalize, exoticize, and ultimately colonize non-normative bodies. The photographs served to naturalize "hierarchical social relations" and consequently built regulative social categories such as race, gender, and sexuality.⁵¹ Gunkel states, "Throughout colonialism and to a certain extent in contemporary discourse, Black women were systematically denied control over their bodies before the camera and

⁵⁰ Ibid, 19.

⁵¹ Henriette Gunkel, *The Cultural Politics of Female Sexuality in South Africa* (New York: Routledge 2010): 37.

the law."⁵² Muholi creates art directly in and with her community, reminiscent of Opie's practices a decade before, and thereby reclaims the medium of documentary photography and reverses traditional and colonial oppressive mechanisms wielded against the black female body.

Similar to Opie, Muholi hopes to inspire the viewer to reconsider the judgments and prejudices that may occur in interactions with lesbian and transgender people. She asks the viewer to contemplate the following questions:

What does an African lesbian look like? Is there a lesbian aesthetic or do we express our gendered, racialized, and classed selves in rich and diverse ways? Is one lesbian more "authentic" than another lesbian? Is this a man or a woman? Is this a transman? Can you identify a rape survivor by the clothes she wears?⁵³

These questions raise the debates surrounding "authenticity," which often overlook intersections between race, nationality, sexuality, and gender. Sociologist and scholar E. Patrick Johnson investigates racial "authenticity" in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. He reveals how hegemonic black culture excludes queerness as a legitimate signifier of blackness.⁵⁴ Consequently, the possible signifiers of "true" blackness fail to acknowledge the politics of race and

⁵² Henriette Gunkel, "Through the Postcolonial Eyes: Images of Gender and Female Sexuality in Contemporary South Africa," *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 13 no. 1 (2009): 81.

⁵³ Zanele Muholi, "Faces and Phases," *Safundi* 11, no. 4 (2010): 407.

⁵⁴ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), 13.

sexuality. Muholi's work questions these racist signifiers associated with a true "African" or "black" identity and undermines the simplistic conception of an *authentic* way of being by providing photographs that collectively reveal the variability of sexuality and blackness. For instance, South Africa's council for traditional leaders officially declared homosexuality "unAfrican" in debates against same-sex marriage in South Africa. They argued same-sex practices remained incompatible with an "African culture."⁵⁵ Scholar of African diaspora studies Xavier Livermon contends that "to experience freedom in postapartheid South Africa, the black queer body must enter either a deracinated queerness or a blackness divorced from sexuality."⁵⁶ Muholi responds in opposition to the nationalistic discourse claiming homosexuality as "unAfrican" or "inauthentic," by presenting portraits of subjects who are black, lesbian, and South African.

Gunkel uses a feminist, counter hegemonic, antiracist methodology to examine female sexuality in postapartheid South Africa against the background of homophobic violence. She aptly notes the tendency throughout world history to construct homosexuality as outside tradition, culture, and consequently, the nation. She calls for a study of lesbian homosexuality in South Africa that acknowledges the historical interdependencies of postcolonial, race, and gender regimes. With the end of apartheid, South Africa changed the Freedom Charter to provide protection for gay and lesbian citizens and thereby became the first country in the world to

⁵⁵ Xavier Livermon, "Queer(y)ing Freedom: Black Queer Visibilities in Postapartheid South Africa," *GLQ* 18, (2012): 301.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 313.

explicitly protect homosexual citizens in its constitution. However, these constitutional promises of freedom fail to reach the majority of black, LGBTI individuals who continue to be disproportionately policed and criminalized. The clause on sexual orientation, Livermon suggests, “was not developed with black, LGBTI individuals in mind.”⁵⁷ Rather, white (minority) leaders in post apartheid South Africa enacted provisional protections for individuals of all sexual and gender identities. Those who hold power over decisions neglect to account for the lived experiences and voices of black, queer citizens. To access this constitutional freedom, the black queer body must present a “deracinated queerness or a blackness divorced from sexuality.”⁵⁸ Recently, in 2012, the Congress of Traditional Leaders in South Africa drafted a document that sought to remove protection of LGBTI rights from the South African constitution.⁵⁹ Although constitutional changes sparked wider discussion and visibility of lesbian and gay men, this progress still meets resistance and hate crimes continue to disproportionately affect black lesbian individuals.

The criticism Muholi has received in response to her art speaks to this social and political reality. In 2010 at one of her gallery openings, the then Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulama Xingwana walked out of the exhibition and called Muholi’s photographs “immoral, offensive, and [...] against nation-building.”⁶⁰ Despite facing homophobic political structures and criticism, Muholi continues to respond to the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 302.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 304, 313.

⁵⁹ Michael Smith, “Zanele Muholi at STEVENSON in Johannesburg,” *Art Throb: Contemporary Art in South Africa*, 14 Feb. 2014. Accessed online. 28 March 2014, www.artthrob.co.za.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

violence committed against her community through documentary artwork that implores the viewer to take action against the violence. Her photographs validate individuals the South African state renders invisible; by situating these photographs and subjects within a landscape of inequity and discrimination her work carries a political message.

Beyond the portraiture initiative of *Faces and Phases*, Muholi documents black lesbian and transmen in *Only Half the Picture* (2003). This series complicates the representation of the black, queer body while confronting the violence, sexism, homophobia, and racism this group experiences daily. These photographs are snapshots of participants in candid, quotidian actions and rituals in contrast to the still and posed portraits in *Faces and Phases*.⁶¹ In *Only Half the Picture*, subjects' bodies carry markings of the past and present and upset the boundaries between stillness/motion, private/public, and pleasure/pain.

In *ID Crisis* of 2003 (Figure 6), the participant appears topless except for a bandage partially covering the breasts. The camera captures the subject in a private moment of binding long bandages around the chest. Some female to male transgender, intersex, or gender-queer individuals choose to engage in breast binding to conceal their breasts in order to present as male or gender-ambiguous. The decision to hide breasts, a predominant signifier of female identity, suggests the subject does not feel an alignment with the biological sex assigned at birth or gender

⁶¹ "Zanele Muholi: 'We live in fear,'" short documentary by Human Rights Watch, *Mail & Guardian*, 26 Nov. 2013. Accessed online. 20 Feb. 2013, <http://mg.co.za/multimedia/2013-11-26-zanele-muholi-we-live-in-fear>.

identity diverges from the strict “female” category. In *ID Crisis*, the participant looks down, ignoring the gaze of the viewer, and focuses on the task of binding the chest. The blurred edges of the hands emphasize the action the participant is immersed in. This act of wrapping bandages around the breasts suggests that the subject does not wish to present as female in the public realm. A bandage, used conventionally to cover a wound, alludes to the violence and hate crimes enacted against lesbian and trans-identified individuals who do not “pass” as heterosexual or cisgendered.⁶² Light filters into the image through a window to illuminate the front of the subject’s body; the stark, dark background denies the viewer reference to the time or place. By documenting this intimate moment, Muholi visualizes the daily struggles and inconveniences facing individuals living outside prescribed gender norms. *ID Crisis* provides a window into how gender expression is personal and fluid.

