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Reflections on the Postcolonial and Postfeminist in the Work of Two South African Photographers: Jodi Bieber and Zanele Muholi.

By

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously, in its entirety or in part, submitted it to any other university for a degree. All quotes are indicated and acknowledged by means of a comprehensive list of references.

MAXINE GABRIELLE THOMIK

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the extent to which discourses of postfeminism and postcolonialism inform the reception of selected portrait photographs by Jodi Bieber and Zanele Muholi. The dissertation is interested in how cross-cultural and transnational formations complicate first world feminist notions of a singular, generalised identity of 'woman'. I intend to explore whether theories of postcolonialism and postfeminism allow for more dynamic readings of their work, as well as how this is represented in the way they portray women. The dissertation will address the relevance of postcolonialism and postfeminism in photography and what this theory offers in terms of the way the images are read. In particular, it will address how the works of these two artists represent identities of women living outside of the West, and how this expression of identity can be positioned within postcolonial and postfeminist theory.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the extent to which discourses of postfeminism and postcolonialism inform the production of selected portrait photographs by Jodi Bieber and Zanele Muholi. The dissertation explores how cross-cultural and transnational formations counteract first-world feminist notions of a singular, generalised identity of 'woman'. I particularly look at female photographic portraiture and the way women working under postfeminist and postcolonial terms represent women. Through a critical analysis of the work of two South African photographers, I investigate how these artists relate to postcolonialism and postfeminism, as well as the extent to which their modes of representation translate into these particular discourses. Representation can be understood as a way of interpreting the problems faced within feminist theory[1] as the photographic image comes to stand as a symbol of the ideologies of a culture, at a particular time.

Representation in art has become a way of reflecting on the way women have been constructed in visual culture and the way women represent themselves; it is also a way of using representation to critique, and often parody, the manipulative ability the photographic image can have on what we perceive to be a simple notion of representation. The image of the female body has become an object onto which the ideals and desires of a particular culture can be mapped, leading to a vast amount of debate surrounding the way women negotiate their own representation with that of constructed oppressive and restrictive systems of representation. In carrying out this research, I critically analyse the works of two South African portrait photographers who deal with the representation of women. I have chosen two photographers from diverse backgrounds to avoid a singular homogeneous grouping of artistic and cultural backgrounds. The analysis of these artists is an iconographic one, specifically looking at how or whether the images they portray of women express postcolonial and postfeminist discourse.

I critically analyse Jodi Bieber's series entitled *Real Beauty* (2007) (a few examples of this series can be seen in Figures 1.1 – 1.4). *Real Beauty* is particularly important

[1] This refers to the issues of singular, generalized identities that first-world feminism tended to create when addressing women from outside the 'west'. This will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

to this research as the series depicts women pictured in their own environments in poses that they have set up themselves. I have chosen this series as the work appears to reflect the multitude of identities that women are capable of moulding for themselves, therefore lending to a broad and eclectic representation of women. Secondly, I analyse selected works from Zanele Muholi's *Being* series (2007) (examples of this series can be seen in Figures 1.5 – 1.8). Muholi's work addresses not only issues of race, but how issues of race fit into ideas of gender and sexuality. I address how notions of race can be interwoven with concepts of gender, and how this issue reflects both a postfeminist and postcolonial discourse.

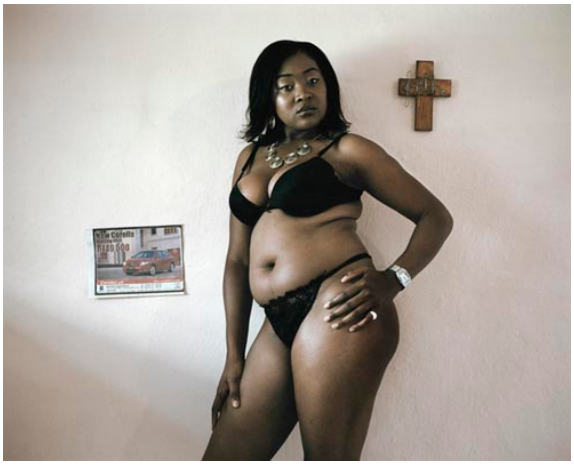

Figure1.1
Jodi Bieber
Brenda
From the series *Real Beauty*
2007



Figure 1.2
Jodi Bieber
Dianne
From the series *Real Beauty*
2007



Figure1.3
Jodi Bieber
Claire
From the series *Real Beauty*
2007



Figure 1.4
Jodi Bieber
Lucille
From the series *Real Beauty*
2007



Figure1.5
Zanele Muholi
Zinzi and Tozama III, Mowbray
From the series *Being*
2010



Figure1.6
Zanele Muholi
Zinzi and Tozama II, Mowbray
From the series *Being*
2010

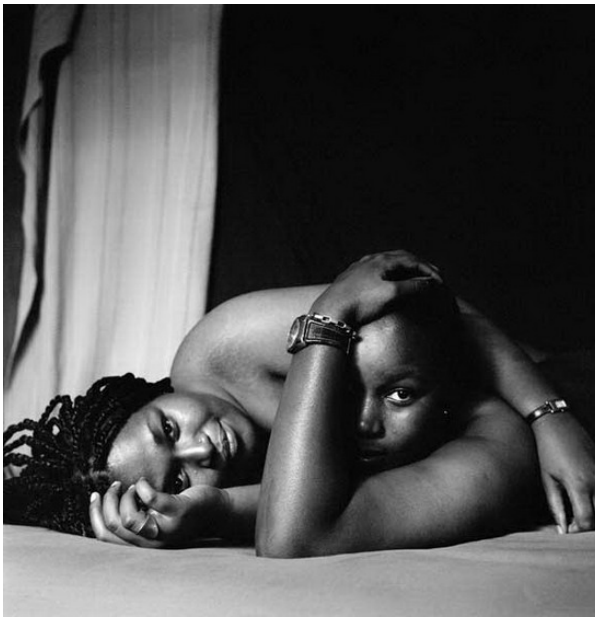

Figure1.7
Zanele Muholi
Apinda Mpako and Ayanda Magudulela, Parktown From the series *Being*
2007



Figure1.8
Zanele Muholi
Tshidi Legobye and Pam Limekhaya Meadowlands, Soweto, Johannesburg
From the series *Being*
2006

Chapter one will address the key conceptual and theoretical concepts relevant to the outlined intention of this dissertation. I will begin by introducing First wave femnism and the art from that period. I will then look at Second wave feminism and the counter-discourses to this wave. This will include an interrogation of artistic practices with regards to women, and the issues surrounding women's artistic practices. I will then look at postfeminism as a possible counter-discourse to second wave feminism,

leading onto an interrogation of two western art exhibitions that attempted to portray women's art in a global and inclusive way. Within this I will look at the concept of postcolonialism and its presence or absence in the exhibitions addressed; proceeding onto an analysis of postcolonial discourse and its critique on essentialism. This leads on to a consideration of postcolonialism and postfeminism as possible counter-discourses to second wave feminism and the issues that arise in exhibitions involving second wave considerations. Lastly, I will address photography and its role as a form of social and political discourse, following onto a discussion around the concept of beauty in popular culture and photography. I will finish off by considering the issue of subject in relation to how I address the women in the images that I will be analysing.

My intitial interest for this study was South African women photographers. I had previously written various papers on postfeminism and postcolonialism in art, but found that very little research had been dedicated to these theories with regard to South African women artists. Furthermore, I realised that many academic texts did not explain postcolonial and postfeminist discourse in a practical manner. These texts did not consider how artistic practice could reflect these ideas. I started looking at postfeminism, and relaised that it aligned and intersected with both postcolonialism and feminism in a complex manner. This sparked an interest in considering how these intersectional theories could influence the way we read images.

CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

Introduction: First Wave Feminism and Art

According to Diane Neumaier in *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies* (1995), with the advent of feminist discourse and the feminist revolution in the 1970s (also known as second wave feminism which I address below), the work of women artists flourished, and stirred up many debates surrounding women's artistic practices (1995: 1). Women artists and critics began to question women's place in art, particularly addressing how women had been predominantly ignored within the historical canon of art histories. Women artists began to create work that questioned their presence in art practice, and which questioned the way women had previously been represented in art. In doing so, women artists focused predominantly on the female body and how it had been represented, which led to a new understanding of the ways in which women artists could break previous patriarchal constructs of the female body. This resulted in a more realistic and female-centred understanding of women's bodies when represented in art.

A number of theorists and writers such as Neumaier have argued that second wave feminism opened up more democratic avenues for women in art. In this way, women have become integrated into museum and artistic practices within society. However, many counter-discourses by theorists such as Charlotte Krolokke and Anne Scott Sorensen (2005) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) have emerged, which suggest that feminist theory in both politics and art still includes exclusionary practices. This particularly applies to women living outside of Europe and the United States. However, in order to understand these debates fully, we first need to understand the three areas of feminism. The feminist movement has been characterised as consisting of three waves.

According to Krolokke and Sorensen (2005: 2) in their book *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses: From Silence to Performance,* the first wave of feminism took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emerging in the context of urban

industrialism and liberal politics. First wave feminism was predominantly concerned with access and equal opportunities for women, particularly emphasising women's suffrage through demonstrations and rallies (2005: 3). The first wave was relatively quiet within the visual arts in comparison to the second-wave[2] as it was more concerned with women's suffrage and political bills.

Second Wave Feminism and Counter-Discourses

Second wave feminism made its way into not only politics, but also into art practice and discourse. The term second wave feminism refers to the radical feminism of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Second wave feminism includes a number of different categories to clarify the different branches of thought that exist in second wave feminism. According to Krolokke and Sorensen (2005: 2) there are over fifteen different branches of feminism. Most theorists, such as Kathleen Weiler and Holland Cotter, explain that there was no feminism, but rather 'feminisms' (Weiler, 2001: 67). However, the most predominant and well-known branches are radical feminism, socialist/Marxist feminism, and liberal feminism.

All three branches were concerned with equal rights and pay for women. However, Krolokke and Sorensen explain that radical feminism and socialist/Marxist feminism tended to be more radical and leftist in their politics, drawing particular emphasis on rallying and women's collectivity in the 'fight' against gender disempowerment (Krolokke and Sorenson, 2005: 3). Furthermore, while both liberal and socialist/Marxist feminists worked to access and influence the institutions of society, radical feminists were critical of these institutions and sceptical of, if not outright opposed to, the inclusion of more women in what they considered profit-driven, patriarchal institutions (Krolokke and Sorenson, 2005: 3).

According to Sarah Gamble (2001: 21), the most common and predominant of these branches remains liberal feminism, and its ideologies have come to be generally

[2] There were artists who dealt with feminist themes, such as Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois. However, these artists were posthumously identified as proto-feminist, meaning that they laid the groundwork for feminist art.

understood as the defining discourse of second wave feminism (2001: 21). Typical liberal feminist concerns during the second wave focused on documenting sexism in private and public life, and delivering a criticism of gendered patterns of socialisation. Second wave feminism extended beyond the political sphere, and filtered into social life, as well as into the arts. Artistic discourses began to question the master narratives of art history, particularly looking at why so few women artists were represented in museums and galleries. Artistic organisations, such as the Guerilla Girls, demonstrated outside of museums and held rallies where they questioned the male-dominated practices and discourses in art.

Many second wave feminists such as Linda Nochlin and Kathleen Weiler theorise that society was constructed according to patriarchal social systems, creating binaries that favoured men over women in various areas of society. The awareness of this unequal system made many women artists question artistic practices. They began to challenge conventions of art in their work often through interrogating the way in which women were previously represented in art. One of the defining moments in terms of the influence of feminist politics on art was the publication of Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* In the essay*,* Nochlin explained that there have been no great women artists because of a hierarchical social structure, built on privileged distinctions of gender, class and race that gave men, and only certain men, the time, education and material resources required to make great art, to become geniuses (Nochlin, 1971: 3).This essay was integral to and exemplifies the way in which women artists began to question their own practices and their place amongst art histories within a second wave feminist context. The art of this movement was generally concerned with the representation of women's bodies, as well as the portrayal of women's identities not only in art, but in society as a whole. Art of this period characteristically reflected on the way women have been constructed in visual culture and the way women represented themselves; this art allowed for a way of using representation to critique and often parody the manipulative ability visual culture can have on what we perceive to be a simple notion of representation. The use of photography to represent oneself became a particularly predominant tool in which women could turn the gaze back to women, therefore implementing agency in the way women are represented in art.

