

**gender, race
and the
reinvention
of difference**

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Zanele Muholi, Photo by Alexandre Gouzou

As a site in the global imagination, Johannesburg is a space of possibility and openness, a mining town that is founded on the promise of riches and of newness – a possibility of remaking not just one’s economic fortunes but one’s very self into the condition of modernity. It continues to be such a city and such a place, every day attracting migrants of every type from other parts of the country, the continent and the world. As a site in South Africa, this city that is the beating economic and political heart of a new democracy contends every day with the problematics of making and remaking of nation.

In the city, certainties of identity and place, of social order and social position, are endlessly under question. New communities form that are outside of the structures of tradition and family, and outside of forms of authority such as traditional rulers and family patriarchs. These are communities that cohere around new identities and new forms of sociability and for whom difference is a productive force. Outside of the gaze of official politics the encounters between the residents of the city suggest that there may be ways of thinking about what it means to be a human being in a space of open-ended possibilities, where gender difference is not fixed as permanently male or female, and where the body marks social relations in ways that cannot be captured in the forms of politics and citizenship written into the Constitution.

The narrative of democracy in South Africa is centred on a modernist idea in which the pinnacle is the formal sphere of the state and the constitution. The presence of women in political institutions is celebrated

as a marker of integration into the nation: South Africa has one of the highest levels of elected women in its national parliament. To be a virtuous citizen in this version of democracy is to support the idea women have freedom in South Africa. It represents the triumph of a form of feminism that focuses primarily on access to places in institutional hierarchies. That is a thorough-going modernist demand on the part of the women’s movement, in that it frames a demand for recognition in the context of the liberal democratic public sphere. But positions in parliament are not costless gestures of inclusion. Frequently it becomes part of a process of turning the gaze away from the underlying structures of power in the relationships between citizens, and between citizens and the state. Or, at the very least, those questions are strategically suspended. For example, if positions in the state are granted on the basis of women’s collective exclusion, then it becomes strategic to retain that sense of women as a homogeneous social entity. Then to ask the questions: does the body conform to the binary political categories of male and female – am I that corporeal entity referred to as woman – or to ask what the forms of violence are that underpin the categorization of male and female is to pose a question that cannot be answered within the framework of the political system.

It is doubtless true that as a result of the inclusion of women in parliament the outward manifestations of the state – the personnel, institutions and policies – have been significantly stripped of their markers of gender difference. However, I argue that the presence of the sexualised body in the public sphere evokes a discussion of gender

that disrupts the narrative of a women-friendly political domain and reveals the deeply embedded forms of raced and gendered power.

We have to turn to the social to perceive these forms of power. In everyday interactions in a range of spaces, the boundaries of communities and the criteria for authentic citizenship are carefully policed, and it is women’s bodies that are the terrain for such regulation, in the idiom of preserving culture. The range of practices of regulation that have emerged are wide.

They include :

- reinvented ceremonies of virginity testing, in which young girls are tested to see if they are sexually ‘pure’ with the reward that they may dance before the Zulu king
- constrictions on the clothes that may be worn by women in some parts of the country, where women who wear trousers in public may be open to attack from other members of the community
- ‘corrective rape’ aimed at curing black lesbians of their supposedly un-African sexuality

All these practices remind us of the ways in which bodies, and particularly black women’s bodies, mark the boundaries of collective communities. It is in the spaces that are carved out by women and men to challenge boundary making that the most profound and threatening political gestures are made. Literary scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola argues that the most transgressive forms of feminism may indeed be found in the creative spaces in which black women exhibit levels of autonomy that are not

easily expressed elsewhere.

In this presentation I wish to discuss two moments of such encounters at the boundaries of public and private, both provoked by representations of bodies in the world of art, that challenge hegemonic norms. Both encounters invited responses that sought to foreclose the possibilities of dissent from the conception of virtuous citizenship. (One of the provocateurs was, indeed, an artist celebrated in the Sharp Sharp Johannesburg month, Zanele Muholi.)