In the same series, the photograph *Bra* (Figure 7) foregrounds the slippage between feminine and masculine signifiers to undermine the hegemonic regimes regulating gender identity and expression. This black and white photograph features a black body wearing a white bra. The photograph’s cropped and fragmented composition draws attention to the subject’s chest. Yet, the subject’s facial and chest hair destabilizes any initial assumptions about the participant’s gender. This individual’s presentation of both masculine and feminine tropes undermines society’s modes of gender organization. The rest of the body is cropped and remains outside the photograph, denying the viewer any singular resolution or

⁶² Cisgender refers to an individual’s gender identity aligning with the sex assigned at birth.

understanding of the participant's gender identity. The choice to leave the face outside the borders of the photograph also protects the subject from the scrutinizing gaze of the viewer. The intentional exclusion of spatial or temporal cues asks the viewer to consider the participant's identity and positionality beyond existing social and political hegemonies. The participant's hands are in motion at the bottom of the photograph in an active gesture that obscures the viewer's access to the chest and complicates any voyeuristic consumption of the subject's body. Because the individual represented in the photograph is only partially dressed, the photograph captures the participant in the midst of dressing or undressing; clothing remains a predominant signifier of gender categorization. Muholi's choice to depict the participant in the private moment of putting on or taking off clothes alludes to the performativity of gender expression. Her photograph renders the transgender body visible and valued; they challenge the viewer to move beyond the judgments and prejudices held toward gender-deviant individuals.

The photograph *Safe Sex II* (Figure 8) from *Only Half the Picture* features a black woman adjusting her strap-on, a sex toy composed of a dildo and harness. *Safe Sex II* visualizes sexual activity beyond its heteronormative and reproductive purposes; the photograph affirms the importance of pleasure, consent, and safe sex practices in lesbian communities. Muholi visualizes the lesbian body beyond either fetishized or desexualized terms that proliferate in hetero-patriarchal rhetoric and visual culture. *Safe Sex II*, similar to *ID Crisis* and *Bra*, positions the viewer to see "only half the picture." This composition combats the assumption that the privileged viewer can

own or control the entirety of the subject's identity. Instead, the participant controls the gaze while maintaining an element of privacy in ambiguity. The viewer does not know if the subject assembles the sex toy before or after sexual activity; one does not know the identity of her sexual partner or the details of the sexual interaction.

Safe Sex II does not eroticize the subject but instead respects and affirms lesbian and queer sexual practices. The dildo, separated from the male body, alludes to the castrated body and imagines a sexual pleasure independent of the patriarchy. *Safe Sex II* also visualizes the nexus between sexuality and race by including a white dildo.⁶³ The juxtaposition between the white dildo and the black body serves to challenge the assumption that black women are not lesbians, or that their non-heterosexual identity cannot be considered authentically "African." Finally, the title *Safe Sex II* combats the assumption that lesbian bodies do not experience the consequences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The photograph implores society to attend to neglected demographics that face discrimination and oversight in South Africa's health care systems. *Safe Sex II* is an intervention into the discriminatory visual canon dictated by postcolonial and postapartheid power structures.

The photographs in *Only Half the Picture* alert the viewer to the absence of positive, affirming images of black lesbians claiming agency over their gender expression or sexuality. In an interview, Muholi explained why she chose to focus on LGBTI activism and art:

⁶³ Henriette Gunkel, "Through the Postcolonial Eyes: Images of Gender and Female Sexuality in Contemporary South Africa," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 13, no. 1 (2009): 81.

It was out of the frustration of not seeing myself in the mainstream media, not seeing our images as the LGBTI community. Between 1990 and 1994 there were so many changes happening in South Africa. There were constitutional changes, there was a regime change, but where were the images? So one had to produce those images, which spoke of the change, for South Africa's history archives.⁶⁴

These photographs exist for black lesbian women and trans-men as they validate not only the subject, but also queer audiences; they endorse the black lesbian body as a site of agency and liberation. Muholi's art instigates a shift in community and national consciousness by inserting positive imagery of black lesbian and transgender individuals in South Africa into public spaces and discourses. While presenting the experiences of those in her community, the images create the necessary visual language to fuel dialogue about issues related to sexual and gender-based violence. However, as Pulma Dineo Gqola, a feminist scholar of African literature, notes, Muholi's photographs do more than simply "make visible" the black lesbian body:

It is of course inaccurate to claim that Black women's bodies, and specifically Black lesbians' bodies are invisible in South Africa society . . . they are in fact *highly visible* manifestations of the undesirable. . . .

Therefore, Muholi's work is less about making Black lesbians visible

⁶⁴ Sarah Wild, "Desire for Change Unites Post-Apartheid Activism," *Mail & Guardian*, 21 Feb. 2014. Accessed online. 30 March 2014, <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-02-20-post-apartheid-activism-united-by-a-desire-for-change>.

than it is about engaging with the regimes that have used these women's hypervisibility as a way to violate them . . . [her photographs] propose a queer perspective on a supposedly familiar reality.⁶⁵

Muholi seeks to liberate society from the oppressions associated with sexual and gender identity constrictions and does so by articulating a "queer perspective." These resilient portraits also publicize the challenges subjugating lesbian and transgender people on a daily basis, such as hate crimes, poverty, unemployment, discrimination, or HIV/AIDS. Muholi's dignified participants contribute to a collective archive that records their silenced narratives through photography of their bodies. Her art ultimately shows how these individuals can imagine and be empowered by new modes of identity variance, envision an oppositional history, and reclaim the black lesbian body.

While acknowledging the cultural and geographic specificities informing these artists' work, these photographs demonstrate how both Opie and Muholi counter the viewer's voyeuristic mode of looking that strips the subject of a voice, a practice all too common in mainstream, contemporary visual culture or traditional art historical analysis. Opie and Muholi trouble the white, heterosexual male authority enacting a fetishization, racialization, and objectification of the lesbian and queer body. These photographs focus on the lesbian as subject as well as active participant while also engaging with a queer gaze. The queer gaze redefines the traditional control granted to viewers of a photograph by giving the subject a voice to generate

⁶⁵ Zanele Muholi and Sophie Perryer, *Zanele Muholi: Only Half the Picture* (Cape Town: Michael Stevenson, 2006), 84.

different configurations of queer selfhood. This representational strategy allows both artists and subjects to simultaneously re appropriate and recode normative categories perpetuated by the mainstream cultural realm. In *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Halberstam demonstrates how overlooked, subcultural, queer communities engage in movements that “mutate,” “invent,” and “reconstruct” the gender-ambiguous body.⁶⁶ Citing the absence of “gender as a category of analysis in much of the work on sexuality and space,” Halberstam’s critique focuses on representations of gender-ambiguous female bodies and/or transgender bodies in visual culture.⁶⁷ The subject should be granted the space to “retain marks from its own ambiguity.”⁶⁸ Art representing specifically transgender subjects should both “construct and sustain a transgender gaze.”⁶⁹ The concept of the queer gaze expands on Halberstam’s notion of a “transgender gaze” to include all minoritarian subjects transgressing sexual and gender boundaries in contemporary visual art. By cultivating agency for the subject, the production and critique of queer art can reverse compulsory conceptions of the heterosexual and cisgender body.

Muholi devotes astute attention to this power of the gaze. She asks her audience to ponder a question when viewing the series *Only Half the Picture*: “what

⁶⁶ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

do we see when we look at ourselves?" Opie's *Being and Having* also uses the penetrating gaze of her subjects to invert the position of viewer and viewed. Muholi states how she wants to stare back as a black lesbian-identified woman "to resist and challenge the idea that our bodies can be researched, understood, displayed for heterosexual and western consumption."⁷⁰ These artworks show how viewers must become participants and consider how they are implicated in these visualized narratives. The photographs consequently challenge viewers to involve themselves in a dialogue with the subject and participate in the broader political and social forces informing a work of art.