At the same time that second wave liberal feminism was becoming a well-known movement, difference feminism was gradually growing into what is often now referred to as 'identity politics'. Difference feminism grew from a discontent with mainstream second wave feminism which many theorists believed to be a one-sided exclusionary discourse that overlooked the diversity of women's identities. Whilst second wave feminism addressed the inequalities between men and women, a counter-discourse was developed in the early 1980s by theorists such as Bell Hooks and Trinh T. Minh-ha which criticised second wave feminism for overlooking women's identities and experiences outside of the United States and Europe, or what is commonly understood as the 'West'. Identity second wave feminism was marked by a growing criticism from black, working-class, and lesbian feminists, outlined by, among others, Bell Hooks in Ain't *I A Woman? Black Woman and Feminism* (1981), and Trinh T. Minh-ha in *Woman, Natives, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989). In the context of the complex power relations of the postcolonial but still imperial and capitalist world, they questioned what they saw as a predominantly white, middle-class, and heterosexual feminist agenda and raised the issue of a differentiated-identity politics, based on the contingent and diversified intersections of gender, class, race/ethnicity, and sexuality (Krolokke & Sorenson, 2005: 13). This area of feminism could be seen as a predecessor to postfeminist discourse which highlights difference amongst women as a key consideration in postfeminist theory.

Postfeminism as a Counter Discourse

According to Coppock (1995: 3), postfeminism emerged as a result of initiatives in government and industry, that sought to create equality in the work environment, promoting the 1990s as the decade of gender equality. Comment in the media, politics and in industry became scattered with references to the 1990s as an enlightened and postfeminist period (Coppock, 1995:3).

According to Pilcher and Whelehan (2004: 105), postfeminism, in its most fully realised definition has come to mean two things. At its most straightforward, Pilcher and Whelehan define postfeminism as going beyond, or superseding feminism

(expressed through the prefix of ‘post’); it is therefore understood as a term that claims that feminism has achieved its key aims, and that there is full equality for all women. Secondly, it means a blurring of the boundaries between traditional divisions of gender. This becomes a problematic definition as it still assumes sameness in terms of equality, producing a generalised statement that all women globally have achieved equality.

According to Sarah Gamble in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (2001: 21) a more fitting idea of postfeminism with regard to cross-cultural approaches is the idea that the postfeminist position was a result of dissatisfaction with existing feminist politics by disillusioned theorists. It can be understood as a position contesting the idea that feminism spoke to the majority of women. In this respect, postfeminism is understood as a dismantling of the sameness of experience that feminism produced and, so, postfeminism becomes a counter-discourse to first-world feminism that overlooks the cross-cultural aspects of women’s experiences and identities. It is this second perspective from which I speak about postfeminism, as it encompasses a cross-cultural perspective that counteracts the hermetically sealed divisions of women’s identities expressed in Maura Reilly’s contestations of what she calls first-world feminism in her essay *Toward Transnational Feminisms* (2007: 14).

Within South Africa, there is a lack in definitive theories and studies on postfeminism. postfeminism is a relatively new concept in South Africa, as well as the fact that it is a political stance that many people argue has not yet begun in South Africa (because feminism is still a pressing issue in South Africa).

According to Hassim, opposition politics in South Africa in the 1980s was dominated by organisations that worked to mobilise women for the national liberation struggle, as opposed to women’s liberation (Hassim, 1991, 65). Hassim argues that this mobilisation process reinforced patriarchal relations of domination. However, it did allow for an entry for women into politics during the transitional period, creating a space for a feminist movement to emerge that would challenge the existing forms of women’s organisations that had formed during the liberation struggle (Hassim, 1991: 66).

Manicom (1999: 30) reiterates similar ideas, explaining that 'feminist politics' had, during the anti-apartheid struggle, largely been subsumed or marginalised by the over-arching project of national liberation. Manicom further argues that the term and idea of Feminism had not been widely used at the time within the liberation movement because of the perception that it was largely white, western, and middle class. During South Africa's transition into a democratic society, debates shifted from whether feminism had any relevance to South African women's struggles, to what the shape of an indigenous feminism might be. Manicom (1999: 31) explains that the democratic transition opened up rhetorical space for a consideration of women's liberation and feminism within a South African context.

What is important to note is that these considerations with regard to a South African feminism occurred during the transitional period of the early 1990s, and continued for more than a decade after its original considerations. Western feminism by this stage had essentially come to its end, with postfeminism considerations now becoming more predominant in gender studies and theories (Manicom, 1999: 30). It is therefore important to understand that a postfeminism in South Africa is a concept that many women argue is not existent in South Africa, as we are still in the process of defining and constructing a South African feminism.

With the prospect of a democratic, non-racial, and non-sexist South Africa, women activists perceived and seized the moment as an opportunity for asserting their claims and concerns within the procedures of formal democracy, demanding representation in negotiating forums and advocating for the inclusion of the principle of gender equality as a fundamental right in the constitution (Manicom, 1999: 30). In April 1992, The Women's National Coalition, a broad-spectrum coalition of seventy women's organisations, convened, gathering the views, demands, needs, and mandates of women all over the country in order to produce the Women's Charter for Effective Equality in 1994 (Manicom, 1999: 30).

According to Manicom (1999: 36), studies around South African women and gender issues internationally were predominantly narrow constructions of gender and women's issues. Manicom explains that many theorists constructed constrained representations of South African women that were uncontradictory, and often

considered unproblematic, with many theorists representing women from South Africa (and particularly women living under apartheid) as downtrodden and pitiable victims (1999: 36). Furthermore, Manicom explains that analysis of 'women under apartheid' was structured as an arithmetic and pyramidal model of triple oppression, where women's oppression was attributed to the system of racial supremacy rather than masculine dominance. The contrasting view of this was a triumphant approach in which women in South Africa were represented as undifferentiated and triumphant. This was a view which was appropriate for public consumption at a time when, Manicom explains, women's participation and gender issues were being overlooked and undervalued both within the South African democratic movement and among its overseas supporters. Manicom argues that this victor to victim approach neither challenged nor displaced the dichotomisation of these one-dimensional and eroticised images. Manicom explains, *"*It worked merely to reproduce the 'othering' of women 'over there' in the South African townships and rural reserves" (1999: 36).

Both Manicom (1999: 36) and Hassim (1991: 65) believe that the major problem with these approaches to analysis was the exclusionary and undifferentiated manner in which the subject was approached. Manicom and Hassim argue that we need to consider the contradictions and hybridism of South African women's identities within society. In this regard, Manicom suggests a model similar to postcolonial theory - one which considers voices of the sub-altern, the other, along with the multiplicity of experience that occurs in countries like South Africa. Postfeminsim then becomes a more likely idea than feminism when considering South African women's experiences along lines of cross-cultural multiplicity.

However, to say that South Africa is feminist or postfeminist is too simple. Due to the complexity of apartheid liberation struggles that led to the overlooking of women's equality issues, and the complexity of the transition of the early 1990s, we cannot consider South Africa gender politics as a hermetically sealed entity. Gender politics and feminism in South Africa manifested much later than western feminism due to emphasis on the importance of liberation struggles. Even though feminist politics has been extensively considered and theorised upon over the last two decades, there are still large gaps in the equality of gender in South Africa. We can therefore argue that

feminism has not yet fully developed and manifested in South African society; it has not come to any conclusion, and is still in the process of being fully realised.

This is not to say that postfeminism and considerations pertaining to postfeminism have not yet begun to manifest in South African society. I would argue that South Africa is simultaneously in a state of feminism and postfeminism, where gender equality is still a key issue amongst South African women scholars and activists, yet their approach to feminism is often mobilised through postfeminist considerations. Issues of equality are often approached through considering the legacy of apartheid, paying particular attention to the pluralistic and diverse nature of women's experiences in South Africa. This then speaks back to the postcolonial considerations that also consider the plurality of experience. Here we see that the relationship between feminism, postfeminism and postcolonialism become interelated rather than singular entities of thought. It is in this that we see the complexity of gender politics in South Africa, something which might seem rather academic, but comes to fruition in the way women artists and photographers represent women in South Africa.

The problem within postfeminist discourse is that whereas second wave feminism did have an impact on women artists, exhibitions and art histories seem to deal exclusively with women artists from the 'west'. This can be seen in a number of recent exhibitions such as *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* and *Global Feminisms* in the west. Despite counter-discourses by Reilly (2007) and Gamble (2001) that have questioned the narrow perspective of second wave discourses, contemporary exhibitions still appear to show exclusionary practices when addressing women artists that work outside of the west, which I will address in the following paragraphs.

Western Feminist Art Exhibitions: A Critical Look at 'Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution' and 'Global Feminisms'

Over the last decade there has been a renewed interest in women's art and the way in which the female body is used in visual culture. Women artists have become far

more integrated into museums and artistic institutions and practices. The lasting effects of second wave feminism are often addressed, particularly while theorists try to define what constitutes contemporary feminism and how feminism has developed from its initial agendas. Within the arts, women-only exhibitions have increased steadily since the early inception of second wave feminism and have recently become, once again, a key point of interest in international exhibitions.

Two particularly notable exhibitions were held in 2007. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles presented an exhibition entitled *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*. The exhibition featured the work of over 120 women artists and sought to present the first comprehensive and historical exhibition that would examine the history of feminist art made between 1965 and 1980, addressing the particular issues that were predominant in women's artistic practices during second wave feminism. The exhibition emphasised the inclusion of work from outside of Europe and the United States, seeking to bring together a cross-cultural perspective on women's art production. In a similar move towards addressing the impact of the feminist revolution on the work of women artists, the Brooklyn Museum presented the exhibition *Global Feminisms* in the same year. The exhibition featured approximately eighty women artists from around the world, exclusively focusing on feminist art from 1990 to the present.

Both exhibitions featured work in a broad range of media including painting, sculpture, photography, film, video, and performance art, showcasing the variety of modes in which women artists work. Both exhibitions featured a large number of portrait photography from around the globe, such as work by Yurie Nagashima, Lisa Reihana and Catherine Opie in *Global Feminisms,* and work by Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wilke and Francesca Woodman in *Wack!* However, *Wack!* featured a predominant number of established, western women artists and did not include any South African artists or photographers, while *Global Feminisms* included only two South African artists - Berni Searle and Tracey Rose - who work specifically with performance and video art. The discourse on these two artists in *Global Feminisms* touches on the fact that both Rose and Searle use the body as a form of political expression within their work, but excludes any considerations on the representation

of women in portraiture (Fall, 2007: 72), or their position within postcolonialism and postfeminism.

The *Wack!* exhibition, in addressing work between 1965 and 1980, inevitably presented a retrospective of second wave feminist art production,[3] and therefore lacks insight into contemporary women's art. According to Holland Cotter (2007), *Wack!* was a historical exhibition as it failed to show contemporary work, or any work after 1980. It is unclear why the decision was made to stop at 1980, when second wave feminism has been understood as lasting through the late 1990s (Gamble, 2001: 25).

Furthermore, in his review of the *Wack!* exhibition for the *New York Times* (2008), Alex Hetherington comments on how the exhibition failed to address in detail what contexts, and political and social realities informed and propelled women's art practices; rather, it featured a show of 'blockbuster' works (Hetherington, 2008). Cotter confirms this opinion by stating:

> *" The presence of figures like Eleanor Antin, Louise Bourgeois, Mary Beth Edelson, Eva Hesse, Mary Kelly, Adrian Piper, Miriam Schapiro, Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke adds up to a pantheon of textbook heroes — a market-ready canon of exactly the kind early feminism tried to disrupt."* (Cotter, 2007)

Both Cotter and Hetherington do suggest that, despite its downfalls, the exhibition does indicate that feminist artistic practice was an important movement and is still relevant in our museums and galleries. However, despite its inclusion of artists from outside of the United States, and its brief essay on mapping a global feminism, the exhibition failed to feature work from Africa, and most reviews fail to address this absence. The catalogue for the exhibition featured many debates surrounding women's art production, addressing the relationship between American and European feminism, feminism and New York abstraction, women's art under the

[3] Second wave feminism refers to a period of feminist activity in the United States and Britain which began during the early 1960's and lasted through to the mid 1990's. The tactics employed by second wave feminists varied from highly-published activism to the establishment of small consciousness-raising groups within society and the art world (Gamble, 2001: 21). Feminist art can be understood as art that was produced during the height of the second wave feminist revolution beginning in the early 1960s and continuing into the mid 1990s.

Pinochet dictatorship, and mapping a global feminism. What the exhibition overlooked was work of women artists from Africa. *Wack!* was therefore less inclusive in representing women from across the globe.
Global Feminisms, however, attempted to be more inclusive, featuring more contemporary women's art from around the world, and a catalogue essay that spoke specifically about women's art in Africa. *Global Feminisms* addressed women's art production from 1990 until the exhibition's opening in 2007, giving a more contemporary perspective on women's art production, as well as exploring how women produce art since the height of second wave feminism.

