
Returning the Gaze:

An Intersectional Look at Black Lesbian Women in South Africa and the phenomenon of 'Corrective Rape'

"We are oppressed triply by society: (1) Black-racism (2) Women-Sexism (3) Homosexual-Heterosexual Bias." – Elandra V. Henderson (325)

It is impossible to begin to understand the lives and oppressions of black South African women who identify as lesbian without an intersectional focus. Intersectionality as a sociological paradigm was first formally introduced in 1989 by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, whose scholarship in the topics of race, black feminist theory, civil rights and law has positively and irrevocably influenced both scholars and social justice activists alike (Crenshaw et. al., 303). In order to understand the phenomenon of so-called 'corrective rape' in South Africa, a term used "to describe the sexual violence perpetrated for the purpose of supposedly 'curing' a person of their real or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity", we must look at the phenomenon through an intersectional lens (Anguita 490).

In this paper, I will examine corrective rape as it is experienced on the black female lesbian body, a site where the axes of race, gender, class, and sexuality meet. Furthermore, I argue that in order to understand corrective rape in South Africa in the present day, we must first examine how South Africa's turbulent apartheid history informs present oppressions. Finally, I look at the work of a black self-identified lesbian South African photographer named Zanele Muholi, whose work attempts to make the lives of black lesbian women visible, as well as return the gaze in an innovative and essential act of resistance.

Historical Context

Under apartheid – the legislative system of racial discrimination that was enforced by the National Party from 1948 to 1994 – South Africa was strictly racially stratified. Apartheid’s architecture, with white supremacy at its core, created binaries within the categories of race as well as gender and class. White, or ‘European’ bodies ruled over ‘non-white’ bodies while urban white upper and middle classes ruled over ‘non-white’ lower classes, especially the black ‘under-class’. More importantly for the purposes of this paper, both white and ‘non-white’ men benefited from patriarchy, though in different in complex ways. In light of this, both white and men classified as ‘non-white’ had considerable power over black women.

In mapping the effect that apartheid’s laws and policies had on the black female body, (laws such as the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act which created ethnically segregated Bantustans for black South Africans as well as policies such as the migrant-labour system), Sharon Groenmeyer writes:

Women, especially Black women, numerically dominated the secondary labor market with low wages and poor conditions of work. . . .Because the labor market was rooted in the legacy of apartheid and took on a particular formation, the multiple burdens of gender, race, and class discrimination consigned women, especially Black women, to the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. . . . [The system] also calcified patriarchal traditional practices by extending the authority of the traditional chiefs and their control over women living in the Bantustans. This marginalized women’s voices from the public discourse and kept hidden from the public purview women’s ability to challenge traditional patriarchal authority or control (262).

Once the apartheid system was dismantled in 1994, this ‘calcified’ sense of traditional patriarchal control did not dissipate with the advent of democracy. On the contrary, in an effort to reclaim their sense of authority, many black South African men

re-inscribed a strongly traditional, patriarchal and heteronormative system in post-Apartheid South Africa. As Megan Morrissey writes in her essay "Rape as a Weapon of Hate: Discursive Constructions and Material Consequences of Black Lesbianism in South Africa":

Emerging from the oppressive racial regime of apartheid where many Black South Africans felt their traditions and cultures to be negated, some have attempted to reclaim those values they identify as natively South African in an effort to reforge their national identity. In this way, heterosexuality has been identified as a natural South African characteristic, leading to vehement proclamations that homosexuality is a product of whiteness and colonialism. These pronouncements are made among Black South Africans from cities and townships, as well as among influential politicians and clergy who verbally attack homosexuals or equate them with external threats to the nation (72).

An example of such a pronouncement occurred in 2006, when South African president Jacob Zuma asserted, "When I was growing up an *ungqingili* [a gay] would not have stood in front of me. I would knock him out" (Ismail, 1). Although he later apologised for his comments, which hurt and angered many LGBTQIA South Africans, Zuma's comment revealed the pervasive nature of South Africa's compulsory heterosexuality.

In her essay about the subject, Adrienne Rich describes compulsory heterosexuality as a social aspect that "needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution – even, or especially, by those individuals who feel they are, in their personal experience, the precursors of a new social relation between the sexes" (637). Although South African homosexuality is not "new", many LGBTQIA individuals recognise the country's compulsory heterosexuality as a false political and social construction and thus, challenge it by through their myriad experiences, expressions, desires and lives.

'Corrective Rape' and the "Tripartite Threat"

According to Amanda Swarr's 2012 study, "Paradoxes of Butchness: Lesbian Masculinities and Sexual Violence in Contemporary South Africa", survivors of 'corrective rape' are commonly black lesbian women living in South Africa's urban townships (962). This particular form of sexual assault is particularly perpetrated against women who deliberately break gender norms by self-identifying as 'butch', thus "performing" their gender (to borrow from Judith Butler) in a way typically read and registered as 'masculine' (Butler, 67). These women are then perceived as openly challenging traditional patriarchy in a hyper-visible manner, and also are perceived to threaten what is viewed as exclusive heterosexual access to women as sexual partners. In the act of 'corrective rape' black lesbians are then not only punished for the perceived transgression of a rigid gender binary, but also for disrupting patriarchal compulsory heterosexuality.

As Swarr concludes, "butch lesbians are targeted for sexual violence because of the tripartite threat they pose: to heterosexuality (through their relationships with women), to gender norms (through their expressions of masculinities and disregard for femininities), and to sex (through challenging expectations surrounding somatically female bodies).

