

Playing with "Normal"

A Review of Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases*¹

By Yvette Abrahams

Every couple of years or so I attempt to come out of the closet as a rape survivor. This is politically important for me in the same way as coming out of the closet as a lesbian has political relevance. Until we are self-identified, self-named, and proud of who we are, we will remain unable to organize effectively for our own liberation. And in exactly the same way as coming out as a lesbian is hard, I find emotionally difficult to mention that I am one of those whom violence was done unto because it is painful and dangerous to lay myself so bare. The very act of visibility exposes me to the possibility of harm. Just like the naming of myself as a lesbian places my affectional and sexual life in the middle of the public spotlight – a place where according to my African culture and tradition it emphatically does not belong – so does the naming of myself as a victim of curative rape place at the centre of my public identity an experience of absolute powerlessness under force which I would willingly spend my life forgetting. It is in this sense I often speak of myself as a victim, rather than as a survivor. I think until one learns to begin to accept that moment of powerlessness, that absolute deprivation of agency like a foreshadow of death, it is impossible to heal and move on. The beginning of regaining a motive will lie in recognizing its loss. This does not mean that I like doing so as a public spectacle.

This piece is not about me, it is about Zanele's work. But I wanted to explain something about the enormous social forces conditioning the world in which her work bears fruit, namely the objectification and stereotyping of Black lesbians (indeed of Black women in general) which Pumla Gqola has called "epistemic violence". Though the chains on our minds may be hard to see, I feel them every time I experience that sense of danger just prior to coming out as a victim of sexual violence. It is not only the original violation which damages, it is the continuing violation of the unique and special being I believe our Great Creator has meant me to be, which is my life under white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. The silence which one chooses is a good thing. The silence imposed by the fear of being perceived as a stereotype is harmful. When the fear of speaking about violation out of the sure and certain knowledge that it will immediately be used to feed racial and

¹. Prestel Publishers, Munich, 2010

sexual objectification, silences; when the very word 'victim' becomes not a description of a personal experience but a space of ideological contestation; then we know for sure we live in a world defined by epistemic violence. It follows that to resist objectification is a profoundly political act. Mkhize *et al* have expressed it as follows:

"The demand for security for South African women, and for the eradication of a climate in which violence against women is "normal" has been a very strong thread of South African feminist activism since before 1994."²

This activism has demanded enormous courage. From the perspective of Pan-Africanism and Black Consciousness, there has always been the risk that raising these issues plays into the hands of Euro-centric racist stereotypes African men as brutal and savage. It also has never been politically popular locally because it casts into doubt the Mandela myth of South African exceptionalism. The fact that this nation has reconciled with our former colonizers at the same time that some men continue to beat the living daylights out of our women never fails to cause acute discomfort amongst the new black political elite. It destabilizes their claim to legitimacy as the rightful heirs to the liberation struggle.

To take the battle a step further and challenge the homophobia carried by everybody, even by black heterosexual women who themselves are victims of violence, even our own internalized homophobia and lack of self-love, is an act so courageous it sometimes seems completely foolhardy. The social spaces in which such a challenge can exist are minute and constantly in danger of being distorted. There was a time when scarcely a week would go by without me getting an e-mail which would go roughly like this:

"I am a film-maker/journalist/writer/student/researcher wanting to do something to highlight the tragedy of curative rape of black lesbians in South Africa. It is terrible and needs to be publicized. Can you provide me with any statistics? Can you put me in touch with some recently raped black lesbians for me to interview?"

I kid you not. At first I would respond saying that I don't do pimping. After a while I just stopped responding. It hurt too much to see that our courageous and determined campaigns of the last five years were being used to re-objectify and re-stereotype us as voiceless victims who needed someone to come from overseas and re-use us fodder for a media myth-making machine. It was a re-inscription of

², Mkhize, Nonhlanhla, Jane Bennett, Vasu Reddy, Relebohile Maletsane [The Country We Want To Live In: Hate Crimes and Homophobia in the Lives Of Black Lesbian South Africans](#), HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2010, pp. 5.

colonialism. The homophobia out there was bad enough, the more so because at last we were breaking two silences on which much of our new heteropatriarchal hegemony has been built. The statement that it was wrong to rape a Black lesbian was such a complete challenge to this hegemony. The power of our campaigns was that they created consequences, if nothing else then in the form of public visibility and shaming. As Sarah Schulmann has said:

“Remember, people scapegoat the powerless because there is no consequence for doing so. If there was a consequence, they would stop...Observing someone else’s vulnerability is suggestive. It embeds the message that this person can be violated without consequence. It is the corrosive power of suggestion.”³

Our work to create consequences has been extremely threatening to the powers that be. I know this every time I look the accused in the Zoliswa Nkonyana trial in the eyes. It has been four years and they and their families are still grappling with a sense of shock and surprise that they should be on trial at all.