According to Reilly (2007: 15), the exhibition payed homage to feminist art from the 1970s, but also expands upon it by looking at contemporary work produced by artists for whom the heritage of feminism has long been part of the cultural fabric (2007: 15). In addressing women's art from a global perspective beyond the borders of Europe and the United States, the exhibition can be understood as a counter-discourse to western feminism that challenges what Reilly (2007:15) believes to be an exclusionary discourse of contemporary art which continues to assume that the west is the centre, and relegates all else to the periphery.

A vast amount of identity feminist, as well as postcolonial, discourse has been dedicated to exploring the problems of western feminism, particularly with regard to its views on women living and working outside of the west. Chandra Mohanty, explains in her journal essay, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1988: 64), that a major problem with western feminism lies in the assumption of women as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location. This implies a notion of gender or sexual difference which can be applied universally and cross-culturally, and leads to a homogenous notion of the oppression of women. This, in turn, creates an image of an average 'third world woman' (Mohanty, 1988:64).

Such a generalised assumption portrays women of the third world as being ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, and victimised. This assumption becomes defined as a form of essentialism. Essentialism

is the view that for any specific entity (such as an animal, a group of people, or a physical object), there is a set of attributes which are necessary to its identity and function (Cartwright, 1968: 615). Recontextualised within feminism, Alison Stone's essay *Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy* (2004: 4) explains that essentialism is the view that there are properties essential to women, and that any woman must necessarily have those properties to be a woman at all. Stone expands that essentialism can either be naturally or socially constructed (Stone, 2004: 5). Essentialism occurs within ideologies around western women as well. Western women are essentialised as being educated, modern, having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and having agency in their lives (Mohanty, 1988: 65). Therefore, women become characterised as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression, and this consensual homogeneity is then mistaken as a historically specific material reality for groups of women. In characterising third world women under a homogenised notion of oppression, women of the third world become objectified; they become objects of exploitation, powerlessness, and victimisation. Susan Moller Okin holds similar views in her essay *Gender Inequality and Cultural Differences* (2006) explaining that women from countries considered to be poor are generally considered to be poor, helpless victims (2006: 168).

The overarching goal of both *Wack!* and *Global Feminisms* appears to be to dismantle restrictive dichotomies of race, gender and class, and thereby to show the interconnectedness and diversity of women's experiences. Both exhibitions, however, fail to realise these aims fully. One could argue that the weakness of these exhibitions is the exclusion of postcolonial discourse which addresses these very issues of diversity and counteractive processes. Although *Global Feminisms* addresses diversity and globalism in women's art practice, it does not address the concept of postcolonialism within these spheres.

In her review of *Global Feminisms* for artnet.com (2008), Michele C.Cone gives an important perspective on the exhibition. Cone explains that the exhibition includes a global perspective and features artists from across the globe, and creates a homogenous exhibition through attempting to dismantle restrictive binaries. Furthermore, Cone believes that the choice to exhibit works according to themes results in the failure to create a comprehensive global idea on feminism that includes

both differences and similarities. She explains that significant similarities across cultures in the themes become easier to read than localised differences, and therefore the exhibition reiterates homogeneity rather than diversity. This could have perhaps been avoided if the curators considered postcolonial discourses with regard to women's art production.

Previous exhibitions, such as *Women Artists: 1550-1950* organised in 1976 by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, focused primarily on the western historical canon of women's art production, privileging Europe and the west over the rest of the world. This places feminism under a western, first-world sameness that assumes sameness amongst women (Reilly, 2007: 15). This perspective, as Reilly puts it, structures women's experiences of race, class and gender as isolated entities that are not permeably interwoven. In this respect, *Global Feminisms* relates to the ambitions of postcolonial artistic discourse to create a counter-discourse. This counter-discourse seeks to dismantle dichotomies in terms of race and identity, with regard to national location and identity (Shohat, 1992: 103), by addressing women's art practices in Africa. However, it does not explicitly cover the concept of postcolonialism.

Postcolonialism and its Critique on Essentialism:

Postcolonial theory should be seen as integral to understanding women's artistic practices outside of the west as it works in the same manner as postfeminism: both emphasise difference and personal experience over homogenous notions of identity and experience.

The idea of difference amongst women on which postfeminism predicates itself resembles many of the ideas related to postcolonial discourse. According to Mbembe (1992: 3), the notion of the post-colony refers to societies which have recently emerged from the experience of colonisation and the violence which the colonial relationship between coloniser and colonised involves. Mbembe explains that the post-colony is a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating representations or re-forming stereotypes (1992: 3). In Africa in particular, Kwame

Anthony Appiah explains that post-coloniality is a condition that creates a myth of Africa. It is made up of a relatively small, western-style, western-trained group of writers and thinkers who mediate the way Africa is presented to the world by presenting an invented notion of Africa, which includes binary concepts of 'us' and 'them'. This creates postcolonial relations of power, with the west holding power in the way Africa is represented (Appiah, 1992: 149). Mbembe explains that conflict arises in post-coloniality because the post-colony is chaotically pluralistic and it is therefore impossible to create a single, permanently stable system out of all the signs, images and markers current in the post-colony, particularly in creating simple binary relations within post-coloniality (1992: 8). Mbembe explains that this is one of the characteristics of postcolonialism and its discourse which constantly reshapes and critically questions post-coloniality in an attempt to rewrite the mythologies of power (1992: 8).[4]

Ella Shohat's *Notes on the PostColonial* (1992) offers a similar understanding of postcolonial discourse, particularly addressing the politics of location within the post-colony. Shohat interrogates the problems that arise out of post-coloniality's distinction of the three worlds, explaining that the notion of a third world, which is often attached to post-colonial countries, flattens heterogeneities and elides differences (1992: 101). Post-coloniality downplays the multiplicities of location and identity and, therefore, a discourse commonly understood as postcolonial discourse has arisen which addresses the multitudinous experiences and decentred multiplicities that occur within postcolonialism (1992: 108).

The term third world arose during the Cold War to define countries that remained non-aligned with either NATO or the Communist Bloc, and continued to be used through the last half of the Twentieth century in a slightly different way (Tomlinson, 2003: 307). According to B.R. Tomlinson, in his article *What was the Third World?*, the division of the nations into categories of First, Second, and Third worlds was based on social, economic, and political divisions, and predominantly used in the second half of the 20th century (2003: 318). The Third World normally included many countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, that had a colonial past. It also included

[4] Here the hyphen comes to distinguish the post-colonial that defines the oppressive and homogenous constructions that arise out of colonialism.

developing countries, and newly-independent countries. However, although the phrase was widely used, Tomlinson explains that it has become a highly contested term in that it has always held rather vague assumptions and homogenised notions of a collection of nations (2013: 318).

Tomlinson argues that the designation ‘third world’ was often used normatively rather than analytically, which set up problematic categories that did not consider the differences within and between those countries. According to Tomlinson (2003: 318), many have theorised the term through a set of material and economic criteria. Those with a small command over resources were considered third world. However, this causes problems in that it does not take into account the considerably different sizes, political ideologies, social structures, economic performance, cultural backgrounds and historical experiences of each nation. As Tomlinson explains: “These differences exist not simply between third world countries, but within them as well. There are rich and poor people, empowered and disempowered citizens, to be found inside all states and societies in the world” (2003: 318).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty offeres a similar contestation over the way western feminism uses the term, explaining how the term creates homogenised notions of women. For Mohanty, the term is ultimately a western construct that ties in with western feminism. Western feminism uses the term to homogenise the identities and experiences of women from a variety of nations into a single entity, just as Tomlinson expresses how the use of the term essentialises and homogenises different nations, as well as the experiences of the individuals who live within those nations.

Mbembe argues that historiography, anthropology, and feminist criticism have reduced the complex phenomena of postcolonial identity and power to discourses and representations that forget that discourses and representations have materiality (Mbembe, 2001: 5). Therefore, when addressing notions of postcolonialism as deconstructing homogeneous systems of identity, the concept of photography and art as a reflection of experience and identity becomes central to understanding how these discourses are situated in a material artistic practice.

This is particularly important when looking at the previously mentioned exhibitions. *Wack!'s* catalogue does not address the idea of the postcolonial, yet the postcolonial becomes particularly important when one looks at art outside of the western canon. Continents such as Africa continuously deal with the legacy of colonialism and how it has affected the identities of those coming out of colonialism. If postcolonial discourse is strongly linked to notions of dismantling dichotomous relationships of experience and identity in the global art world, it raises the question of why the link between postfeminism (which works in the same counteractive way as postcolonialism through breaking homogenous notions of identity and gender) and postcolonial discourse is not addressed within exhibitions and discourses that seek to address women's art from a transnational, global viewpoint.

Furthermore, both exhibitions overlook postfeminist theory, despite the emphasis on contemporary understandings of feminist ideology in art in these exhibitions (particularly seen in *Global Feminisms*). One would expect to see the inclusion of a postfeminist understanding of contemporary women's art, given that postfeminist theory contests the idea that feminism spoke to the majority of women. Postfeminism is understood as a dismantling of the sameness of experience that feminism produced (Gamble, 2001: 21). Therefore, as *Global Feminisms* attempted to demonstrate, postfeminism becomes a counter-discourse to first-world feminism which overlooks the cross-cultural aspects of women's experiences and identities. Postfeminism encompasses a cross-cultural perspective that counteracts the hermetically sealed divisions of women's identities expressed in Reilly's contestations of what she calls first-world feminism; yet, despite both exhibitions' attempts at narratives, they still failed to address postfeminism explicitly.

Counter Discourses to Western Feminism

A vast amount of research has been dedicated to the relationship between postcolonialism and feminist artistic and academic discourse, particularly seen in the works of Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak. The most distinguishing features of this discourse involve a criticism of feminist theory with regard to postcolonial art production. According to Mohanty (1988: 62), western feminism has

tended to overlook the multitudinous voices of women on the periphery, creating essentialist and homogeneous identities for women living in postcolonial situations. However, little information regarding the postfeminist perspective on postcolonial women and their artistic practices exists. Therefore, one could suggest that perhaps the postfeminist relates more closely to postcolonial discourse and its concerns regarding a homogeneous notion of women.

There is minor information and discourse surrounding the relationship between postfeminism and postcolonialism, and therefore it is important to address the connections between the two discourses. This would enable a more critical and complex approach to understanding women's experiences which fall outside of a western first world frame. Women artists working under postcolonial conditions have a strong sense of agency and express their complex situation, which not only revolves around issues of race and identity, but also of gender. They are faced with both colonial and feminist issues confining women to defined spaces, which simplify the complexities of experience. Yet, despite the inclusion of African women artists in international exhibitions, these artists are still addressed under the umbrella term of Africa, and the exhibitions fail to take a closer look at the many cross-cultural aspects of African and South African culture, particularly with the postcolonial experience in mind.

It is therefore imperative to explore how their practices go beyond the simplified definitions assigned to them, and explore the way in which these artists situate themselves in both discourses. If artistic production, as Stuart Hall explains, can be seen as a direct reflection of the social contexts of a time (1997: 49), then the discourses of postcolonialism and postfeminism should seek to address art and how their concepts occur within art production. These discourses in their theoretical definitions need to be seen from a social and contextual perspective in order to be fully realised. If theory has no substantial evidence to exemplify its concepts, then the theory can become a stale model with no substantial evidence as to the realities of such a discourse within actual society (Mbembe, 2001: 5).

Photography as a Form of Social and Political Discourse

According to Liz Wells in *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (2004: 282), one of the functions of art is to explore and comment upon individual and social worlds of experience. Historically, art has been understood as contributing to the myths and discourses which inform ways to make sense of and respond to cultural phenomena, thereby helping us to locate ourselves within socio-political hierarchies. Wells explains that art may be seen as feeding our need for a clear sense of identity and cultural belonging. However, this is a continuous process of apprehension and reassurance since identity is neither uniform nor fixed, but constantly subject to challenge and shift (2004: 283). According to Wells (2004: 280), second wave feminist discourse and art examines how the image of the female body has become an object onto which the ideals and desires of a particular culture have been mapped. It becomes a tool which can influence the way beauty and selfhood are expressed. In feminist discourse, this representation and mapping of ideologies has been understood as a traditionally male act which represents women according to patriarchal power structures that construct false notions of selfhood and beauty.

According to Solomon-Godeau (2007: 338), ideologies of femininity and their psychological components were closely linked to certain forms of representation, particularly photography. Photography was instrumental, especially in its mass-media incarnations, in fabricating and disseminating stereotypes and fantasies of femininity. The awareness of photography's ability to construct an image of woman resulted in a heightened importance of the technologies of representation, raising critical awareness of what these enabled, what they enacted, what they authorised, and what they censored (Solomon-Godeau, 2007: 338). By turning the camera on themselves and on other women, female photographers enabled a way of not only re-representing oneself, but also enabled female artists to expose and critically address the mediated construction of female representations. Loewenberg (1999: 399) suggests that by exploring representations of the self in art, either through portraiture or self-portraiture, female artists were able to take control of their own representation.