Jean Brundrit's Portraiture: *Out of Site*

South African artist, Jean Brundrit's series, *The Space Inside*, further explores the ways in which the queer gaze operates as an aesthetic strategy to undermine hierarchical and patriarchal relationships between subject and viewer. Brundrit works primarily in Cape Town, engaging in photographic media to explore the intersections between lesbian sexuality and stereotypes, otherness, and normativity. She began focusing on lesbian and feminist issues in the 1990s, around the same time as Opie in the United States, primarily representing the white lesbian community in South Africa. Brundrit has contributed to numerous exhibitions in South Africa and internationally; she currently holds a position as the Senior

⁷⁰ Zanele Muholi, "Mapping our Histories: A Visual History of Black Lesbians in Post-apartheid South Africa," Self-published essay, 2009. Accessed online. 15 April, 2014, <http://www.zanelemuholi.com/writings.htm>4, 5.

Lecturer at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town and teaches photography. In the exhibition *Out of Site* at the AVA Gallery in Cape Town in 2013, Brundrit showcased the series, *The Space Inside* (Figures 9–10).⁷¹ The series features close-up portraits of lesbian-identified women against stark black or white backgrounds. Rendered in high detail, a gentle halo of light encircles the faces, exemplifying each facial feature; every fold, wrinkle, and imperfection is laid bare and visible. Despite the simplistic presentation of her subjects, the soft facial expressions beckon the viewer into an intimate dialogue. Brundrit silently interjects in this initial dialogue between subject and viewer by choosing to capture the moment when the participants' eyes are closed; she isolates and unsettles one of our most essential senses, vision, to raise questions about lesbian subjectivity.

By fixating on the absence of gaze, Brundrit engages in a queer gaze that unsettles the traditional hierarchy of gazes between the dominant viewer and powerless subject. Through intimate portraiture, she narrows the space between the subject and audience and challenges viewers to participate in a process of introspection. *The Space Inside*, forces the viewer to consider the implications of relying on vision to demarcate our positionality in relation to those around us. The portraits confront the viewer face on, enlarged and domineering in their presence, forcing the viewer to surrender any associative codes made about the lesbian subject. Instead, the subjects' humanity comes to the foreground, imploring the

⁷¹ "Exhibition: Out of Site by Jean Brundrit," Orms Connect, Aug. 2013. Accessed online. 20 Feb. 2014, <http://www.ormsconnect.co.za/2013/08/exhibition-out-of-site-by-jean-brundrit>.

viewer to pause and speculate what lies beneath the lids of their eyes. As Brundrit mentions, “I wanted to show ‘real’ lesbians. By not showing anything hardcore, I’ve taken away the voyeuristic angle that might have otherwise been there for the viewer.”⁷² The subjects refuse to become spectacles; they fracture the powerful weapon of the viewer’s vision to combat the scrutiny of the voyeuristic, discriminatory gaze. Brundrit’s portraiture series grants the represented lesbian individual agency to speak and to define her subjectivities.

Portraits of Lesbian Partnership

The series of Opie, Brundrit, and Muholi documenting lesbian partners together offer examples of how these artists play with resistant queer gazes and imagine sexual relationships outside heteropatriarchal norms. Brundrit shows that despite statutes of equality in the constitution the lesbian subject continues to be rendered invisible in South African political and social consciousness. Brundrit utilizes pinhole photography to raise alarm about the exclusion of dissonant sexualities and genders in South Africa.⁷³ In *Portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (Figure 11), Brundrit captures half-profile portraits of two silhouetted figures in front of a black and white suburban background. Thin, black lines trace the edge of the silhouettes as if the figures were cut out from the composition, leaving an

⁷² Svea Josephy, “Jean Brundrit,” *Art Throb*, no. 79 (March 2004): 1.

⁷³ Emma Bedford and Sophie Perryer, *10 Years 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa* (Cape Town, South Africa: Bell-Roberts Pub. in association with Struik Publishers, 2004), 81.

ambiguous absence of detail. The black outline, emphasizes the boundary between the lesbian subject and the external world. Not only do society's heterosexual norms "cut out" any non normative identities, they also establish a clear divide between the acceptable, ideal citizen and the deviant citizen. Brundrit's work contests this boundary. Despite the lack of clear facial markers, the white forms stand out in the centerfold of the photograph's composition and cannot be overlooked. The gaze of the viewer immediately becomes cognizant of absence, neglect, and loss of a returned gaze. The glaring negative space engulfing the two figures denies the viewer access to the intricacies and nuances of the couple, including their gender and sexuality. The title *Portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* reveals more about the identity of the figural forms than the visual clues provided in the photograph. This tactic catches the viewer in an act of stereotyping and criticizes the heterosexual assumptions viewers may make when observing two people together. Brundrit draws awareness to the continuing oversight of political and social consciousness of non-heterosexual identities. The blank, white figural forms that represent the lesbian subjects allude to the homogenization, universalization, and stereotyping of the lesbian body.

Zanele Muholi also investigates lesbian identity through an intimate photograph of interracial, lesbian partnerships. In *Caitlin & I* (Figure 12) from the series *Being*, two naked bodies lie on a white sheet, one on top of the other against a stark, white background. The two women turn their gaze directly toward the viewer. The subject below lies on her stomach as her head nestles in her crossed

arms. Her position, prostrate and extended on the floor, denies the viewer access to her full body. The viewer's eyes travel across the photograph to her crossed legs in the far right of the photograph. Her upper back holds and supports the head and body of her partner, who lies face up on her back; her breasts and pubic hair are exposed to the camera. This subject rests in a calm, effortless position, cradled by her partner. Her arm falls to the sides of the body and loosely rests next to the body of the other woman. Her left leg extends into the background. The couple's bodies touch and meld neatly together across the long, horizontal composition from head to toe.

The photograph is fragmented onto three separate panels and alludes to the divisions and gaps dividing bodies based on race and gender; this formal element dismantles the notion that a photograph holds a complete, objective representation of reality. The spaces in between the photographs bring ambiguity and suggest an incomplete narrative about the relationship between the subjects. Yet, a cohesive, powerful representation of two lesbian women overcoming the breaks in the photograph speaks to a resilient interracial, lesbian relationship that bridges racial divides.

In her work, *You're Fine, You're Hired* of 1988 (Figure 13), African American artist Lorna Simpson also employs this strategy of fragmentation as a method to disrupt stereotyped scripts assigned to the racialized and sexualized black, female body. In *You're Fine, You're Hired*, a black woman in a simple white gown lies down horizontally divided across four, colored photographs. Simpson positions the figure

with her back away from the viewer, protecting her body from the insolent, white, male gaze. Fifteen engraved, plastic plaques on the left side of the photographs feature words related to medical examinations such as “blood test,” “heart,” “reflexes,” “urine,” “height,” and “weight.” Simpson places the words “secretarial” and “position” on the right side of the photograph. The text, “You’re Fine, You’re Hired” hangs centrally above and below the photographs. Situating these charged words and phrases around the figure alerts the viewer to the racist and sexist claims attributed to the black, female body. The work highlights the societal pattern of hiring a secretary solely on the basis of physical characteristics. Simpson deploys cropped photographs with text to deconstruct the automatic racist and gendered associations made between the black female subject and secretarial labor. The frames dividing the subject across the photographs, like Muholi’s *Caitlin & I*, present an ambiguity and incomplete narrative about the identity of the woman undergoing racial and sexual categorization on the job market. *You’re Fine, You’re Hired* alerts the viewer to the sexualization and exploitation of black female workers who continue to be undervalued, scrutinized, and dehumanized in the workplace. Drawing a parallel between Muholi’s and Simpson’s compositional strategy reveals the power of the photograph and figure as they re-appropriate and deconstruct established stereotypes and norms surrounding the black female body.