Zanele Muholi and the Act of Visual Resistance

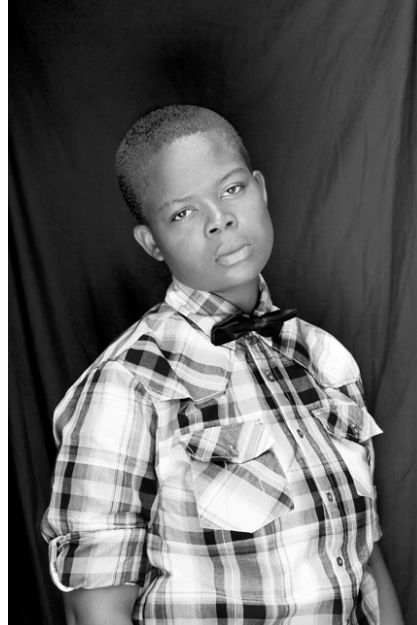
Despite the intense levels of violence that many black South African lesbians face, many reclaim their experiences in order to fight back. A remarkable illustration of resistance can be seen in Zanele Muholi's photographic and social justice work.

Muholi is a talented South African artist, activist and photographer who actively works to challenge heteronormative understandings of South African life. Her visual art deals with the lives of LGBTQIA individuals, particularly focusing on black South African lesbians in an effort to change social attitudes and shed light on the many struggles and

oppressions that individuals within these communities face. In her essay “Mapping Our Histories: A Visual History of Black Lesbians in Post-Apartheid South Africa”, Muholi describes her own experiences of violence based on her sexuality and gender identity:

In 1996 I experienced a severe hate crime when I was beaten up by my former girlfriend’s mother. Her mother believed that I was a ‘pervert’ who promoted homosexuality and made her daughter into a lesbian. We broke up after that. This experience was a wake up call about the effects of lesbophobic attacks. Six years later, I started documenting hate crimes. I journeyed the townships and listened to and recorded more than 50 cases. I conducted interviews and recorded survivors to mark their experiences, resistance and existence as black lesbians in the country, as I believed that it is important to put a face on each and every issue (20).

In her *Faces and Phases* series, Muholi uses the photographic portrait as a means to return the harmful gaze that is often focused on hyper-visible LGBTQIA individuals as an act of resistance. She writes that, “In *Faces and Phases* I present our existence and resistance through positive imagery of black queers (especially lesbians) in South African society and beyond. I show our aesthetics through portraiture. Historically, portraits serve as memorable records for lovers, family and friends” (*Faces and Phases*, 1)

Fig. 1¹Fig. 2²Fig. 3³

In the above photographs, Muholi's intent is to challenge the viewer to grapple with their own assumptions and stereotypes about African homosexuality. In describing her intent for the series, Muholi writes that the viewer "is invited to contemplate questions such as: what does an African lesbian look like? Is there a lesbian aesthetic or do we express our gendered, racialised and classed selves in rich and diverse ways? Is this lesbian more 'authentic' than that lesbian because she wears a tie and the other does not? Is this a man or a woman? Is this a transman? Can you identify a rape survivor by the clothes she wears?" (*Faces and Phases*, 1)

In challenging South Africans to ask these insightful and important questions, Muholi's work plays a vital role in dismantling the oppressive systems of power that inform and contribute to the perpetuation of horrific forms of violence such as

¹ Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases*, "Bongiwe 'Twana' Kunene, Kwanele South, Katlehong, Johannesburg, 2012"

² Ibid., "Mpumi Moeti, Kwanele South, Katlehong, Johannesburg, 2012"

³ Ibid., "Sinenhlanhla Lunga, Kwanele South, Katlehong, Johannesburg, 2012"

'corrective rape'. In *Faces and Phases*, each of the individuals in Muholi's series looks directly at the camera in a simple yet powerful assertion of selfhood and visibility. In returning the viewer's gaze, Muholi's subjects perform a profound and compelling act of resistance.

Works Cited

- Anguita, L.A. "Tackling corrective rape in South Africa: the engagement between the LGBT CSOs and the NHRIs (CGE and SAHRC) and its role", *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 16 Vol. 3, (2012): 489-516
- Butler, J. "Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler" *Radical Philosophy*, 67 (1994)
- Carbado, D.W. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Vickie M. Mays and Barbara Tomlinson (2013). "Intersectionality", *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10 (2013): pp 303-312
- Groenmeyer, S. "Intersectionality in Apartheid and Post-apartheid South Africa : Unpacking the Narratives of Two Working Women" *Gender Technology and Development* .15 Vol. 249. (2011): 249-274
- Henderson, E. V. "The Black Lesbian", *Radical Feminism*, ed. Barbara A. Crow, New York: New York University Press (2000): 325-326
- Ismail, S. "Mixed Reaction to Zuma Apology" *Mail and Guardian*, 28 September 2006, <http://mg.co.za/article/2006-09-28-mixed-reaction-to-zuma-apology>
- Muholi, Z. "Mapping Our Histories: A Visual History of Black Lesbians in Post-Apartheid South Africa" (2009): 20 http://www.zanelemuholi.com/ZM%20moh_final_230609.pdf
- Morrissey, Megan E. "Rape as a Weapon of Hate: Discursive Constructions and Material Consequences of Black Lesbianism in South Africa." *Women's Studies In Communication* 36, no. 1 (February 2013): 72-91
- Rich, A. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", *Signs* 5 No. 4, Women: Sex and Sexuality (1980): 637
- Swarr, A.L. "Paradoxes of Butchness: Lesbian Masculinities and Sexual Violence in Contemporary South Africa", *Signs*, 37 (2012): 961-986.