Wells goes on to show that issues of identity are of double relevance to people who see themselves as outside of dominant culture, if not marginalised by it (2004: 283), This connects notions of feminine identity and postcolonial experience as both seem to display an existence outside of the dominant culture, and have often been marginalised by it. In this respect, the photographic image then has the ability to challenge notions of identity in both a postfeminist and postcolonial perspective, as the photograph becomes a tool in which one can expose the system of power that authorises certain representations, while blocking, prohibiting, or invalidating others (Solomon-Godeau, 2007: 338). Therefore, photography (and its ability to represent particular ideologies and constructions) is further relevant to the study because its ability to manipulate and construct certain ideologies around gender can be extended to identity and race. Photography that considers gender, identity and race shares similar distinctions within postcolonialism, whereby dominant systems of power are challenged. People are often represented according to particular modes of power and, as in feminist discourse, the topic of representation becomes integral to postcolonialism as representation has the ability to construct imperial notions of race and ethnicity onto the body.

Wells explains that photography encompasses a range of differing types of social and artistic practices (2003: 2). As critical photography readers, we need to link considerations about the photograph as a particular sort of artefact with questions of uses of photography and its effects. Through such considerations, the photograph allows us to consider how and in what circumstances we use photographs. Therefore, the photograph allows us consider the broader framework of how our world is structured through the images that we produce of the world; it also allows us to investigate how photography can also be used to resist dominant structures and practices (Wells, 2003: 2).

The Concept of the Gaze in Photography

Within the context of desire and the gaze, Laura Mulvey, a key theorist in feminist theories on film and photography, addresses the male gaze, and how this plays a key role in the objectification of women. Mulvey explains in *Visual and Other*

Pleasures (1989) that woman has historically been image, and man has been the bearer of the look, or 'gaze' (1989: 19). According to Mulvey, in a world of sexual imbalances, pleasure in looking has been split between male as active, and female as passive. Mulvey explains that the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly (1989: 19).

Traditionally, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact. Furthermore, Mulvey explains that the display of women functions on two levels: as erotic object to be gazed upon by the person capturing such an image, and as erotic object for the spectator, creating a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the image (1989: 19). Women therefore become displayed as an object onto which society reflects its desires. Those looking and those being looked at enter into a power relationship, where those looked at often partake in the act of objectification. Mulvey explains that there is pleasure in being looked at, which creates an act of scopophilia. Scopophilia is seen as taking other people as objects, and then subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. Mulvey states that as the subject itself gains pleasure from being looked at, she could re-enact this objectification herself by moulding her appearance according to the desires of society (1989: 16).

The Concept of Beauty in Popular Culture and Photography

Furthermore, it is integral to look at the way in which women have been represented photographically throughout modern society, and the way in which beauty has been negotiated in the photographic image. The importance of beauty is highlighted by Jodi Bieber, who directly references beauty in the title of her series *Real Beauty*. One can see that ideas of beauty are key to interpreting and analysing the relationship created between sitter and photographer in *Real Beauty* due to the emphasis on beauty in the title, and the fact that the series portrays women in underwear, revealing their bodies. Beauty has often been linked to the gaze, and theorists such as Umberto Eco have often considered the notion of beauty as a fixed idea. The key aim in this section is to distinguish what the common western conceptions of beauty

are, and whether or not these are ideas that contemporary photographers working outside the west, such as Bieber, challenge and contest.

I will firstly look at Umberto Eco's *On Beauty* (2004) which is often referred to when considering ideas of beauty, and then Reischer and Koo's *The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World* (2004) who consider notions of beauty that lie outside of the west. This will then enable critical consideration as to how *Real Beauty* represents or challenges these ideas.

In his book *On Beauty,* Umberto Eco discusses concepts of beauty, and how beauty has been regarded in western culture, beginning in Ancient Greece, up until contemporary western society. Eco bases beauty on the principle that it has never been absolute and immutable, but has reflected various notions depending on the historical period and place (2004: 15). He suggests that beauty and art have historically gone hand in hand (2004: 94); art was traditionally seen as being able to capture beauty, and within this, the female nude was paramount to the ways in which beauty was expressed. Eco explains that beauty was initially about perspective and proportion, as well as about the depiction of nature. It then shifted to ideas of the proportioned body. However, body proportions in classical male-produced art then changed according to what was particularly idealised in a specific society at a specific time. In considering an object to be beautiful, Eco suggests that our judgement must have a universal value, and that everyone must share our judgement. This universal value has often been intrinsically expressed in the images of the female nude over centuries, and each universal value is specific to the context in which that beauty is created and received (2004: 264).

This becomes particularly relevant when addressing notions of beauty in the Twentieth century with regard to the growth of consumerism. It is in the Twentieth century that mass media created a beauty of consumption, where many forms of media used the female body to signify the ideals of society. According to Eco (2004: 418), magazines, films, and television portray models of beauty that we then consume. What fashion and media garners as beautiful becomes standard in the media, which we as a society then subconsciously assign to notions of beauty. One

can see this in a number of examples from media and fashion from the Twentieth Century.

In the Twentieth Century, western advertising in the 1980s generally depicted women in beauty product advertisements as white, blonde, and blue-eyed. This was perpetuated by the hype of the Supermodel: a top-earning elite, such as Claudia Schiffer, Christy Turlington, and Christie Brinkley who were considered the paragon of beauty (Figure 1.9). All of these women were tall, slender, and white, with the exception of another famous supermodel, Naomi Campbell. However, even images of Naomi Campbell tended to display ideas of western beauty, despite her being a black model, as seen in Figures 1.10 and 1.11. Campbell's hair was always straightened to reflect the characteristics of Caucasian hair, and she was often photographed with blue contact lenses. Here we see how the fashion and advertising industry perpetuates similar ideas of female beauty, which then become a normative model in mass media.



Figure 1.9
Mario Testino
In *Vanity Fair*
September 2008



Figure 1.10
Photographer Unknown
Naomi Campbell
In *BlackGlama* campaign
2007



Figure 1.11
Tom Munro
Naomi Campbell
In *Vogue Brazil*
May 2013

Reischer and Koo, in their essay *The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World* (2004: 298), further interrogate the notion of beauty, particularly in the Twentieth century. They explain that, beauty, though highly subjective, is more than simply a matter of aesthetics and taste. According to Reischer and Koo (2004: 298), cultural ideas of beauty are an index and expression of social values and beliefs[5]. Reischer and Koo explain that the west has perpetuated a particular idea of beauty, one that has become the prevailing idea of beauty due to a hegemonic cultural dominance that circulates idealised images of beauty throughout the world via forms of media. Reischer and Koo further explain that it is regions of Saharan and Sub-Saharan Africa that serve as critical counterpoints to the west:

> *"In the west, the condition of thinness has become such a widely accepted prerequisite of the body beautiful that it almost seems 'natural' to assume that a thin body is aesthetically preferable to a corpulent one. But the celebration of female obesity and 'largeness' in certain demographical groups in Saharan Africa offers a revealing opposition to that ideal, and further serves to illuminate the constructed nature of all notions of beauty"* (2004: 298)

[5] The idea of beauty has historically been explored with women's bodies in mind. This is said to be because "beauty work" has historically been the province of women. However, notions of masculinity and beauty in men have become increasingly studied and written about (Reischer and Koo, 2004: 298).

Reischer and Koo offer a different perspective on beauty that acknowledges the shifting concepts of beauty in a globalised world. Although they offer a perspective that challenges the fixed notions of beauty, few concepts of subversion and contestation to the predominant theories exist.

By venturing outside of western beauty ideals, *Real Beauty* can be understood as a counterpoint to notions of what beauty means in society, and could be seen as a point of departure from ideas of oppressive systems of beauty that the west is said to perpetuate. There still remain a variety of stereotypes that exist around notions of beauty in contemporary society. A beauty, particularly in a globalised society influenced by advertising, fashion, and mass media, has generally come to be understood as who displays characteristics such as thinness, whiteness and youthfulness[6].

When I speak about the various tropes of beauty amongst white women, I speak of the stereotypes of whiteness, thinness, and youthfulness. However, this is different when I speak about the tropes of black identity and femininity. Black women have historically been considered as 'different': as standing outside of normative western models of beauty, and are often considered to be ugly in relation to white western beauty. Sinead Caslin explains in her article *Feminism and Post-Colonialism* (2009) that the west has traditionally assigned overly sexualised, uncivilised, traditional, exotic, and primitive connotations onto the black female body (2009: para. 5). Beauty in terms of the black body becomes slightly more complex as the stereotypes of black female beauty often tend to create derogatory ideas of beauty, rather than a model of what constitutes as being idealically beautiful.

If one looks back to advertisements from the 1950s and 60s, one can see an upsurge in black female beauty products, and many of these products were aimed at making black women appear more 'white'. Furthermore, advertising suggested to all women (black and white) that white skin was what men desired, as can be seen in Figures 1.12 and 1.13.

[6] I say "generally", as I don't want to mix this up with counter discourses that have arisen. There has been a shift in more recent years towards a more inclusive and diverse notion of beauty.



Figure 1.12
Nadinola advertisement from *Ebony* magazine
1960



Figure 1.13
Golden Peacock Peach Cream advertisement
Circa. 1950

Furthermore, black women are not generally constructed according to beauty, but rather according to how their bodies transgress normative models of beauty. Characteristics seen as standing outside of normative models become exaggerated in the media's portrayal of black women, therefore creating a stereotyped construct of what black women should look like. Generally, big curly hair, otherwise known as the 'Afro', is considered to stand outside of normal constructs of beauty in western society, and is often shown in an exaggerated way; this therefore creates a caricature of black women. Larger bodies and more sexualised femininity are also considered to be characteristic of black women.[7]

This stereotype simultaneously causes derogatory ideas of what constitutes black beauty. According to Sinead Caslin in *Feminism and Post-Colonialism* (2009: para. 5), the black body is considered overly-sexualised and primitive, and so the particular characteristics of black beauty are viewed negatively. When I speak of the tropes of

[7] This stems back to early examples of black female objectification such as the case of Sarah Baartman (1789-1815), where biological and ethnographic studies categorised black women as being overly-sexual and primitive. This will be further explored in chapter 2.

black femininity, I refer to the various stereotypes that western culture considers characteristic of black women's features, but I also refer to the simultaneous negative caricature and reading that results.

This is not to say that these stereotypes are fixed and constant in our current society. Globalised society has changed the way women are represented as media attempts to create a more inclusive consideration of beauty. Advertisers use challenging concepts of beauty to try to establish a more inclusive and diverse concept of beauty by using models that are not considered traditionally beautiful. The fashion industry has challenged certain assumptions of what constitutes beauty by using models such as Alek Wek (Figure 1.14) and Devon Aoki (Figure 1.15), who have become extremely popular. Alek Wek's dark complexion and Devon Aoki's small stature and half-Asian heritage challenge western ideals.

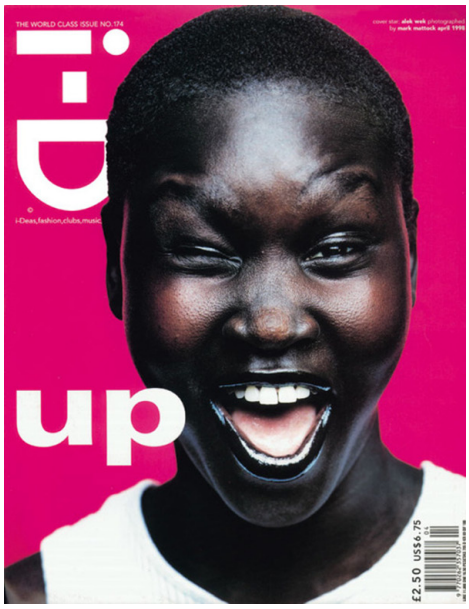

Figure 1.14
Mark Mattock
Alek Wek
ID Magazine
April 1998



Figure 1.15
Sebastian Simon
Devon Aoki
1999

However, stereotypes are still found in the media. Many images of black women in the media adhere to the stereotypes of what black women should look like. If one types 'African beauty' into Google, the images show an exoticised notion of Africa (Figure 1.16 and 1.17). The women wear animal print or 'african' beads, and have

exotic face paint markings. More recently, French magazine *Numéro* came under fire for featuring a white model heavily bronzed to appear black, and dressed in 'exotic' prints under the title 'African Queen'. The magazine was highly criticised in the media for this portrayal: although the model's skin colour appears black, it is really a neutral and light form of black; the model is slim and wears what many deem exotic prints that are as associated with Africa; and her hair remains smooth and lightened. As Hana Riazuddin explains in Adam Elliott-Cooper's article *The Anti-Imperialist: The Whitewash of Black Beauty:*

> *"When we look, for example, at the Black hair care industry or skin complexion/colourism and skin bleaching, when we analyse music videos and what type of Black beauty is 'accepted' within Black communities as well as by White mainstream media, we reveal a world in which ideas of beauty are placed within a historically racist as well as gendered framework"*
> (Riazuddin, 2011: 2).