Muholi’s portrayal of an interracial relationship between herself and her partner resists the postcolonial, male power regimes disallowing queer, interracial relationships. The connection between the two women remains strong, grounded,

and confident as they confront the gaze of the viewer. Their confrontational gazes provoke the viewer to reconsider any prejudices and thereby dismantle the homophobic and postcolonial gaze controlling the lesbian body. The photograph captures a sensual and intimate moment; the subjects support and satisfy one another and therefore reject the voyeuristic desire of the viewer. As scholar Zethu Matebeni aptly describes, Muholi visualizes a “female intimacy and sexuality that is self-sustaining and self-sufficient.”⁷⁴ Their languid and content bodies remain inaccessible to the heteropatriarchal South African state. Muholi combats the desexualization of the black female body prevalent in visual culture by inserting her own body into an erotic moment with her partner.

Catherine Opie also documents lesbian couples in her *Domestic Series* of 1995. Opie traveled 9,000 miles across the United States in an RV to nine different cities to document lesbian couples in their domestic environments and create large-scale color photographs. Opie describes in an interview how she sought to “focus on the idea of community, the individuals within that community, and how communities form.”⁷⁵ Responding to the heteronormative portraiture of family and friends by American photographer Tina Barney, Opie photographs lesbians comfortable and content in their homes. She describes the numerous images she captured in this series as “lesbians relaxing in their backyards, hanging out in kitchens, floating in

⁷⁴ Zethu Matebeni, "Intimacy, Queerness and Race. (Zanele Muholi's Photographic Collection, *Only Half the Picture*)." *Cultural Studies*. 27.3 (2013): 408.

⁷⁵ Opie, Trotman, Ferguson, *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, 86.

their pools, playing with their children, lounging on beds, staring out windows, and so on."⁷⁶

In *Norma & Eyenga* (Figure 14), two women embrace in their home in Minneapolis. Their faces glow as sun filters through the window, giving the setting a peaceful and calm aura. The woman in the foreground leans against her partner, who wraps her arm around her torso while placing her other hand in a supportive position along her partner's upper back. The background, though indistinct, reveals domestic items, including art on the walls, books, and pencils; a door in the background opens to a vibrant colorful outdoors. The couple leans into one another in a comfortable, confident, and content embrace. They avert their eyes from the viewer and thereby deny full entrance into the privacy and sanctity of their home; they choose to ignore or not be bothered by the investigative gaze of the viewer.

Similarly, Opie's *Catherine, Melanie & Sadie Rain* (Figure 15) also features two women in their home in New York City. One woman sits on a windowsill and embraces her partner, who stands between her legs. They both look down on their child, who actively plays with a toy. The standing woman gently reaches her hand out to catch the toy. The photograph captures the warmth of the light beaming in from the window and reveals the welcoming and comforting nature of the home. Outside the barred window stands a tall building, indicating the urban environment. Both women direct soft, loving smiles toward their child. The three subjects remain preoccupied and content in their union, indifferent to scrutinizing or

⁷⁶ Ibid., 86.

curious gazes from the viewer. In this photograph, Opie upends the heterosexual expectation that only a heterosexual husband and wife can bear and raise children. She states, "So much of what we define as being domestic has to do with a heterosexual framework. A family doesn't have to be a mom and a dad and a kid. We build family and community in other ways, too."⁷⁷ Her photographs combat the heterosexual, nuclear familial ideal proliferating in American visual culture. Opie's respectful renderings of lesbian couples in their homes introduce an alternative queer narrative where couples occupy secure and stable domestic spaces. In speaking to this series, Opie comments, "It's about creating communities and household systems everywhere in this country. Gender specificity and sexual preference can be ignored. I wanted to create a visual language of people living together, images about domestic space."⁷⁸ Opie's documentary photographs provide snap shots into the lives of lesbian couples around the country building communities through families and homes.

These three artists' contribution to political and social commentary through artistic documentation of lesbian partnerships upsets the conception of the heteronormative ideal citizen circulated through mainstream discourses. A comparison of these photographs of lesbian couples in the United States and South Africa contributes to a transnational queer movement interrogating national identities that continue to exclude the lesbian and queer community. Although

⁷⁷ "Catherine Opie: American Photographer," Guggenheim Museum Online Collection. Accessed online. 6 Dec. 2013, <http://web.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/opie/exhibition.html>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

transnational feminist theory must attend to wide geographic and temporal spaces, gender and sexuality studies scholar M. Jacqui Alexander argues that the deployment of heterosexuality in nation-state formation remains a widespread phenomenon. Alexander investigates the nexus between transnational feminisms, sexuality, and colonialism by positing that neocolonial state powers rely on the ideal heterosexual citizen for nation-building.⁷⁹ State powers “manufacture” heterosexual citizenship through state programs such as welfare or legal council.⁸⁰ Transnational queer theory must attend to wide geographic and temporal spaces as nation-states around the world manufacture a citizenship “normativized within the prism of heterosexuality” and this practice remains integral to the “project of nation-building.”⁸¹

Gunkel elucidates the ways in which technologies of homophobia are linked to projects of nationalism in post apartheid South Africa. She identifies a shift that occurred between apartheid and post apartheid constitutional definitions of citizenship. Under apartheid, citizenship depended on racial categorization. Instead, in post apartheid South Africa, citizenship depends on one’s ability to obtain a South African ID and thereby privileges a “politics of belonging.” As a result of this “new national identity process,” bodies become increasingly regulated not just through racial categorization (although that still occurs) but also through border management, deportation, or imprisonment. Nationalism depends on a state of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 184.

⁸⁰ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 184.

⁸¹ M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Cartographies of Knowledge and Power.” 37.

surveillance.⁸² Gunkel continues by noting how the regulation of sexual and gender identity cannot be untangled from these nationalist agendas. She states, “nationalism is in fact informed by heterosexuality and its political institution, the family. In particular women are not only considered as reproducers of the race but also as the reproducers of the nation. Therefore women are (continuously) seen to be makers of national boundaries.”⁸³ The post apartheid government of South Africa reintroduces a “model” citizen through implicit privileging of heterosexual familial ideals along reproductive lines.

Given nationalist agendas’ dependence on heterosexual norms, these artists’ focus on lesbian couples should be viewed through a queer transnational lens that reveals how documenting non heterosexual, compassionate, lesbian relationships undermines the nation-state’s deployment of a heterosexual, ideal citizen. They document the queer, lesbian, and transgender body to deconstruct sexual and gender identities, expectations, scripts, and labels of the state while producing a space where subjects can enact malleable, intersectional identities. Muholi, Opie, and Brundrit problematize traditional definitions of sexuality and gender, gift subjects with the agency to determine their own representation, and upend the heteronormative stereotypes pathologizing non normative bodies through the power structures of the nation-state around the world.

Belonging in Collectivity: Community in City and Landscape

⁸² Gunkel, *The Cultural Politics of Female Sexuality in South Africa*, 138.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 139.