In both cases, the narrative of South Africa as the epitome of a human rights oriented democracy, a country of freedom for all, was disrupted. The modern vision of postapartheid citizenship is one in which all are stripped of ethnic, racial or gender differences. In reality, however, difference and entitlement are configured in new ways around gender and race. The anxieties provoked by economic exclusion and social fragmentation have found expression in violent masculinities, in which weapons are extensions of maleness and women are no more than bodies to be possessed or wombs to bear children. At precisely the moment in which women are claiming rights and asserting their collective presence as moral and political agents, it would seem, they are being beaten back by the blatant assertion of masculinized power.

The two encounters in Johannesburg reflect two dimensions of the forms in which gender identities are corralled: first within the confines of heterosexuality and second within the confines of patriarchy. I suggest that in both encounters the artists concerned deploy a feminist gaze:

Indian scholar Nivedita Menon describes 'seeing like a feminist' in this way: 'to see like a feminist is not to stabilize, it is to destabilize.'

The first emblematic encounter took place in August 2009, at an exhibition entitled Innovative Women. The exhibition was financially supported by the government in honour of National Women's Day, an annual public holiday that commemorates the participation of women in the national liberation movement. The exhibition was to be opened by the Minister of Women, Youth and People with Disabilities, Lulu Xingwana. However, the Minister walked in, looked at the photographs briefly, and then walked out. What she saw was a series of images by photographer Zanele Muholi and artist Nandipha Mntambo. Muholi's photographs show nude and semi-nude lesbian couples in embrace, and are among her most tender images; in other exhibitions she has portrayed heteronormative violence in images that tend to shock – for example, showing the violence that accompanies sexual relationships.

Nandipha Mntambo's Rape of Europa is a deeply symbolic work in which she depicts herself in the Greek mythological twin roles of minotaur and maiden. Mntambo's work deals with 'the dynamic between fighting and protecting, public spectacle and private self' – and portrays strength and vulnerability simultaneously in narcissistic embrace.

Xingwana claimed to be offended because the images were pornographic, "immoral... and going against nation-building" (Van Wyk, 2010). The exhibition was doubtless

unsettling to those for whom the narrative of democracy is twinned with the celebration of the presence of women in government. To note the dissonances in democracy – the violence towards those who choose to live outside the given forms of gender, to suggest that women may have multiple identities, to present women as sexual agents, or who articulate intimacies that defy the pristine images of desexualised maternalist politics – is to disrupt the very core of the nation. In her defense Xingwana explained "I was particularly revolted by an image called 'Self-rape', [by Mntambo]. ... The notion of self-rape trivializes the scourge of rape in this country" (Van Wyk, 2010). She drew on the idea of protection of children from pornography to justify her response. "My reaction was guided by the view that these "artworks" were not suitable for a family audience... To my mind these were not works of arts [sic] but crude misrepresentations of women (both black and white) masquerading as artworks rather than engaged in questioning or interrogating... These particular works of art stereotyped black women... we have laws in this country that protect children against exposure to pornographic material" (Van Wyk, 2010).

Here is a clear statement of the ways in which discourses of equality can conceal the conservative foundations of nationalism and social cohesion. The task of women, as described by Xingwana, is to protect children from the immorality of nudity and intimacy: by extension, to stabilize the heterosexual patriarchal family which is considered to be the normal form of the black family (despite all sociological

evidence to the contrary). Indeed, for her the exhibition was particularly egregious because it represented black women outside of the normative framework of black community. She wishes to dissolve sexuality and sex and particularly the messy complications of sexual desire, violence and harm by reinstating the comforting narrative of the idea of 'good' black women.

In this framing by a prominent public defender of the idea of gender equality (for that is what she stands for as Minister in charge of Women's Affairs), the performance of gender in the public sphere – more specifically, the performance of the category woman – must stabilize both the hetero body form as well as the ideological meaning of female identity as primarily maternal. Xingwana's inability to grasp the ways in which the works of Muholi and Mntambo disrupt the certainties of fixed identities attached to heteronormative patriarchy reveals the limits of state-sponsored feminism that is detached from the complexities of power relations in society.