Figure 1.16
Example of 'African beauty' from Google



Figure 1.17
Example of 'African beauty' from Google
For *Harper's Bazaar*



Figure 1.18
Sebastian Kim
African Queen
In Numero
March 2013

These images clearly demonstrate that trivial and stereotyped ideas around beauty concerning black women are still prevalent, despite a move towards a more inclusive notion of beauty when addressing black women.

The Issue of 'Subject'

Lastly, it is important to identify the problems that occur in deciding how to address women in Jodi Bieber and Zanele Muholi's photographs. If we say the 'subject', the individual identity of the person being photographed becomes obsolete, therefore counteracting the task of exploring how these images counteract objectifying and homogenising practices of the west. The use of the word 'subject' also connotes ideas of the person being a nameless example within a study, one that renders the person a passive object to be looked at. The use of 'model' is similarly problematic, though it initially seems appropriate. 'Model' alludes to notions of a sculpted 'thing'. It suggests women who actively participate in displaying their bodies in order to sell garments, or products. While 'sitter', which would traditionally refer to someone being

photographed for a portrait [8], could be used, it too suggests passivity, as if the person being addressed holds no agency in that act of sitting.

For the sake of this dissertation, I will address the women in each portrait by their first names. However, where this is not possible, I will use the term 'sitter' in the traditional sense of the word: a person who sat for a portrait in the classic photographic salons of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

These theoretical issues are all relevant to the study as they allow for a deeper consideration of how we read images. The theoretical concerns around postfeminism and postcolonialism are important to understand, as the women photographers and the women in the photographs addressed in this dissertation are working and living in a country dealing with the legacies of colonialism, oppressive government systems such as apartheid, and unequal gender systems perpetuated by the aforementioned social systems.

To consider if the photographs intended for analysis in this dissertation challenge conceptions of women living outside of the west, it is necessary to understand the discourses around women living outside of the west. Both artists use photography as their medium, and therefore we need to understand the importance of photography and how it can be a form of social and political discourse. This is particularly important because of my intention to provide research that goes beyond the theoretical to consider the practical implications and influences of these discourses. Furthermore, the images that will be analysed are of women, and therefore, issues of the gaze become a key concern. Within this concern, issues of beauty, and the way in which women have traditionally been represented need to be addressed and understood. This understanding is important as it will enable us to consider if and how the images challenge western preconceptions of women.

[8] Clients were generally seated against plain backgrounds and lit with the soft light of an overhead window and whatever else could be reflected with mirrors.

CHAPTER TWO

ZANELE MUHOLI

Zanele Muholi: An Introduction

The work of Zanele Muholi has proved to be of particular importance when addressing women artists working within discourses of women's identity and gender politics from outside of the United States and Europe. Her work is most notably known for representing individuals who collectively identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT). Muholi is particularly known for her representation of same-sex couples in intimate settings that expose and highlight the politics of the body. Muholi's work defies represented ideas of the black lesbian body by those from the outside through an insider's intimate and personalised representation of the black lesbian body (*Zanele Muholi*, 2013: para. 1).

The aim of this chapter is to explore Zanele Muholi's series *Being* (2007), and her follow up *Being (There)* (2010), addressing the ways in which Muholi represents the black female body. This chapter addresses the following: a background to Muholi's work and the relevance of her photography in the social landscape of South Africa; the representation of the black body in western history; the theories and issues regarding representing lesbianism; and then a visual analysis. The visual analysis considers the ways in which Muholi represents women of colour and lesbian couples; and the ways in which Muholi represents race and gender through the medium of portraiture, and how her images transgress binary categories of gender and race. An in-depth analysis of a selection of images is included in order to exemplify the various ways in which Muholi represents women outside of the 'west'.

Background and Relevance of Muholi's Work

Zanele Muholi was born in Umlazi, in Durban, in 1972 (*Zanele Muholi*, 2013: para. 1). According to the Stevenson website (*Zanele Muholi,* 2013: para. 1), Muholi completed an Advanced Photography course at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg, in 2003 (2013: para. 1). Muholi had her first solo show in

2004 at the Johannesburg Art Gallery and was awarded her Master of Fine Arts degree from Ryerson University in Toronto in 2009. Muholi is also an activist and is a member of the Forum for the Empowerment of Women, an advocacy group for black lesbians based in Johannesburg. Muholi recently won the Freedom of Expression Index Award, as well as the Fine Prize for emerging artists in the Carnegie International Prize in the United States of America. She is also the recent recipient of a prestigious Prince Claus award (*Zanele Muholi,* 2013: para. 1).

Muholi's work is particularly important in light of the recent brutal attacks on various lesbian women in South Africa. In 2006, a woman named Zoliswa Nkonyana was raped and then murdered with a golf club in Khayelitsha, Cape Town (Tham, 2006: 1). It took two weeks for the story to break in mainstream media. In 2007, lesbian couple Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Massooa were gang raped and shot near their homes in Meadowlands, Soweto, which led to the formation of the 07-07-07 campaign: a coalition of human rights and equality groups calling for justice for women targeted in such attacks (Kelly, 2009: 1). However, little change has occurred in terms of minimising such cases (Kelly, 2009: 1). In 2008, female soccer player Eudy Simalane, a player for the South African National Women's Football team, and an openly LGBT-rights activist, was abducted, beaten, gang raped, and stabbed 25 times in the face, legs, and chest in her hometown of KwaThema, Springs (Kelly, 2009: 1). In 2011, 24-year old lesbian activist, Noxolo Nogwaza, was stoned, stabbed, and raped because of her sexual orientation (*South Africa: No Arrests in Murder Case,* 2011: 1*)*. More recently, there was the brutal rape and murder of Duduzile Zozo, a 26-year old lesbian. These cases are just a few of many corrective rape cases in South Africa.

According to Ishan Asokan (2012: 20), South Africa is the first African country to openly accept members of the LGBT community, and yields notable advancements in the protection of human rights. Asokan explains that roughly 31 sub-Saharan African countries outlaw homosexual intercourse, with four allowing capital punishment for such behaviour. However, South Africa is said to fail at properly advocating against corrective rape of lesbian citizens. Another problem is the societal belief that homosexuality is "un-African". Asokan explains:

> *"In addition to being accused of witchcraft and sorcery, lesbians in SA are assaulted for their sexual identity. Families, churches and schools are described as being homophobic and transphobic, openly promoting the belief that being gay is 'un-African'. Some men believe that homosexuality is an issue that can be remedied and that lesbians have yet to be satisfied during heterosexual intercourse. When a lesbian presents her prefered orientation to community leaders, she may be correctively raped by members of the same tribe or township. Instead of being punished for the act, the rapist is exalted and venerated. Lesbians victimised by rape endure social persecution and report feelings of self-hate following the incident".* (Asokan, 2012: 24)

In 2012, Muholi's home was broken into and 5 years' worth of work, including visual records of three funerals of black lesbians who were murdered in hate crimes, was stolen. Nothing else was stolen, leading many people, including writer Chika Okeke-Agulu, to believe that this crime was an attack directed at her visual activism (Okeke-Agulu, 2012: para.1). This crime, as well as the high number of corrective rape cases in the media in the last few years, reveal society's prevailing ignorance and disdain for homosexuality.

According to Gabeda Baderoon, in her article *How To Look* (2007), South Africa's notions of race and sex have been profoundly shaped by its 350-year history of colonialism and apartheid. Gabeda Baderoon explains that the past is written on the bodies and subjectivities of its inhabitants. How we see such bodies have been shaped by history (Baderoon, 2007: 2). Throughout history, the body has been used as an object onto which the ideals and normative models of society have been placed. According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, throughout history, bodies that challenge the normative models of society function as magnets to which culture secures its anxieties, questions, and needs at any given moment (Garland-Thomson, 1996: 206). Bodies which are different have historically been exploited for someone else's purposes. The transgressive body therefore becomes politicised as culture, and then maps its concerns upon the body as meditations on individual, as well as national values, identity, and direction.

The Representation of the Black Body in Traditional Western Culture

The exploitation of the black body has particularly been noted in the way the 'west' has historically represented and addressed black bodies. This is inevitably linked to freak discourse, which addresses how the representation of bodies that are different to European and western ideals becomes a way of cementing categories of normal and abnormal, inscribing difference as a way of controlling that which is different and unknown (Garland-Thomson, 1996: 57).

One particular strategy which resulted from this need to control that which is different was the aesthetic implementation of hyper-visibility.[9] With the rise of imperial exploration in the Victorian era, western and European anthropological explorers were exposed to different cultures (Currie, 2005: 65). Many of these explorers were awed by bodies that were different from Victorian ideals. These explorers often brought back images of these 'different' people, whilst also scientifically attempting to categorise such bodies. In doing so, anthropologists such as Herbert Lang and Frederick Starr objectified these different bodies by transforming them into objects of anthropological study and categorisation. These bodies then became removed from notions of human individuality, and became categorised as 'other' (Currie, 2005: 23). These categorisations emerged from western colonial traditions, which relegated society into binary categories of 'us' and 'them'.

According to Rita Abrahamsen in *African Studies and the Postcolonial Challenge* (2003), postcolonial discourse has often addressed the binary relationship between Africa and the west (Abrahamsen, 2003: 205). This relationship has predominantly centred on ideas of power, particularly addressing how the west has historically assigned power to itself, and placed Africa on the periphery. In doing so, the West denies Africa agency and characterises it as 'primitive' and 'traditional', in contrast to the 'modern', 'cultured' and 'civilised' west (2003: 205). This creates a binary opposition that relegates Africa to categories that define it as lesser in terms of growth and innovation.

[9] Hyper-visibility is understood as a representation that attempts to call attention to an individual, a population, or a situation, but that also caricatures or hides the complexities of the individual, population, or situation. It is often understood as an increased visibility that constructs a stigmatised, stereotypical representation of something that exists outside of what is considered 'normal' (Ryland: 2013, para. 2).

The black African body has been central to these binary constructions. These binary constructions are emphasised through the exaggeration of stereotypical signifiers. This exaggeration was particularly achieved by displaying these bodies as biological and anthropological specimens of difference (Currie, 2005: 65). Colonial explorers and anthropologists often achieved exaggerated models of difference through representing the black body as exotic and primitive – that is, without clothing, or clothed in a loincloth – which reinforced the idea of the African body as uncivilised and traditional.

Sinead Caslin, in her book *The Imperial Archive, Key concepts in Postcolonial Studies*, explains that both patriarchy and colonialism reduced women and black minorities to stereotypes that included 'virgin', 'whore', 'savage' and 'heathen'; women and black minorities were therefore denied an identity by the system that entrapped them (Caslin, 2009: para. 2). In recent times, postcolonial academia has reacted to this viewpoint, addressing the issue of gender, and questioning to what extent it affects the lives of colonial subjects who also happen to be female. According to Caslin, even constructions of the pre-colonial are strongly influenced by the phallocentric prejudice that wrongly defines black women as passive and subsidiary inferiors (Caslin, 2009: para. 5). Furthermore, in a contrasting idea to the black woman as being passive and inferior, many of the representations of the female 'native' figure in western literature and art perpetuate the myth of the erotically charged female (Caslin, 2009: para. 5). According to Caslin, black skin came to depict sexual promiscuity and deviant behaviour for much of the nineteenth-century.

One notable example of this ignorance and prejudice that 'offensive' foreign sexuality engendered is the infamous case of Sarah (Saartjie) Baartman (termed the Hottentot Venus by Colonialists), which details how British colonial powers transformed one young African woman into an icon for racial inferiority and savage female sexuality (Syed and Ali, 2011: 353). Sarah Baartman (1789-1815), a female member of the Khosian tribe of South Africa, was taken to Britain in 1810 and exhibited as a biological oddity and scientific curiosity due to her pronounced buttocks and genitalia (Caslin, 2009: para. 5). Her plump, voluptuous body was seen as a deviance from traditional European ideals, and was therefore seen as being exotic and different.

She was displayed with objects that emphasised notions of her ‘traditional’, ‘primitive’ identity, such as an African cape, a spear and a loincloth; all of which aid in the hyper-visibility of the black female body (Caslin, 2009: para. 5). This emphasised her difference and exoticism, resulting in a myth of Africa, and those that inhabit it. Her consequent humiliation and degradation illustrates the racist mindset common in 19th Century Europe, and her image has become a lasting symbol of western colonial attitudes towards Africa.