The backlash against our work has been vicious. But the e-mails I found most hurtful were from people who considered themselves activists and sympathizers. The racism and sexism implicit in their objectification escaped them completely. How do we understand the fact that it occurred to none of them that a recently raped Black woman might just have other things on a mind than becoming a film star, that maybe she is in a place where she is busy re-acquainting herself with the very concept of choice, that to seek to exploit her vulnerability at such a time was itself an act of profound secondary victimization, and that the bland assumption that I would be prepared to collude in the secondary victimization of another was an insult? Well, this was the kind of experience that would plunge me into the depths of depression.

It is at such times that I turn to Zanele’s work like a thirsty Khoesan in the desert. Some people have issues with preaching to the converted. I do not. Firstly, because such a discussion has nothing to do with Zanele’s life. She is the kind of person who goes out there into the townships and the places where the homeless people live, and puts cameras in people’s hands. “Express yourself!” she says. Her greatest ambition is to exhibit her photographs on six-foot billboards at the taxi ranks, and indeed she is not afraid to go out there and use the street as her gallery. When she is not doing that, she is bussing the township into the established galleries, claiming spaces and making places for her people without apology. Those of you only familiar with her artwork might not know her as an indefatigable documenter of LGBTIQ and

³ . Schulmann, Sarah Ties that Bind: Familial Homophobia and its Consequences, The New Press, New York, 2009, pp. 97.

women's activism. There is another side to Zanele which she does not promote, but which has brought her much respect amongst her own.

Secondly, because I want to say a word for the converted. Without activists we would have no action. Taking the trouble to refresh and restore them is not unimportant. Being an activist is absolute madness most times. The work that needs to be done is so overwhelming, the more so because – and I believe I speak for all violated Black lesbians here – the fact that someone out there right now is experiencing the same trauma is a memory trigger for all of us. It makes us not want to sleep, or eat, or do anything but struggle. That way lies burnout. It also captures us into another stereotype as lesbian Mothers of the Struggle. So to have someone who cares enough to say: "Take a break. Just look at yourselves. You are deep and quirky and philosophical, angry, emotional and highly intelligent, hardworking, heartbreakingly sexy people, just gloriously fully human, and I find you beautiful!" is really important. I mean this not just in the abstract sense that our artists are dreamers of freedom and so we must cherish them. I mean it in the concrete, daily sense of finding the energy to keep on going. In supporting activists to take a breather and love one another a bit, Zanele's work performs a profoundly political act. After all, when we forget about the love, we miss the whole point about being lesbian. Zanele's work, at its best, has always been to me a pure celebration of women loving women. It is an act of homage which no woman can resist. Reminding us what it is all about is in itself a form of activism, and a desperately important one.

The fundamental political impact of Zanele's work lies in resisting stereotypes. No, I cannot even say this is what she does. Let me rephrase: for many years I have believed that the only answer to objectification is to present myself as a full subject. To aspire to no one's values but my own, to seek the respect of no one but myself and Godde, to love my community in all their many failings and supreme wonders, to live life well regardless; these principles have been my only answer to epistemic violence. I have often said that there are two types of struggle: the anti-struggle (as in we are against homophobia) and the pro-struggle (as in what are we really for? What does a free world actually look like?). Zanele's work transcends these categories to stand proudly on its own. Her subjects, volunteers all, come to us fully as themselves. Marked and scarred by the world they live in, they move beyond simple platitudes like the triumph of the human spirit. They just are. Only when one knows the conditions of their lives is it possible to understand what an achievement this is. Elsewhere I have written:

"As I write I am going to try to cease to use the word "lesbian". This is because I am trying to create a space where women loving women is normal, that is, where we do not need the qualifier "lesbian" because it is so obvious that we do not need to mention it. How often do you read an article on

heterosexual relationships which uses the word "heterosexual"? It is the sense of a love we can take for granted that I need to evoke in this space which is my writing."⁴

This is the kind of emotional work that Faces and Places does for me. It is an affirmation. As I sit and go through its pages, picking out my favourites, sharing them with my family, admiring this one and smiling at that one, this book creates for me a sense of love we can take for granted. It brings me a foretaste of a future when we are truly free. We need more art like this.

⁴ . Abrahams, Yvette Cape Town Jazz; or; Auntie Yvette's 10 Rules for Survival in Lesbian Love, 2005, unpublished.