But not all bodies evoke the same levels of public interest. Xingwana's reaction to the portrayal of ordinary women's bodies sank without much of a trace in public debate. By contrast, the portrayal of the body of the president became a national cause celebre. In May 2012 an exhibition by Brett Murray, called *Hail to the Thief II* opened quietly in a gallery in the upscale art hub of Rosebank in Johannesburg. Within days, however, the calm and placid white-walled space of the Goodman Gallery became the centre of a political storm about art, culture and the right to dignity. A painting (called *the Spear*)

in the exhibition depicted ANC and South African president Jacob Zuma as a glorious, larger than life sized revolutionary, penis exposed.

Within the space of ten days, President Zuma sued the artist and the gallery and hundreds of ANC supporters took to the streets of the normally calm suburb. The Goodman Gallery owners reported receiving death threats, the head of the Shembe Church – the largest independent Christian church in South Africa - called for Brett Murray to be stoned to death and somehow in the furore two men slipped through the flaccid security at the Gallery to smear red and black paint over the *Spear*. On Tuesday, the ANC organized a march to the gallery, in which the various constituents of the ANC participated—the Women's League, dressed in uniform and selling food, the ANC's Umkhonto we Sizwe veterans goose-stepping in combats, members of the Shembe church in uniform. This carnivalesque outpouring of political anger was focused on the defense of the President's dignity, and by implication (often overtly) on the persistence of racism in South Africa.

Art and politics met in a heightened clash that embodied all the tensions of a country moving imperfectly towards an imagined state of democracy. For many commentators, what was at stake in this debate was nothing less than democracy itself. First, it raised whether or not the liberal political norms of the South African constitution were in danger of being eroded by a socially conservative populist movement. Second, it re-opened the question of citizenship: who belongs in

South Africa, who has the right to criticize, and who is an authentic citizen.

For some feminists it also raised a third question: the gendered nature of power, the implications of a masculinized politics for women's sense of citizenship, and more particularly how we might understand the implications of masculine forms of power for women as political subjects of postcolonial democracy in its South African form.

Murray's exhibition included works that depicted the ANC as 'for sale' and 'sold', drew attention to corruption and authoritarianism, and to the association between masculinity and political power. The *Spear* painting itself referenced a 1967 Soviet poster of Lenin as well as the language of the ANC, whose former military wing was called Umkhonto we Sizwe, or *Spear of the Nation*. In its portrayal of Zuma as potent phallic leader, the painting unmistakably alluded to the sexual life of the President, who was tried and cleared of rape in 2006, is polygynously married to four women, has fathered approximately nineteen children, of whom at least two were conceived out of polygynous wedlock.

Unambiguously, then, Murray's use of the continuities between masculine virility and political power played on the familiar and general critique of politics as male, and the specifically hetero-patriarchal mode in which Zuma/ presidential power appears as a figure in South African politics.

The connections are made in very obvious fashion. The painting linked sexual potency very directly with political power, and

in doing so it linked intimacy with the performances of masculinity in the public sphere. The painting, and indeed the whole exhibition of which it was a part, parodied the pretensions of power. In the otherwise clothed image of Zuma, it is the penis that dominates; in the grotesque scale of the painting, it is the overweening ego of the male politician that invites the viewer into mockery. The artist draws the viewer into the familiar space of noting that the emperor is indeed naked.

In creating this work, then, Murray was commenting very explicitly on the figure of Zuma as the embodiment of the collapsed story of a democratic teleology, the president as the personification of dream turned nightmare. And part of that collapse – the tragic flaw in Zuma’s presidency, as it were – is the extent to which his sexual relationships have continually surfaced in public debate.

The reaction to the painting was varied, from commentary on what was entailed in satirical art, complaints about its supposed pornographic qualities, the long tradition of male nudity in the history of art, and nudity in the public sphere in general, cast in a spectrum of possibilities of analysis of democracy’s demands. On the one end of the spectrum lay explanations for or against the exhibition based on the tension between modern and traditional notions of respect of authority and seniority in politics. For these critics, who sought to have the painting banned from public view, the artist epitomized white racism and the denigration of the black male body. They focused on dignity as the core value in South African democracy.

On the other hand, many intellectuals emphasized the right of citizens to criticize those in power. Disrespect, whether as a form of critique of the powerful or dissidence from conventional norms, thus features as a crucial element in a robust public sphere.

