

Review: Reading Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases* and *Difficult Love*

By Nadia Sanger

Zanele Muholi is very clear about the objectives of her work as a black lesbian South African visual activist. In the introduction to her 2010 book, *Faces and Phases*, she states:

In the face of all the challenges our community encounters daily, I embarked on a journey of visual activism to ensure that there is black queer visibility. It is important to mark, map and preserve our mo(ve)ments through visual histories for reference and posterity so that future generations will note that we were here (2010: 6).

Faces and Phases fulfills Muholi's objectives in many ways. It documents, through black and white portraiture covering 103 pages, the existence of black queer individuals. If this book is read/viewed as a project in documentation, it is in itself a powerful record of the existence of black queer individuals, mostly in South Africa, but also crossing national and international borders.

African feminist analyses have for decades stressed the importance of documenting the lived realities of those who live on the continent. Often, however, this historical record excludes the lives of those who are gender non-conforming. Muholi uses the term 'queer' to refer to these individuals, and her book, *Faces and Phases*, reflects how it is possible to record the lives of black queer individuals, most who live on the African continent, while simultaneously avoiding treating these individuals as 'subjects'.

In my view, the book *Faces and Phases* can be simultaneously read against Zanele Muholi and Peter Goldsmid's recent film, *Difficult Love*, which was recently shown at the 17th *Out in Africa Gay and Lesbian Film Festival* in South Africa. In the film, the viewer is provided a lens into Muholi's personal life that informs her work as a queer photographer. We are given the opportunity to see and hear her experiences as a lesbian woman who was reared in a black South African township, the importance of her relationship to her mother - who recently passed away - and the commitment to her work as a visual producer in the communities she has invested in through photography and sharing her skills. The film includes conversations with a number of people, all who make Zanele's work possible. Some people appear in *Faces and Phases*, others work in the area of gender and sexuality, and others are family and friends who continue to play a significant role in Zanele's always evolving coming-into-being.

Difficult Love and *Faces and Phases* do more than merely sketch Muholi's life, however, or document the existence of black queer people – it can be read as a practice in post-colonial feminist research methodology. In *Difficult Love*, the centering of Zanele's role as the viewer/ the gazer, disturbs the often invisible and 'objective' role of the producer of images. Through zoning in on Zanele - her words and experiences - we see how power is distorted. Her attempt to channel power to those who make her images possible, who tell their stories through her photography, visibilises black queer people, and turns on its head false ideas of the objective position of the photographer/filmmaker.

Zanele's focus on subverting power and disrupting norms around gender and sexuality is clear throughout the book and film. Principles of reflexivity, located-ness, being-in-the-world, the complex, but often ignored relationships between the 'viewer' and the 'viewed' are central to Zanele's work. The 'owning' of an image, and the 'owning' of a life, which Zanele refers to in the film, is clearly articulated in the black and white photographs in *Faces and Phases*. The portraits reveal that a life cannot be owned by anyone other than oneself. The expressions on the faces of the individuals in the photographs express pain, frustration, happiness, arrogance, sadness and joy. These photographs reveal diverse and complex human expressions that scream 'we are here to stay' in a social and political context that is unkind to gender and sexual non-normativity.

In the film, *Difficult Love*, notions of 'race' are dismantled, while the material ways in which 'class' works are highlighted. In the current South African context, 'race' still matters, and 'blackness' and poverty are often simplistically aligned in ways that might exclude those who continue to exist marginally in South Africa's townships. Through conversations with Petra Brink and Pra-line Hendricks - a couple living under a bridge in Cape Town, and rejected by the shelter because they are openly lesbian – *Difficult Love* explores how class and sexuality are linked, and how they work to ensure the marginalisation of non-conforming 'coloured' women. This is significant because it reveals the specific moments in current South Africa where the materiality of socio-economic realities and gender non-conformity intertwine. Petra and Pra-line's lives expose how sexual difference is mediated by class, and class mediated by sexual difference – their lives embody the feminist theoretical position that argues for intersections and context as significant in people's daily lives.

Similarly, the viewer's glimpse into Zanele's relationship with her partner, Liesl Theron, allows us to see the ways that racialisation, class, gender, sexuality, and slavery intersect. It is clear from this glimpse that the dissection of power relationships is central to Zanele's work – her 2008 *Massa and Mina(h)* project referred to in the film, is grounded in the life of her mother, Bester Muholi, who served as a domestic worker to a supportive 'white' family for forty-two years. Through this project, Muholi queers the master-slave relationship and reveals how power works in complex ways.

The voices of the men in the film, who express their views on homosexuality and violence against gender non-conforming people, are especially revealing. Millicent Gaika, who speaks about being raped by a man whom she knew in the community where she lived, forms the backdrop to the men's views in the film. Muholi and Goldsmid reveal the diverse and context-specific identity of townships through engaging the different views of the men who are part of these communities. While some men (and women) expressed homophobic sentiment rooted in religion and 'culture', others revealed their discomfort and condemnation of the violence against women in their communities based on their sexual orientation. In this instance, *Difficult Love* reveals the heterogeneous character of 'the township', and turns on its head the essentialism of 'black', 'township' masculinity as inherently violent, again disrupting gender and racial stereotypes and revealing the significance of context and specificity.

Through the views of those working in the area of gender and sexuality, such as Gail Smith, Wendy Isaack and Nomboniso Gasa, amongst others, the film is situated in a South African context that identifies the social and political trajectories giving rise to heterosexist violence against black lesbians. The multiple photographs taken by Zanele over the years are shown throughout the film, and these

provide a critique of the South African social context by revealing positive images of black lesbians that document black queer existence.

Both *Faces and Phases* and *Difficult Love* tell the stories of those who make these productions possible. They are deliberate attempts by Muholi at documenting black queer visibility that will lodge themselves in South Africa's history and archived for decades to come. It is my hope that, as feminist producers of knowledge in Africa, we will continue to build on what Muholi has created.