Figure 2.1
Drawing of Sarah Baartman
Circa 1810

Furthermore, this historical ‘othering’ and binaristic categorisation was also implemented in representations of the female body, and manifested in literature, art, and popular culture throughout the 19th and early 20th Century. The representation of women and the discourse surrounding the ways in which women have been represented in history are bound up in notions of the ‘gaze’ (Caslin, 2009: para. 2). In visual arts discourse, the ‘gaze’ is a term used to describe the act of looking. Caught up in the dynamics of desire, the ‘gaze’ embodies a desire for control over its object. Theories of the ‘gaze’ have explored the complex power relations that are a part of the acts of looking and being looked at (Mulvey: 1989: 19).

In Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (1999), Pollock explains that, according to psychoanalytical discourse, each subject, each sex, each identity passes through processes and structures of differentiation that are figured in cultural representation from language to art, as separate positions, as fixed sexes, as distinct identities that need no production. Pollock explains that the canon of art is politically 'in the masculine' and culturally 'of the masculine' (1999: 24). This cultural canon has historically been expressed as the representation of men, for men through the concept of the male gaze. Art production has historically been considered as a masculine discipline, which has resulted in representations of women being created by men. This resulted in the portrayal of women, which emphasised particular patriarchal ideals through controlling the way women were represented in art (Pollock, 1999: 26). Women became objects onto which the desires of society were reflected, therefore removing any form of agency from those who were being represented. By inscribing ideals onto the female body, by differentiating and categorising acceptable notions of femininity and identity, the male gaze has become understood as a mechanism for maintaining difference which represents and defines women as other, sex, lack, metaphor, and sign (Pollock, 1999: 26).

Zanele Muholi's work begins to deconstruct these binary models of gender, race, and identity, not only in the historical canon of art history, but also in western feminist ideas that still overlook and simplify the way in which women from outside of the first world are represented. Muholi's work makes visible the realities of same-sex couples, as well as providing revealing detail into the intimate relationships within same-sex couples. According to Gabeda Baderoon in her essay *How to Look* (2007), Muholi's work came to national attention in 2004 with her solo exhibition *Visual Sexuality.* The images in the exhibition constituted an intimate documentary of black lesbian life in South Africa. Since then, her work has continued to address the experiences of gays and lesbians in the country (Baderoon, 2007: 2). According to Baderoon (2007: 2), her photographs have helped to reframe ways of seeing the black body, and have brought the details of black lesbian and gay life closer to the urgent centre of South Africa's political and artistic debates.

Muholi's work has often been said to challenge the hetero-normative ideals and standards of not only black culture, but also of South African culture as a whole, through an intimate portrayal of women who fall outside of hetero-normative models. According to Muholi (2008: 2), in a socio-cultural context where the dominant sexuality is a white Europeanised heterosexuality, any kind of queer, gender sexuality - lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/ transsexual identity or a racialised sexuality – can only surface when white heterosexuality, and the gender binary of male/masculine and female/feminine upon which it rests, is threatened.

According to Muholi, imperialist and formerly colonised countries are embedded within hetero-patriarchal values (Muholi, 2008: 2). The late black lesbian feminist scholar Audre Lorde stated that there is an invisibility of homosexual identities missing from official records, which leads to the re-iteration of hetero-normative values and queerphobia[10]. Muholi explains that South Africa is still embedded within this European hetero-patriarchal model, as well as queerphobia (Muholi, 2008: 2). Cornel West observes that silencing is a form of violence perpetrated by elites and those in power, stating that "an injury uniquely sustained by a disempowered group will lack a name, a history, and in general a linguistic reality." (Davis, 1997: 194). According to Muholi, if given exposure at all, as a community of queers, and as black women, LGBT communities are still racialised, commodified, and sexualised for the consumption of students and scholars, yet are never imagined as productive beings able to produce and create knowledge for the mainstream. However, Muholi explains that it is the silence and silencing of those who fall outside of hetero-normative models society that results in the production of their own visual cultures as a form of resistance and location, and as other forms of expression.

According to Baderoon (2007), the body plays a central role in the mediation of the visible and invisible, and sexuality is at the forefront of the most pressing concerns in contemporary South Africa (2007: 2). South Africa has often been considered an extremely forward-thinking nation in terms of sexual orientation. According to Baderoon, the period between 1990 and 2007 marked a period of tumultuous transition, yet also resulted in the drafting of a constitution that included a Sexual

[10] Queerphobia is understood as an irrationally negative attitude toward those with homosexual orientation (McGraw-Hill, 2002).

Non-discrimination clause in 1996, which unprecedentedly explicitly outlawed discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Ten years later, the Civil Union Act of 2006 legalised gay marriage, making South Africa the first country in Africa and the fifth in the world to permit such rights to gay and lesbian people (Baderoon, 2007: 2). However, despite these constitutional advancements, homosexuality is still rife with discrimination, queerphobia and violence on a social level. Stereotyping is still existent, and whilst many theories revolve around the problem of Europatriarchal values as being a site for homosexual discrimination, there is also discrimination within African communities as same-sex orientation is falsely considered 'unAfrican' (Asokan, 2012: 25)

Representing Black Lesbianism

Zanele Muholi is very clear about her objectives as an artist. In her book *Faces and Phases*, she states the following regarding her artistic practice:

> *"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."* (Muholi, 2010: 6**)**

The work of Muholi has been recognised as a voice for those who fall outside of dominant sexual preferences; it is often recognised for the fact that the images she produces are from a homosexual perspective. Rather than being a document of lesbian life by an outsider, her images are of lesbian culture from an insider's perspective. Furthermore, Muholi's work is important from a postcolonial perspective as her dealing with sexuality becomes a way for us to critically consider the way the black African body has been treated by colonialism, and the effects of this treatment. In the article, *Women's and Gender Studies in English speaking Sub-Sharan Africa*, co-authored by Akosua Adomako Ampofo, Josephine Beoka-Betts, Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi, and Mary Osirim, explain how some African scholars and activists have suggested that a strong silence remains regarding considerations of female sexuality within African women's gender studies (Ampofo *et al*, 2004: 694). Ampofo

et al suggest that little research has been done regarding sexual desires, homeoerotic desires, lesbian relations, and other sexual transformations, including those that may have followed the colonial and decolonisation processes, as well as impacts on the new global economy.

According to Amina Mama (1996: 39), it is surprising that sexuality is an important concern in international gender studies yet is often overlooked in African gender studies. Mama suggests that these silences need to be understood considering western and European fascinations with projecting hyper sexuality onto the African body. Furthermore, Mama argues that there is a need to address sexuality in terms of empowerment. There are studies into silencing practices with regard to women, such as studies on reductive and sexist ideologies of the family and women's bodies by religious and nationalist movements, as well as discourses on practices such as female genitalia cutting (Mama, 1996: 47). However, Mama argues that despite these research fields that address the constraining effects on women's sexuality, little research is dedicated to addressing traditions which empower women, which give them more, rather than less, control over their sexual and reproductive lives. Mama argues that postcolonial and postfeminist research needs to take into account the effects of colonialism on female sexuality, and the agency that lies therein (Mama, 1996: 47).

Muholi challenges colonial representations of the black female body through her representation of lesbian women. According to Evelynne M. Hammonds, the historical narratives around black female sexuality do not address the possibility of a black lesbian sexuality (1994: 181). Hammonds addresses the theories of Audre Lorde,[11] explaining Lorde's theory that the silence of black lesbian identity is challenged when black lesbians theorise sexuality, and that female desire and agency are key to the theorising of black lesbian sexualities (Hammonds, 1994: 181). Muholi's images theorise black lesbian sexualties through the photographic image; Lorde believes that theorising sexualities disrupts silent narratives, producing an ulterior discourse that is based on an active production of speech, agency, and

[11] Audre Lorde was a Carribbean-American poet, theorist, writer, and human rights activist. Her work was dedicated to confronting and addressing the injustices of racism, sexism, and homophobia (De Veaux, 2004: 7).

desire (Hammonds, 1994: 181).

Visual Analysis

The disruption of silent narratives can particularly be seen in the intimate ways in which Muholi represents same-sex couples in her series *Being (2007).* The images are predominantly in black and white, consisting of portraits of same-sex couples in their domestic settings, with no additional lighting, or props. What is seen is a direct factual representation of the environment which her 'subjects' inhabit. When one begins to analyse Muholi's images critically, it becomes clear that her work offers not only intimacy and insight into the lives of same-sex African couples, but also challenges cultural notions of what is acceptable; her work further challenges the relationship we have with images of intimacy and nudity.

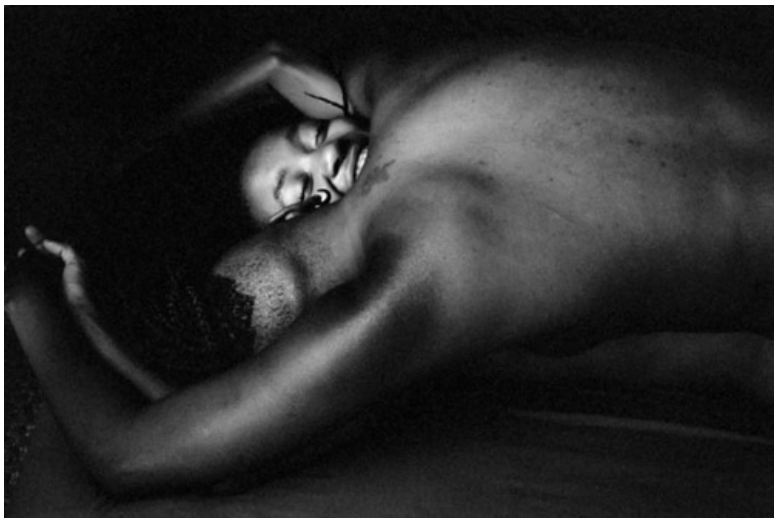

Figure 2.2
Zanele Muholi
Zinzi and Tozama III, Mowbray
2007

In Muholi's *Zinzi and Tozama III, Mowbray* (2007) (Figure 2.2), taken from her series *Being*, the viewer is presented with a black and white image of a couple in what appears to be sexual intimacy. We see one face, whilst the second figure has her back to us. The lighting is high in contrast, and light is only reflected on the bodies and faces of the two figures. This lighting composition becomes a metaphor for

highlighting and revealing intimacy between two people, particularly lesbian intimacy. The figure whose face we can see does not look at the camera, thereby avoiding a direct gaze. This denies the objectification of this woman, as we are denied what could be understood as a fetishised gaze[12]. Through the denial of a direct gaze, Muholi subverts and challenges the historical act of gazing into the female eye with desire. Furthermore, the denial of a direct gaze expresses the intimacy of the moment, a private moment between two people, for them alone. In this respect, the image highlights the normality of such a couple; they too feel and share physical intimacy that is just as beautiful and deserving as heterosexual intimacy.

The subversion created by the denial of the direct gaze is further highlighted by the ambiguity of the second woman. The second woman in the image is particularly interesting in the way she is represented. We see no torso or face, and in capturing the figure in this way, her sex becomes ambiguous. When first viewing the image, this figure could easily be mistaken for a male figure. Her hair could be considered quite masculine: shaved from the ears to the nape, with short braids on top. She lies over her lover in what could be deemed as a dominant, masculine position, intimately kissing her lover in the nape of her neck. However, when we look closer, we see the curve of her breast at the bottom of the frame in the darkened area. The representation of this figure's sex as rather ambiguous challenges the viewer's ideas of what is 'normal' in sexual intimacy. It asks us to question the reasons for our immediate assumption that this figure is male. Once we realise that this figure is a woman, the image becomes a way of making us question our reaction to the image.

Some may be shocked or uncomfortable; others may have no reaction, and feel ambivalent. Whatever the reaction, the image asks the viewer to consider what one expects when seeing a photograph that depicts sexual intimacy between two people. Furthermore, the intimacy created by the denial of a direct gaze makes us, as viewers, feel like voyeurs; we feel as if we are intruding on a private moment between two people. This could possibly allude to how society does not question

[12] Nicholas Mirzoeff explains that the fetishised gaze occurs through the relationship of man as active, and woman as passive in looking. Men are controlling subjects and treat women as passive objects of desire. This objectifies the female body and does not allow women to be desired sexual subjects in their own right. The fetishized gaze is this controlling male gaze that objectifies the female by superimposing desire over her. She becomes a passive object of desire (Mirzoeff, 1999: 158).

heterosexuality, but feels it acceptable to interrogate and punish homosexuality. We would not intrude on an intimate moment between two heterosexual people, and so the image asks us why we would then intrude on the personal choices of those who fall outside of hetero-normative values. Therefore, this image simultaneously highlights the intimate lives of same-sex couples while asking us to re-evaluate the way in which we address and think about homosexuality.