However a straightforward liberal stance that focuses only on the right to freedom of expression does not take us into the heart of why the painting evoked such an emotional debate, and why that debate was so far-reaching in its impact on South Africans who are not part of an elite circle of visitors to art galleries.

It is clear that surfacing deep seated anxieties about the postapartheid social order exposed the extent to which the racialised past remained deeply imprinted in the present.

But how would those anxieties be dealt with in the public sphere? To some extent, reading the works of Mntambo, Muholi and Murray as demeaning the black body constructs the debate at a level that was beyond politics. By this I mean that it made sensible deliberation more difficult in the face of the categorical imperatives of racial and party loyalty. It does this in three ways. First, the substitution of the phallus with blackness invisibilised the debates on violent masculinities in politics which are evident in the gendered dimensions of Murray’s (rather obvious) critique. Second, the reappearance of colonial racial harm in analyses of *The Spear* played into a notion of the president as embodiment of the ANC and ANC as embodiment of nation. To elaborate, for some ANC members, it represented a familiar trope in nationalist

discourse that associates a particular political party with the general interests of ‘the people’.

Third, Mntambo and Muholi’s representations of female bodies outside of the framework of heteronormative, maternalist identities evoked a response of deep insult to the conventions of South African nationalism. In the case of Muholi and Mntambo, the naked bodies of black women were in themselves ‘crude and pornographic’ with the implication that they violated the codes of privacy. The effect of government and ruling party responses was to place these artists outside of the community.

Indeed, in the ANC’s stance, to be a critic – whether as a white artist or a black feminist artist – was to position one’s self outside of the nation. The consequence of critique is clear: it is to be an outcast to nation. In these debates about works of art, race was mobilized in a way that separated racial identities from those of gender. Achille Mbembe, one of the most astute interlocutors of Fanon’s work, points to the linkages between race, patriarchy and privilege. He suggests that what is at play in the political carnival relating to the *Spear* is a crisis of patriarchy. “Many young men, especially among the poor, can no longer enjoy the privileges of patriarchy. There is more than ever before an unequal redistribution of the dividends of manhood. Struggles over access to women are dramatised by high levels of rape and various forms of sexual violation. In this context, President Jacob Zuma represents, in the eyes of many young men, the symbol of a “big man” involved in an unfair capitalisation and monopolisation of those resources necessary for patriarchy to keep

reproducing itself.”

Mbembe is acutely aware here of how central the projection of virility and entitlement to the bodies of women works as the marker for power in contemporary South Africa. In his reading, women’s bodies become the terrain of a patriarchal battle between young men and political patriarchs. We could extend this argument to show how dependent the patriarchal paradigm is on the idea that women’s bodies are vessels for reproduction, to be hidden from public view and to display no signs of sexual agency and autonomy. As Anne McClintock has argued, in this paradigm women’s agency is a designated agency – an agency by invitation only.’ And what is invited is participation via mechanisms such as quotas in the formal liberal public sphere, not participation as destabilizing critique.

Through these forms of closure, involving the reinstatement of the primary binary distinctions between black and white, male and female, ‘the nation-state will remain the repository of male hopes, male aspirations, and male privilege.’

An alternative reading of the works of Muholi and Mntambo in particular would reveal the ways in which black women have negotiated the boundaries of racial and patriarchal power, whether through resistance or accommodation or some combination of strategies. It would show that there is no unified black identity, however successful this was in sustaining the anti-apartheid movements, but rather ‘a realistic engagement with heterogeneity’ (Gqola, 2010: 34).

In Murray’s work, the brute representation

of the president forces a reading of political power as phallic and overpowering. Women are outside the view of the painting, as they are outside the view of many of the commentators in the debates discussed above. But artists such as Murray, Muholi and Mntambo are the grinding stones for new debates on embodied subjectivities. Their images fracture the triumphalist narratives of South African democracy, and disrupt the neat solidarities of race or class. Race, gender and sexuality are interconnected in shaping subjectivities, and Spear and the artworks in the Innovative Women exhibition lead us to think about the complicated nature of power. They provoke discussion of what can be said, how and by whom. Importantly, that invites a consideration – specifically – of which women can speak, what they can say, and when.