Opie, Muholi, and Brundrit extend their message beyond the site of the individual, queer body by also documenting the spaces where queer identity and community formation occur. Queer bodies do not exist isolated from the world around them. On the contrary, they become implicated in the political and cultural pressures that regulate status, create artificial boundaries, and limit the freedom of identity formation. Given these adverse societal conditions, media and cultural theorist José Esteban Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*, expresses a discontent with the present and states, “The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.”⁸⁴ Muñoz proposes we embody and enact “queerness” and refuse to be complacent in the conditions of present-day society that regulates, subjugates, and oppresses individuals while also rupturing instances of collectivity. Muñoz defines “queerness” as “a longing that propels us onward, beyond romance of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”⁸⁵ By refusing to settle for the adversary conditions that favor majoritarian, privileged identities, Muñoz proposes that we move towards a not-yet-reached “queer utopia.” This unobtained “queer

⁸⁴ José E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

utopia,” involves a drive to reject the present and move on to an unrealized, collective futurity. By recording the formation of alternative subcultures, these artists engage in the realm of “queer aesthetics” to counter dominant neoliberal and heteronormative ideals propagated in society. Muñoz’s conception of a queer futurity provides a framework to investigate how Opie’s, Muholi’s, and Brundrit’s documentary photography envisions alternative, queer ways of being in this world.

Muñoz clarifies that queerness encapsulates more than simply gay or lesbian sexuality but instead proposes that we move toward a utopia that “embraces experimental modes of love, sex, and relationality.”⁸⁶ When approaching an analysis of these photographs, the notion of queerness extends beyond the artist’s or the subject’s sexual or gender identity as queer. While this identification remains pertinent, these artists also declare how various subcultures in the United States and South Africa enact non normative, experiential ways of being outside expectations in mainstream society. This art investigates how collective queerness disrupts dominant narratives and temporalities shaping human identity by occupying a queer time and space.⁸⁷ Similar to Halberstam’s proposal to occupy a queer time and space, by archiving subcultures outside hegemonic spheres these photographs each beg the viewer to pause and reassess quotidian relationships to space and time.

The focus of these artists’ photographs extends beyond the site of the body as they each take unique steps to document spaces and boundaries of alternative

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 7.

subcultures and communities. As Opie notes, “I think that in some ways, the queer resistance is always bringing focus to the queer community. My deciding to use it as a subject is about compassion and creating a history.”⁸⁸ By photographing cityscapes, landscapes, and public gatherings they each investigate the spatiality of queerness. These photographs speak to the potentiality of community through a formal and conceptual emphasis on environment, nature, or architecture. Although not as explicit in message as their confrontational portraiture series, Brundrit’s photographs capturing an iconic cityscape in Cape Town, Opie’s series on icehouse communities in northern Minnesota, and Muholi’s documentation of funerals and weddings each offer a unique avenue to question the construction of alternative communities within and outside the mainstream. These artists’ photographs, operating through a queer aesthetic, should therefore be considered within a broader, transnational initiative to envision queer, resilient communities.

Jean Brundrit’s series *City of Cape Town* (2001-2), *Reclaiming Cape Town* (2001-2), and *Boundaries* (2002-4) (Figures 16–18) re appropriate and modify photographs of the iconic tourist site of Table Mountain in Cape Town to interrogate discourses of otherness and redefine who owns and is welcome in the city. Multiple photographs, each exposed for three minutes, are placed side by side to construct a composition of the skyline. Brundrit captured these photographs through pinhole photography; pinhole cameras do not use a lens and have only one small aperture. Light enters through this pinhole and reflects an inverted image; this method produces a

⁸⁸ Andrea Blanch, “Catherine Opie Interview,” 24 Sept. 2013. Accessed online. 20 Feb. 2014, <http://museemagazine.com/art-2/features/catherine-opie-interview/>.

photograph with blurred or dimmed qualities. This aesthetic strategy gives the image of an idyllic view of Cape Town a nostalgic, ethereal, and idealistic tone, inviting the viewer to look closer. These blurred and ambiguous aesthetic decisions also allude to the unstable nature of identity and space; the homogenous identity associated with the city, and reinforced through iconic photographs, remains constructed, prescribed, and sanitized by the state. Upon closer scrutiny, Brundrit offers subtle interventions to challenge mainstream conceptualizations of the city.

In *City of Cape Town* Brundrit repeatedly etches in cursive the provocative word “dyke” across the composition. Table Mountain, a highly frequented tourist spot, exemplifies an instance when political and social authorities use a space to construct a universal, idealistic character for a city. The model Cape Town resident excludes those who diverge from the affluent, heterosexual, patriarchal ideal. By inserting the word “dyke” across the composition, Brundrit subverts the “straight” or heterosexual representation of the city. She adamantly objects to the exclusion of lesbian bodies from conceptualizations of a city or national identity.

In *Reclaiming Cape Town* Brundrit further proclaims a queer identity by stamping the words, “OFFICIAL QUEER SPACE” in the top right corner of the image. This powerful text breaks the conventional, picturesque conception of Cape Town by loudly reminding viewers of queer people’s right to live and thrive in the city. In *Boundaries* (Figure 18), Brundrit engages with the same photographs of Cape Town and now etches the silhouettes of a lesbian couple across the multiple photographs. The transparent couple dominates the city, asserting their sexuality

through an act of intimacy. The open, transparent forms of the figures remind the viewer of the invisibility or exclusion of lesbian experiences and lives from narratives of the city.

Brundrit's strategic modification of the historical and recognizable image of Table Mountain gives viewers an opportunity to envision a new space where lesbian communities can intervene and assert their identities in Cape Town. These photographs push the boundaries of the city by asserting the existence of the lesbian voice. By reclaiming the public image and space of the city through queer re-appropriations, Brundrit imagines a limitless and open space for individuals typically unwelcome from mainstream visual culture (or advertisement) due to their non-normative identities. Using a "queer aesthetic" she interweaves a queer voice and presence through formal and conceptual decisions such as pinhole photography, reclaimed words, or etched, figural forms. Brundrit asks viewers to re-consider their position and identity in relation to the city and unlearn heterosexual assumptions attributed to a public identity and space. She reenvisioned Cape Town from a queer perspective by re-appropriating panoramic photographs of the city and conceives of a future city that includes queer, minoritarian identities.

Catherine Opie's art also engages with the "queer aesthetic" to explore collective belonging and record new ways of being in the world. Her photographs visualize an alternative realm of existence outside mainstream society. While her portraiture series such as *Being and Having* map the individual queer body in relation to identity or subcultures, her landscape photographs visualize the potential

for community and document human collectivity in nature. Opie's style and focus shifted in the mid-1990s as she began to study landscape and architectural themes. *Icehouses* reveals the simultaneous connections and disjunctures between what can be oversimplified as two disparate directions in her career. As reporter Michael Wilson noted in *Time Out New York* in 2009, "while Opie has famously reflected on marginalized sexualities, she has also made space for issues and interests from all walks of life."⁸⁹ In 2000, Opie began a one-year artist residency at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and produced her series *Skyways & Icehouses* in 2001 (Figures 19–23). For the *Icehouse* series, Opie spent two months periodically photographing fishermen's icehouses constructed on frozen lakes in northern Minnesota. Each of the fourteen photographs features small, colorful hatches punctuating the horizon; the icehouses maintain a playful presence as the angular and boxed structures recall toy building blocks. At times, the houses appear to float on a blanket of an atmospheric white expanse, emphasizing their temporality and portability. The bright colors imbue the homes with unique charm and character, suggesting the small groups of families and friends gathering inside. Each house stands in sharp contrast to the vast, white winter landscape.