The ambiguity of woman with her back to the camera also suggests stereotyped identities of lesbian culture. A predominant stereotype is that lesbian women are overtly masculine in appearance. Muholi's use of fluid, curved lines gives the image a softness that implies femininity, therefore denying the stereotypical masculinity one would expect from an image depicting a lesbian couple. The ambiguity of the figure's appearance blurs the distinctions of what we deem 'masculine' and 'feminine', while simultaneously denying the masculine stereotype through the subtle femininity of the image.



Figure 2.3
Zanele Muholi
Musa Ngubane and Mabongi Ndlovu, Hillbrow
2007

The ambiguity of the woman and the denial of a gaze can also be seen in other images from the series *Being* (2007*).* In *Musa Ngubane and Mabongi Ndlovu, Hillbrow* (2007), the viewer is once again denied a gaze from the women presented. Musa wraps herself around her partner, Mabongi, from behind; Musa rests hers chin

in the nape of her partner's neck. Both women's genitalia are hidden by the position in which they are seated. As in *Zinzi and Tozama III, Mowbray* (2007), Musa also appears rather ambiguous. We do not see her face in full detail, and we do not see her genitalia. Her 'masculine' pose (the image of enfolding her partner could generally be seen as a 'masculine' due to its connotations of protection) suggests that this image could depict a man and woman if the image is not studied in detail.

The simultaneous ambiguity of gender and the denial of a direct gaze once again subvert gender expectations, as well as the historical act of desire that is inherent in the gaze. Furthermore, the bodies of both women are particularly interesting. While it may not be immediately recognisable that Musa is female, the curves and cellulite on her body could be indicators of her gender. What is particularly noticeable is that these bodies, despite their nudity, challenge the voyeuristic gaze one might associate with such an image. This is because the image does not depict the kinds of images or visions popular culture has of lesbian intimacy.

Popular culture (particularly male pop culture) and the pornography industry have cultivated a vision of lesbianism as being erotic, something that is arousing. However, the bodies often depicted in media and in the pornography industry are generally slim and white; the women wear a large amount of make-up, stiletto heels, and revealing fetish lingerie. The image of Musa and Mabongi dispels these stereotypical views of lesbianism, revealing a realistic representation of lesbian women, as well as real intimacy that is not constructed to adhere to particular societal visions of homosexuality.

Despite Muholi's assertion that there is an invisibility within society around the lives of black lesbian women, Pumla Gqola (2006: 82) explains that the black lesbian body is one that is hypervisible[13] in society. This hypervisibility is made up of a number of tropes and stereotypes that perpetuate violence and hatred towards lesbians. Gqola explains that this hypervisibility can be exemplified through curative rape (2006: 85), as society would not know who to subject to curative rape[14] if it

[13] Hypervisibility is a form of scrutiny based on perceived difference, which is usually misinterpreted as deviance (Ryland: 2013, para. 2).

[14] Curative (also known as corrective) rape is a hate crime in which a person is raped because of their perceived sexual or gender orientation. The intended consequence, as viewed by the perpetrator of

were not for hypervisibility. According to Gqola, 'lesbian' and 'feminist' are used as derogatory words in everyday South Africa, resulting in a system that creates estrangement within women's identities. Women become afraid of asserting their identities and, as a result, they deny themselves agency over their own sexual identities in order to avoid the violence and degradation that is a result of society's objectification and deprecation of homosexuality (Gqola, 2006: 82). This also leads to the creation of an identity that becomes bound to notions of victimisation, further denying these women complex identities that go beyond repressive systems of identification. The fact that Muholi's models are real lesbian couples who volunteer to be photographed counteracts this fear of asserting one's identity, as these women take agency over their identity through allowing Muholi to capture and share their personal realities (Gqola, 2006: 85).

In Muholi's *Apinda Mpako and Ayanda Magudulela, Parktown* (2007) (Figure 2.4), Muholi depicts another lesbian couple in an intimate moment, in black and white once again. However, unlike *Zinzi and Tozama III, Mowbray* (2007), the two women in this image look directly at the camera. This asserts a sense of agency in that these women subvert the male gaze through our own awareness that the photographer is a lesbian woman herself, and that the women gazing out of the photographic frame are not simply objects of desire, but real women sharing an intimate moment. The choice to frame the two women in such a way that their bodies are outside of the frame further reiterates the subversion of desire. Both women's bodies stretch out of the photographic frame which, paired with their direct gazes, pulls the viewer away from a sexualised visual encounter, to one where we come face to face with the actual women. We become involved in a direct confrontation with them - with their expressions, which give subtle yet powerful details of the intimacy that the two subjects share beyond the physical and sexual. The sexual is therefore subverted and avoided, and the viewer is left to ponder the expressions of the two faces staring back at us, rather than to take part in a sexualised encounter of subject and viewer.

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the rape is to "correct" the victim's orientation, to "cure" them of their homosexuality, or to make them adhere and conform to gender stereotypes (Bartle, 2000: 24).

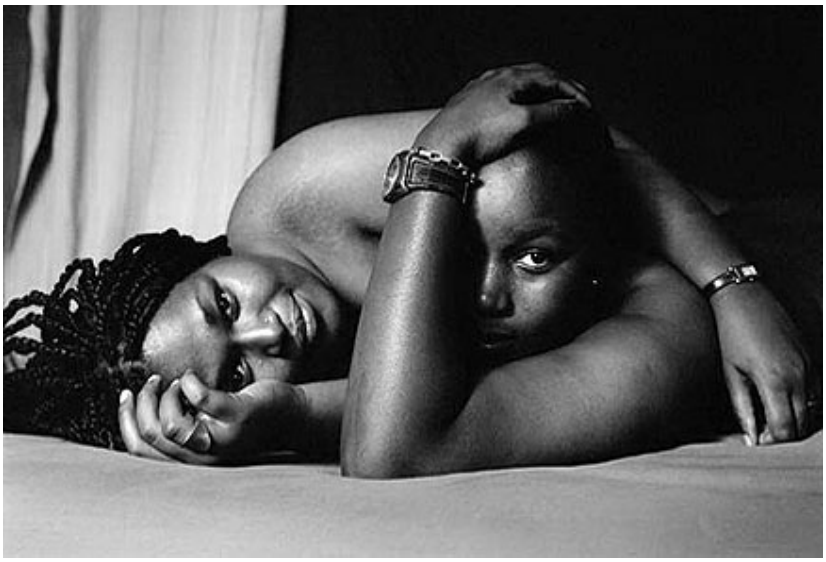

Figure 2.4
Zanele Muholi
Apinda Mpako and Ayanda Magudulela, Parktown
2007

Another image that generates similar observations is *Tshidi Legobye and Pam Limekhaya Meadowlands, Soweto* (2006) (Figure 2.5), despite the lack of direct eye contact. This image seems rather domestic in its simplicity and lack of sexual allusion. Both women are completely covered up to their chins by a blanket. They lie facing the camera, appearing to giggle. This image reveals simple intimacy - a quiet moment between two women, that does not allude to any sexual activity, but rather to the intimacy of sharing. This is revealed through the close warmth of the large blanket that covers them, and the soft early morning light that creeps over them, lighting up a seemingly humorous moment between two partners.



Figure 2.5
Zanele Muholi
Tshidi Legobye and Pam Limekhaya, Meadowlands, Soweto, Johannesburg,
2006

A particularly notable aspect of this image, as well as many of Muholi's other images from this series, is the lack of exposed breasts and genitals. Despite the intimate interactions that Muholi captures, Muholi does not display the full nudity of her 'subjects'. This could be a very deliberate choice to reveal an intimate moment, but to deny the objectification of the female body. The sitters are no longer sexual beings onto which the desires and stereotypes of the 'over-sexualised' black body can be placed. Furthermore, in an image such as *Apinda Mpako and Ayanda Magudulela, Parktown* (2007), the direct gaze challenges our own act of looking. The historical act of gazing at the female body, as previously mentioned[15] , is linked to desire. The male gazes at the female body, and the female body becomes a mechanism of sexual pleasure through the association of the female body with hetero-normative impulses (Mulvey, 1989: 140). However the direct gaze in *Apinda Mpako and Ayanda Magudulela, Parktown* (2007) is from a same-sex couple, a relationship which disrupts hetero-normative ideas of sexual desire. This direct gaze, coupled with the denial of full nudity, removes the objectification of the female body, as we become aware of the closeness of the two models. The close embrace of the two women, and their linking of limbs, denies both an over-sexualised display of the

[15] Chapter 1, page 36.

black female body, and the act of viewing the image with desire. This idea resonates in Muholi's own reflections of her work. On addressing the gaze, Muholi explains:

> *"In my own practice, I actively chose to work against this by ensuring that the photographs I produced of black women's bodies would no longer subject us to spectacle or the exclusive male gaze. The photographs were for us to re-image and re-imagine ourselves, to see likenesses and to celebrate our diverse embodiments of what it means to be a lesbian in South Africa".* Muholi (2009: 15)



Figure 2.6
Zanele Muholi
Tebogo Mokobane and Nhlanhla, Queensgate, Parktown
2007

Figure 2.4 *Tebogo Mokobane and Nhlanhla, Queensgate, Parktown* (2007), once again subverts the male gaze by presenting two women from behind. The image consists of a couple, Tebogo and Nhlanhla, both wearing blue jeans with white belts, facing their topless backs towards the viewer. Tebogo lies on her side, with her head resting on Nhlanhla's lap. As in *Zinzi and Tozama III, Mowbray* (2007), the image is ambiguous in that we do not see Tebogo's face. A viewer could mistake this for an image of a man and woman. The image therefore sets up a visual acceptance: it appears familiar, rather than shocking or transgressive. However, on closer inspection, and through the use of titles, the viewer is made aware that the image is of two lesbian women. This subverts audience expectations, enabling the

viewer to question his or her own expectations and ideologies of what is socially acceptable when it comes to images of sexual intimacy.

The choice of wearing blue jeans with a white belt by both sitters displays ambiguity once again. Both sitters are wearing the same clothing, which creates a mirror effect that suggests equality; both women are connected and this is displayed through the literal decision to wear the same garment. The only sense of gender in this image is the slight curve of Nhlanhla's breast, and her long hair. Apart from these features, the image appears ambiguous, a feature emphasised by the lack of a direct gaze. In this respect, the image subverts explicit sexuality, which does two things: first, it disrupts any form of desire that could be placed upon the women presented; second, it disrupts idealised notions of nudity and explicit 'glamourous' sexuality that is often found in images that present sexual relations between two people.

Once again, the direct gaze makes one feel like they are intruding on a private moment and the couple within this moment is aware of our presence. One could therefore feel as if they are intruding, yet still feel fascinated and want to continue looking at the image. The simultaneous feeling of intrusion and fascination to the image bears resemblance to the idea that what we find confusing or different also holds fascination. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson holds that society is both repelled and fascinated by that which is different (1996: 56). This fascination drives one to define what is normal and what is not, in order to determine our own 'normality' in society (Garland-Thomson, 1996: 56). With this in mind, the image challenges our own act of viewing. We question why we are fascinated by the image, and the politics of this fascination.

However, a problem still remains: despite the activism in photography, the majority of viewers who are not knowledgeable in the field of art theory might not view the images with this reflexive approach. The criticism and derogatory reaction people have had to the work reveals the inherent state of particular stereotypes in society. The images reveal the importance of creating a history around particular identities, yet also reveal the very difficult nature of trying to change public perception. This is exemplified in the reception Muholi has received from her various exhibitions. In a

show for Women‘s Month entitled *Is Anybody Comfortable?*, Muholi recalls the public’s reaction to her images on display:

> “*There was a sense of shock, and people described their feelings as they read the text and the images. Some of my work went over some people‘s heads and they did not understand the intentions of my photographs. Others felt violated as they did not expect to see images of black women in intimate lesbian contexts in a public gallery. Viewers were encouraged to write their comments in a book. There were those who recommended scriptures, stating that —homosexuals need to be prayed for to change their queer behaviour.”* (Muholi, 2009: 16)

Furthermore, this prejudice is present within South Africa’s own governmental employees, which further reiterates society’s ever-present derogatory treatment of lesbian visibility in the arts. In 2010, South African government minister Lulu Xingwana famously walked out of an exhibition featuring Muholi’s *Being* series because it displayed photographs of nude lesbian couples which she found “immoral” and “against nation-building” (*Lulu Xingwana Describes Lesbian Photos as Immoral*, 2010: 1). The denial of allowing true depictions of lesbian realities only perpetuates society’s disdain for homosexuality, counter-acting society’s concern with eliminating violent acts such as curative rape.