Taken on 8 x 10 inch film, the colorful *Icehouse* photographs convey a high amount of detail and demonstrate how Opie values attention to formal and aesthetic elements while also addressing themes of community, belonging, temporality,

⁸⁹ Michael Wilson, "Catherine Opie: American Photographer." 9 Oct. 2009. Accessed online. 8 Feb. 2014, <http://www.timeout.com/newyork/art/catherine-opie-american-photographer>.

change, and nature. Opie decided not to modify the negative images digitally, preferring to show these images in their raw, unaltered state. The artist commented on the significance of recording this environment through photography: “There’s something that happens when you’re faced with this emptiness that only can happen for a quick moment through the lens of a camera that makes you sit with a space in a different way and think about [it].”⁹⁰ The blank negative space composing the majority of the photograph in the *Icehouse* series also exudes an openness inviting viewers to position themselves within the space. Opie asks viewers to contemplate their position and identity in relation to community. In fact, the artist invited viewers to share their personal stories and experiences to complement the exhibition catalogue for this series. One participant named Carol Nulsen contributes a narrative to the project, commenting, “Ice fishing had its own subculture. Who would bundle up warmly and jump on a loud machine to reach a small, dark, unmarked shack and sit for hours waiting for a fish to bite? I don’t remember catching any fish that we kept and ate. It was the process, the experience—so different from our daily life—that kept us returning each year.”⁹¹ Nulsen’s narrative reflects how Opie’s intentional receptiveness to multiple interpretations and experiences remains central to her work.

According to Nulsen’s narrative, ice fishing requires braving the discomforts of winter, yet she also notes its rewards, which include belonging to a “subculture”

⁹⁰ M. Reilly, “The Drive to Describe: an Interview with Catherine Opie,” *Art Journal New York*, 60 (2001): 82-95.

⁹¹ Catherine Opie, *Catherine Opie: Skyways & Icehouses* (Minneapolis, Minn: Walker Art Center, 2002), 39.

that provides an alternative to “daily life.” This narrative emphasizes how this subculture evolves around and depends on the environment. Aesthetic decisions deployed in *Icehouses* investigate this relationship between community and nature. In the series, the icehouses progressively become engulfed in the stark, overpowering whiteness of the snow. By the final photograph, *Untitled #14* (Figure 23), the viewer can only glimpse the subtle materialization of the houses through the ethereal layers of snow dusting the foreground. The simplicity of the spatial composition emphasizes the inconsequentiality of human presence on the lake; the near-absence of human activity bestows a quietude, serenity, and stillness to the scene.

As Muñoz notes, “art functions as a manipulation of nature’s vastness and thus a site of contemplation and critique.”⁹² Opie’s series provokes the viewer to question the relationship between nature and the human-made. The all-encompassing presence of nature and harmonious balance of the sky and lake dwarf the ad hoc and scattered presence of houses and people in the photograph. The gradual disappearance of the icehouses and fading of the horizon line emphasize the expansiveness and potentiality resting in nature while referencing the temporality of human presence. This progression conveys the ephemerality of this group of people who are together only in the winter. At the onset of spring, the snow and ice melt and the ice-fishing season ends. Residents take down their houses. They leave behind this temporary and constructed community. Opie muses, “I love the ideas

⁹² José E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 146.

that the icehouses are a temporary community. They only exist on the ice for about two months, but they receive pizza delivery, even prostitutes.”⁹³

Opie advocates taking time to learn the intricacies and nuances of a community. She provides a window into the experience of taking the photographs: “I would spend all day, everyday, out on that ice, trying to figure it out. If I did it really quickly you would miss this whole experience of what it means to let something seep into your mind in a different way.”⁹⁴ Communities progress and change over time. These photographs map the transitory and fluid exchanges between humans and nature over a set period. *Icehouses* investigates the tensions between construction/deconstruction, growth/decay, flourishing/withering, permanence/instability.

In the first photograph of the series, *Untitled #1* (Figure 19), the blank expanse of the sky dominates the upper register of the composition. The snow-covered lake reflects the sky to invoke symmetry or balance between the upper and lower registers of the photograph. The horizon, defined by a rhythmic line of trees and sprinkle of houses, is a sharp divide between these two white, negative spaces. The viewer’s gaze can rest on the identifiable horizon line, yet becomes lost or dislocated in the unending, limitless stretch of scenery serving as the background. As art historian Jennifer Blessing posits in an analysis of Opie’s *Surfers* series, “depictions

⁹³ Leslie Evans, “Catherine Opie’s ‘Surfers’ Opens at Regens Projects for One-Month Showing.” *Regen Projects Website*. Jan. 2004. Accessed online. 8 Feb. 2014, <http://www.westadams-normandie.com/index.php/newsarticles-menu/58-article58>.

⁹⁴ Opie, Trotman, and Ferguson, *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, 256.

of the horizon [. . .] provide a site for longing for the apprehension of an elusive, mystical truth.”⁹⁵ Blessing also references the literary critic Susan Stewart, who, when commenting on the significance of a horizon line in works of art, states, “The very *fact* of the horizon is what is immutable; it is an infinite dividing line between infinite entities, a place towards which the mind journeys and yet a place that appears as a continuous, productive deferral of place.”⁹⁶

I propose to extend Blessing’s and Stewart’s astute attention to horizons by placing Opie’s incorporation of aesthetic and formal elements of space in relation to José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of a “queer utopia.”⁹⁷ *Icehouses* resists mainstream or limited conceptions of community through aesthetic and formal elements like the horizon line. Opie’s playful deployment of an evanescent, infinite horizon line provokes the viewer to scrutinize the present condition of their external environment. She uses the power of landscape to subtly challenge viewers to reexamine societal systems, thereby envisaging what Muñoz would call a “queer horizon.” Like the horizon lines in her landscapes, the possibility of continuous utopian transformation extends infinitely beyond the borders of the photograph.

Brundrit’s series on Cape Town also captures the horizon of a cityscape and calls for a queering of the heterosexual exclusivity of Cape Town. Superimposing interventionist formal elements such as the words “dyke” or a silhouette of a lesbian couple on the city offers a glimpse into a world that celebrates non normative

⁹⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁶ Susan Stewart, *The Open Studio: Essays on Art and Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁹⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 1.

identity. By reappropriating a mainstream image of the straight city of Cape Town, Brundrit identifies a discontent with the present but insists on imaging a queer futurity or a queerness not-yet-reached. As Muñoz remarks, “We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”⁹⁸

Similar to Brundrit’s photographs that capture the physical aspects of a cityscape, in *Icehouses* the presence of humans is only implied through architectural structures. The photographs do not capture humans within the environment and leave the viewer recalling instances when one longs or searches for an unobtainable community. Opie references how the ice-fishing community stands in opposition to the economically prohibitive spaces such as summer lakeside homes, relegated to the wealthy. She states, “I like that it messes with the whole economic thing of the house on the lake. Mostly, only the wealthy can have that. Come winter, even the mechanic at the gas station can pull his house onto the lake and he has a lake-view property.”⁹⁹ *Icehouses* captures a space that embraces both belonging in difference and the asymmetries of individuals in a community. Opie explains that she upsets the stereotypes forced on variant communities based on class, race, sexuality, and gender. She notes the importance of creating a “seductive visual language” that can engage viewers but then challenges them to “consider both people and space in their

⁹⁸ José E. Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 1.

⁹⁹ Hunter Drohojowska-Philp. “For Her, It’s Always about Community,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 May 2002. Web. 8 Feb. 2014, <<http://articles.latimes.com/2002/may/12/entertainment/ca-hunter12>>

various complexities."¹⁰⁰ Opie evokes the possibility of a utopia on the horizon through the documentation of the little-known icehouse community of northern Minnesota.¹⁰¹

Through photography, these artists foresee and record the creation of alternative spaces in society. Identifying the continuities and tensions between portraiture, where the subject is central to the composition, and their landscapes, devoid of definitive subjects, leads to a richer analysis of the meaning of community and identity interwoven throughout their photographs. Despite Opie's and Brundrit's engagement with a queer aesthetic and visualization of a utopia, the struggle toward a queer futurity must not overshadow the immediate and persistent presence of violence plaguing queer communities globally. Muholi's most recent exhibition, *Of Love & Loss* (2014), highlights the complex simultaneity of love/pain, mourning/celebration, violence/resilience, that endures in black, lesbian communities in post-apartheid South Africa. An analysis of her performance art piece and photographs in the installation *Of Love & Loss* (Figures 24–28) delves deeper into the nuances of Muñoz's utopian conceptions of "queerness" and alternative futurities. Muholi's documentation of the violence committed against lesbians in her community complicates the notion of queer futurity by addressing the politics of both sexuality and race; in order to envision a queer futurity one must

¹⁰⁰ "Catherine Opie: American Photographer, Icehouses and Surfers," *The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation (SRGF)*. Accessed online. 8 Feb. 2014, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/education/school-educator-programs/teacher-resources/arts-curriculum-online?view=item&catid=728&id=103>.

¹⁰¹ Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 140.

first acknowledge the necessity of surviving within the “here and now.” Juxtaposing violence with moments of celebration and love, Muholi implores the viewer to never settle or be complacent in the surrounding injustices, but rather actively seek a future that is more collective and intentional about the contributions and perspectives of all.

In *Of Love & Loss* (Figure 24), Muholi places a custom-made, transparent coffin in the center of the gallery. On the opening night of the exhibition, Muholi enacted a performance using this coffin. As audience members entered the space, they immediately saw the artist lying naked in the coffin with roses strewn across her body.¹⁰² With her eyes shut, she peacefully rested in a bed of cotton; a framed self-portrait sat on the top of the coffin. Muholi pays tribute to the bodies that have occupied coffins as a result of violent murder and rape. By inserting herself into the narrative of mourning, death, and loss, Muholi speaks to how grief from these persistent murders reverberates and injures the whole community. Bringing a coffin into the gallery space invites the viewer into the rituals of grieving and reflecting. Muholi occupies the coffin as an artist, an activist, and a source of life and hope. Although coffins carry the associative power of death, funerals, and loss, she invigorates this installation with life by fueling dialogue about existing inequities facing the LGBTI community. Viewers pause and reconsider their relationship to the deaths resulting from hate crimes against LGBTI individuals. As one audience

¹⁰² Zanele Muholi, “*Of Love & Loss*,” Stevenson Gallery. 14 February, 2014. Accessed online. 28 March 2014, <http://aadataart.com/exhibition-zanele-muholis-of-love-loss-at-the-stevenson-gallery/>.

member named Bakae Vosloorus stated in response to the performance art piece on opening night, “This is an example that one day it might be us.”¹⁰³ Muholi awakens an imperative within each viewer to fight against the atrocities and hate crimes, including murders and “corrective” rapes committed against black lesbians. By interpolating her body within the realm of death, Muholi speaks to the impact these murders continue to have on the living in her community and, more broadly, society.

The transparency of the glass coffin responds to the ways in which the media reacts to the deaths of LGBTI individuals. Mainstream news reports simultaneously over-sensationalize the deaths, making them into spectacles and statistics, while also silencing preventive dialogue and change. As a result, gender and sexual-based violence continues plaguing townships in South Africa. Muholi exposes her entire body and allows viewers to look at her from all angles. By occupying the realm of death, the nude body can no longer serve as a sexual or erotic object for the viewer. The sanctity and dignity her body carries while lying in the coffin ruptures the mainstream colonial, racist, homophobic gaze and patriarchal fantasy. Here, she presents a moment of support and visibility for the black, queer body. Muholi contests the media’s role in sensationalizing the deaths of lesbians who often obsess over the sexuality of the victim. She remarks: “Every media house wants to

¹⁰³ Aluta Humbane, “Black South African Visual Artist Lesbian, Zanele Muholi, in a Transparent Coffin of Love and Loss,” 14 Feb. 2014. Accessed online. 28 March, 2014. <http://inkanyiso.org/2014/02/24/2014-feb-14-black-south-african-visual-activist-lesbian-zanele-muholi-in-a-transparent-coffin-of-love-and-loss/>>

document that murder . . . there is nothing private about these funerals.”¹⁰⁴ Despite this façade of transparency and dialogue about LGBTI murders in the media, Muholi sheds light on the ineffectiveness of mainstream coverage given the continued prevalence of violence afflicting the LGBTI communities.¹⁰⁵ Muholi speaks out against atrocities disproportionately facing black lesbians; she lies in the coffin in an act of sacrifice and solidarity for the lost community members. As another viewer, Mpume Turtfontein, shared: “If it weren’t for her, we would know each other, but the world would only know us through their eyes and voice, I see myself in this exhibition.”¹⁰⁶ Muholi provides an intentional community space of support for people to collectively mourn and reflect on the continued losses of friends and family.

Another feature in *Of Love & Loss* is the series *Ayanda & Nhlanhla Moremi’s Wedding* (Figure 25) and *Duduzile Zozo’s Funeral* (Figure 26). These photographs, exhibited on the same wall of the gallery, ascertain the tense coexistence of love and loss. The photographs document a lesbian wedding and a funeral in Muholi’s community. The installation informs the viewer of the unnervingly close timing of these two events: “Ayanda Magoloza and Nhlanhla Moremi’s wedding in Katlehong

¹⁰⁴ Ang Lloyd, “Zanele Muholi’s New Work Mourns and celebrates South African Queer Lives,” *Africa is a Country*. Accessed online. 27 March 2014, <<http://africasacountry.com/zanele-muholis-new-work-mourns-and-celebrates-south-african-queer-lives>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Aluta Humbane, “Black South African Visual Artist Lesbian, Zanele Muholi, in a Transparent Coffin of Love and Loss,” 14 Feb. 2014. Accessed online. 28 March 2014, <http://inkanyiso.org/2014/02/24/2014-feb-14-black-south-african-visual-activist-lesbian-zanele-muholi-in-a-transparent-coffin-of-love-and-loss>.

took place just four months after Duduzile Zozo, a member of their community, was murdered a short four kilometers away in Thokoza.”¹⁰⁷ Muholi offers a poignant and raw visualization of the simultaneity of these most intense, oppositional, yet essential, human emotions by archiving both a lesbian wedding and funeral.

In one photograph, *Duduzile Zozo's Funeral* (Figure 27), a standard piece of printer paper is glued to a cement slab shaped like a tombstone. The paper features a black and white photograph of Duduzile Zozo and announces the details of her memorial service. The surface that the public announcement is pasted to is cold and impersonal. Past posters, worn and faded, along with swirls of dirty glue surround the announcement. The announcement states, “IN MEMORY OF LATE DUDUZILE ZOZO MEMORIAL SERVICE” and includes the date, venue, and time of the funeral arrangements. At the bottom of the paper in bold, capitalized letters is the phrase “STOP KILLING US AS LGBTI’S.” In contrast, above the small, thin paper are bold and black numbers permanently stenciled onto the cement slab and occupying the top frame of the photograph. These large numbers serve as a chilling reminder that murders of lesbians continue to become impersonal death statistics in South Africa. A hand interjects into the right side of the photograph and points directly to the paper, imploring the viewer to take a second look and allow the poignant message to sink in.

¹⁰⁷ Zanele Muholi, “*Of Love & Loss*,” Stevenson Gallery. 14 February, 2014. Accessed online. 28 March 2014, <http://aadataart.com/exhibition-zanele-muholis-of-love-loss-at-the-stevenson-gallery/>.

By recording politically current events, Muholi uses photography as a vehicle to disseminate information and create an archive for her community. The announcement informs the viewer of an unjust hate crime; Muholi exposes the gapping contradictions between the South African constitutional protections of LGBTI citizens drafted twenty years ago and the reality on the ground in her community. As her artist statement says, "In 2014, when South African democracy celebrates its 20 years, it seems more important than ever to raise again our voice against hate crimes and discriminations made towards the LGBTI community."¹⁰⁸ *Duduzile Zozo's Funeral* shows how established narratives of independence and equality mask the existing inequities in South Africa. Muholi reminds viewers of the consequence of South Africa's lack of legislation regarding anti-hate crimes: "the rampant hate crimes are used to make black lesbians invisible, because coming out exposes us to the harshness of patriarchal pressures. Challenging the norms of compulsory heterosexuality has put many at risk."

Muholi notes how in South African black culture, the lesbian identity carries negative associations and is considered antithetical to the nuclear, heterosexual family. Her photographs of a lesbian wedding challenge this discriminatory norm by recognizing the significance of family and love in lesbian communities.¹⁰⁹ In the photograph, *Ayanda & Nhlanhla Moremi's wedding III* (Figure 28), a flimsy piece of

¹⁰⁸ Zanele Muholi, "Of Love & Loss," Stevenson Gallery. 14 February, 2014. Accessed online. 28 March 2014, <http://aadataart.com/exhibition-zanele-muholis-of-love-loss-at-the-stevenson-gallery/>.

¹⁰⁹ Zanele Muholi, "Mapping Our Histories: A Visual History of Black Lesbians in Post-Apartheid South Africa," Self-published essay, 2009. Accessed online. 15 April 2014, <http://www.zanelemuholi.com/writings.htm4>, 19.

paper is taped to the front of a red car featuring a photograph of Ayanda and Nhlanhla Moremi, the recently married couple. Colorful ribbons streak across the bright red hood. The vibrant rainbow colors of the photograph contrast the somber and stark black and white hues dominating the composition in *Dudzile Zozo's Funeral*. The creases in the tape and the folds in paper imbue the photograph with a tangibility and texture. The piercing sun rebounds off the car, reflecting the contagious, celebratory mood. Higher on the hood of the car, another piece of paper reads, "Keep calm and be proud of who you are." The text, printed on an image of a rainbow flag flapping in a pure, blue sky, proclaims the triumph of love over hate. Re appropriating a popular culture trope, the text reminds viewers that despite recent legalization of same-sex marriage, controversy around the issue prevails. This photograph of the married couple's car with its many rainbow accouterments records a celebratory instance in the lesbian community. Muholi captures a candid moment of celebration and new beginning. The pictures are taped hastily and positioned slightly askew on the car, leaving traces of movement. They mirror the progressive, carefree, and lighthearted environment that this ceremony embraces.

Muholi believes that "it is through seeing ourselves as we find love, laughter, joy that we can sustain our strength and regain our sanity as we move into a future that is sadly still filled with the threat of insecurities."¹¹⁰ These photographs document significant events in the lesbian community to explore the nuanced dichotomy between love and loss. Muholi visualizes the liberation of queer

¹¹⁰ Zanele Muholi, "*Faces and Phases*," Stevenson Gallery Website. Accessed online 9 Dec. 2013, http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/index_faces2011.html

communities from the violent, racist, and homophobic crimes occurring in South Africa. She alerts the viewer to the current reality affecting those in her community but also foresees a powerful and resilient future, one that denounces racism and homophobia and is safe for all LGBTI individuals. She speaks to a “new South Africa” when stating, “It is my duty to pave the way for others to see that it’s possible. How do we embrace each other and mix without faking it? The new South Africa I long for is where people collaborate, beyond races, and where queer people can make a difference in other people’s lives.” Just as Muñoz urges one to find a queer utopia in the actions of the everyday, Muholi’s art documents the daily, yet no less momentous, rituals in her township through *Of Love & Loss*.

Her artwork redefines heteronormative social and political discourses in society that normalize violence against LGBTI communities. By working with a queer aesthetic that privileges the voices of black, lesbian communities, Muholi’s art archives and generates awareness in order to change violent conditions in South Africa. Yet, she also moves beyond the present by showing the power of a supportive community to instigate change.

Toward a Queer Futurity

Catherine Opie, Zanele Muholi, and Jean Brundrit reveal how themes of community, belonging, identity, and futurity extend beyond their initial portraits as these artists archive the thriving, resistant spaces of collectivity. The various representational strategies they deploy help capture new kinds of belonging in

society that embrace the asymmetries of queer identity. Their art engages with queerness by archiving silenced, alternative instances of community and strives toward a futurity that diverges from the majoritarian politics of the present.

An investigation of how these artists independently document and conceive of alternative communities demonstrates how their artwork reflects the diversified yet transnational strategies thriving in queer art around the world. Despite the adversarial social and political conditions facing queer individuals and communities throughout the United States and South Africa, Opie, Muholi, and Brundrit each present an enduring search for meaning in resilient community and strive towards a queer futurity. Through documentation of individuals, subcultures, urban spaces, or nature, these artists imagine new, utopian modes of identity variance.

IMAGES

Figure 1. Catherine Opie, *Papa Bear, Chief, Jake, Chicken*, from the series, *Being and Having*, 1991.

Figure 2. Catherine Opie, *Pervert/Self-Portrait*, 1993.

Figure 3. Zanele Muholi, *Anelisa Mfo*, from series *Faces and Phases* 2010.

Figure 4. Zanele Muholi, *Ziyanda Daniel*, from series *Faces and Phases*, Cape Town, 2011.

Figure 5. Zanele Muholi, *Lerato Dumse*, from series *Faces and Phases*, 2010.

Figure 6. Zanele Muholi, *ID Crisis*, 2003.

Figure 7. Zanele Muholi, *Bra*, 2003.

Figure 8. Zanele Muholi, *Safe Sex II*, 2003.

Figure 9. Jean Brundrit, *The Spaces Inside* series, 2013.

Figure 10. Jean Brundrit, *The Spaces Inside* series, 2013.

Figure 11. Jean Brundrit, *Portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa*, 1995.

Figure 12. Zanele Muholi, *Caitlin & I*, 2009.

Figure 13. Lorna Simpson, *You're Fine, You're Hired*, 1988.

Figure 14. Catherine Opie, *Norma & Eyenga*, 1998.

Figure 15. Catherine Opie, *Catherine, Melanie & Sadie Rain*, from the *Domestic* series, 1995–98.

Figure 16. Jean Brundrit, *Reclaiming Cape Town*, 2001–2.

Figure 17. Jean Brundrit, *City of Cape Town*, 2001–2.

Figure 18. Jean Brundrit, *Boundaries*, 2004–6.

Figure 19. Catherine Opie, *Untitled #1, Icehouses* series, 2001.

Figure 20. Catherine Opie, *Untitled #3, Icehouses* series, 2001.

Figure 21. Catherine Opie, *Untitled #6, Icehouses* series, 2001.

Figure 22. Catherine Opie, *Untitled #11, Icehouses* series, 2001.

Figure 23. Catherine Opie, *Untitled #14, Icehouses* series, 2001.

Figure 24. Zanele Muholi, *Of Love & Loss*, installation view, 2014.

Figure 25. Zanele Muholi, *Duduzile Zozo's Funeral*, installation view, 2014.

Figure 26. Zanele Muholi, *Ayanda & Nhlanhla Moremi's Wedding*, installation view, 2014.

Figure 27. Zanele Muholi, *Duduzile Zozo's Funeral*, 2013.

Figure 28, Zanele Muholi, *Ayanda & Nhlanhla Moremi's wedding III*, 2013.

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