Muholi’s work is diverse and complex, and this is heightened as each new series unfolds. Muholi’s images utilise many different visual strategies, such as the gaze, that often noticeably differ from one another. Muholi’s images remain a clear message about the realities of black lesbian identities in South Africa. Her work continues to challenge and subvert the patriarchal narratives that have framed women’s bodies throughout history. In Muholi’s series *Being (T)here* (2009) Muholi employs visual techniques that substantially differ from the stripped-down appearance of the *Being* images that remove the tropes of the over-sexualised black body. *Being (T)here* (2009) reflects the power of self-portraiture and its impact on the way in which the female body has been objectified as a result of the ‘male gaze’.

Being (T)here (2009) is a series of self-portraits taken from a performance that Muholi did in Amsterdam’s infamous red light district. The red light district is

notorious for its long stretch of large windows displaying prostitutes whom passers-by can appropriate for the evening in return for money. Muholi places herself in a window in the red light district. She is dressed in clothing that indicates many of the visual tropes that indicate a 'primitive, sexualised' black body. She sits in a red velvet 'cubicle', lit by an ultra violet light and a small lamp to her right. Muholi wears a tight black laced corset, and a bright 'African' beaded skirt and beaded collar. She wears spiked black patent leather platform shoes, and her hair is thickly plaited into the air in a cone shape.



Figure 2.7
Zanele Muholi
Being (T)here
2009

Muholi's choice of clothing is integral to the interpretation of the image. Adorning her body in beads that resemble 'traditional' African beadwork alludes to ideas of primitiveness, as we come to associate beadwork not only with Africa, but with the tourist market (beads became a substantial commodity within the tourist market of Africa). The beads become an allusion to her 'Africanness', her 'primitiveness'. The primitive allusion of the beads can also be understood as an indicator of her lesser status. Beadwork has historically been categorised as craft art, an activity that was considered 'women's work', and was regarded as inferior in terms of artistic skills

such as painting, particularly within European and western academic and artistic discourses.

The choice to adorn her body with beadwork emphasises the idea of Muholi's body as a commodity, decorated by the stereotypical indicators of 'African-ness'. Furthermore, her choice of clothing - a short skirt, coupled with platform heels that resemble those worn in sado-masochistic and pornographic films - presents her body as overtly sexualised. It creates the effect of a body that is commodified and on show for passers-by to purchase. This could possibly be understood as a comment on the historical use and representation of the black body as being over-sexualised, primitive, and dangerous. Muholi presents us with all the tropes of what has been used to represent the black female body by western patriarchy. The representation of these tropes expresses the commodification and objectification that occurs to those living outside of the west for the benefit of others.

In this image, Muholi's direct gaze challenges us to question the relationship between those who represent, and those who are represented. The image disrupts the stereotypes represented within it through the way in which Muholi poses. She does not sit upright, in an overly sexual way. She slouches against the back of the chair, with no feminine indicators of sexual invitation, such as a crossed leg, or placing her hands on her body. Her direct gaze, posture and pose convey a sense of discomfort to those walking past, and make them aware of the way in which she is clothed and presented.

The fact that this is a self-portrait is also important. As previously mentioned[16], self-portraiture was a key element in the development of an independent female artistic voice in feminist artistic practice. Self-representation in art is often understood as a way of reflecting on the way women have been constructed in visual culture, the way women represent themselves, and a way of using representation to critique and often parody the manipulative ability the photographic image can have on what we perceive to be a simple notion of self-representation. The use of photography to represent oneself became a tool with which women could turn the gaze back to women, therefore implementing agency in the way women are represented in art.

[16] Chapter 1, page 34.

Aesthetically, each image appears quite sculptural. Due to Muholi's use of light, and the minimalism of the environment, Muholi creates an emotive chiaroscuro that emphasises the contours of the women presented. Images such as *Zinzi and Tozama III, Mowbray* (2007) are highly emotive through the strong contrast created by the light, which makes the skin of the two women seem to glow. This sculptural effect is further seen in *Between Friends* (2010) in the way that the two women portrayed are posed. In this image, one woman is sitting on a plinth-like block. Her hands are behind her back, while her head hangs forward, making her hair cover her face and breasts. In front of this woman sits another woman with her legs to the side. She wraps her arms around the right leg of the other woman, and rests her head on her thigh, peering at the camera through her hair.



Figure 2.8
Zanele Muholi
Between Friends
2010

The plain white clothed backdrop with the plinth-like block, and the way these women are posed, alludes to classical sculpture. Classical sculptures such as Auguste Rodin's *The Kiss* (1889) (Figure 2.9) come to mind when looking at the aesthetic qualities of the two women because of their pose. Furthermore, the woman on the block is also reminiscent of the Rubenesque bodies produced by the Flemish Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens (Figure 2.10). The chiaroscuro and the

sculptural nature of these images create an interesting juxtaposition to the intention of the images. The images are sometimes redolent of classical sculpture - sculpture that comes out of a western patriarchal canon. The woman on the floor hanging onto her lover intimately hints at classical sculptures, yet the two bodies in the image are both women. This subverts the western patriarchal ideologies of passionate love between a man and woman, and further subverts these ideas through the Rubenesque woman who falls outside of categories of the slim, toned, classical body depicted in classical sculpture. Through the allusions to European works, juxtaposed with black lesbians, one could argue that Muholi is inserting these women into historical western canons through aesthetic references.



Figure 2.9
Auguste Rodin
The Kiss
1889

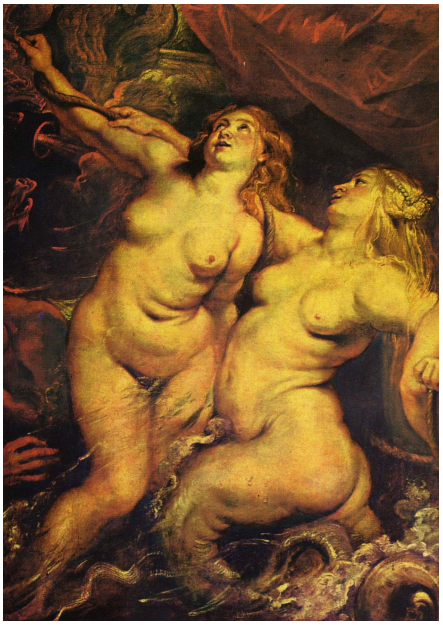

Figure 2.10
Peter Paul Rubens
Women
1625

The black lesbian body then becomes a part of considerations of classical art and the ideologies that followed such a canon through the aesthetic allusions present in Muholi's images to classical works. Furthermore, the hidden face of the central woman once again denies the viewer's gaze, further subverting classical western constructs of desire. The seated woman on the floor gazes without confrontation, she seems vulnerable. The vulnerability is emphasised by her clutching onto her partner's leg, as if her safety lies in this woman. This suggests the intimate and close friendship, further reiterated by the title, between the women. In this respect, the

image suggests that beyond the sexual, these women are friends, and rely on one another; that their sexuality and sexual, choices are not simply physical, but emotional and psychological. Such an idea further inserts a hidden reality into the images, which challenges western historical constructs of idealised sexuality and sensuality in classical sculptures, an observation brought about by the sculptural aesthetics of the image.

Muholi's work ultimately reveals the agency of lesbian women in South Africa by revealing the intimate relationships they form. She gives voice to those considered transgressive in their sexual choices, and allows for lesbian women to be represented and accounted for. Each woman is given agency in that the photograph becomes a platform from which to document the reality of lesbian life in South Africa. Her simultaneous use of ambiguity and familiarity challenges the historical treatment of the black female body.

CHAPTER 3

JODI BIEBER

Introduction

Jodi Bieber is a South African photographer whose work is predominantly based in photojournalism. However, in her series *Real Beauty*, Bieber moved into the realm of fine art photography, producing a series of portraits of a variety of women from different backgrounds. Bieber's *Real Beauty* explores the concept of beauty and the way in which women negotiate their self-identities within cultural notions of what beauty is. The aim of this chapter is to critically analyse a number of portraits from Jodi Bieber's *Real Beauty* series, particularly addressing the way in which Bieber portrays women, and the kinds of identities that play out within the series.

The chapter will begin with an overview of Bieber's career, looking particularly at her crossover from press photographer to portraitist. I will then critically analyse a selection of images from *Real Beauty*, addressing the ways in which Bieber portrays women and the kinds of identities that are represented in the series. This will include a consideration of concepts of beauty and the gaze, along with the writings of Laura Mulvey and her theories on the representation of women in art and society, particularly since her work is focused on photography and film. I will then look at Judith Butler, whose work looks at the way women present their identities, which becomes an important point in light of the women in the portraits being given agency as to how they want to be portrayed. I will use the ideas of these theorists to critically analyse and investigate whether *Real Beauty* contributes to, or challenges the way women are represented in society and photography.

Jodi Bieber: An Introduction

Jodi Bieber is particularly renowned as a photojournalist, specialising in documentary photography. Jodi Bieber was born in Johannesburg in 1967. She completed three short photographic courses at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, after which she was selected to participate in a photographic training programme at *The Star* newspaper under the late Ken Oosterbrook in September 1993 (*Jodi Bieber*, 2012:

para. 1). She continued to work at *The Star* newspaper until 1996, when she was chosen to participate in the World Press Masterclass in Holland; following this, she began working on assignments for international publications such as the *New York Times Magazine*. Her series *Real Beauty* was completed in 2008 and received first prize in the Picture of the Year International Competition in the United States of America, and went on to become one of ten finalists in the Leica Oskar Barnack Awards in 2009 (*Jodi Bieber,* 2012: para. 1). Bieber's early press work often depicted the atrocities of the apartheid regime and the uprisings against this regime, whereas her other works reflect on the societal situations of women in Africa. Her documentary work often features portraits of Afghan women living in oppressive social systems (as seen in Figure 3.1 and 3.2) (*Jodi Bieber,* 2012: para. 1).



Figure 3.1
Jodi Bieber
Pakistan
2001



Figure 3.2
Jodi Bieber
Pakistan
2001

Behind Real Beauty: Concepts and Relevance

In her series *Real Beauty*, Bieber returned to South Africa and began capturing on camera a multitude of women from a range of racial, sexual, and class distinctions. The series comprises portraits which capture a number of women in their domestic environments, posing in their underwear. These images were positively received by American critics and won first prize in the Picture of the Year International Competition (*Jodi Bieber: Curriculum Vitae*, 2014: para. 7), which suggests an interest in images of women who work in opposition to victimised representations of women from African countries.

Each woman is different in the way she presents herself, and is positioned in her own domestic setting. Bieber approached each woman and asked her how she would want to be photographed (*EXHIBIT: Jodi Bieber's "Real Beauty" show in Finland*, 2011: para. 3). This approach relies on the sitter's sense of agency, as well as how she sees herself in terms of her physical appearance and her environment. The images evoke a sense of performativity[17] in this respect, as each sitter plays out how she wants to be portrayed on film. The images range from the demure to the outright confrontational. Some of the images are a denial of constructed ideas of 'woman' and feminine representation, while some incorporate stereotypes as a way of negotiating women's identities and presence in society. Furthermore, the images play out a performativity by allowing each model to partially construct how she wants to be represented (*EXHIBIT: Jodi Bieber's "Real Beauty" show in Finland*, 2011: para. 4). In this respect, the subject takes part in presenting an identity and a story to an audience, both consciously and subconsciously. This 'performance' is based on the sitter's experiences of being women, and how they see themselves fit into ideas of 'beauty'. We could therefore argue that these images simultaneously become images of performance and gender, which I will address later in this chapter.

In *Angie* (2008) we see a woman sitting in front of a white couch with an animal print throw draped over it. She sits with one leg crossed under the other, holding her ankle with one hand. She is dressed in laced black underwear, with her long waved hair falling over her shoulders. Her body is curvaceous; we can see flesh rolls and cellulite, unlike the slimmed and toned bodies seen in beauty magazines. She stares directly at the camera, with her chin slightly tilted downwards, which displays a sense of demure softness in the model's character. The animal print throw is non-descript – it is a leopard print throw, but in black and white, which suggests this is not authentic animal hide. The lighting is natural daylight, creating a fairly even-lit image. Slight shadow creeps in from the left hand side.

[17] Performativity is understood as the use of non-verbal forms of expressive action, to perform a type of constructed identity. It is the construction of identity that is conditioned through social interaction.



Figure 3.3
Jodi Bieber
Angie
2008

Within this image, there are a number of elements that become integral to critically analysing and understanding what Bieber is attempting to say through this, and other portraits from the series. The key elements that stand out in *Angie* are the gaze that she adopts, the body and hair type presented, the accessories and clothing that she chooses to wear, the environment in which she presents herself, and the objects with which she presents herself.

The first notable aspect is the gaze. In *Angie*, the sitter appears relaxed and comfortable, which suggests confidence, yet she appears to be coy through the slight drop of the face, which emphasises her direct gaze towards the camera. Here we see an unfolding of many of the issues raised in the discourses around the desirable gaze. Her gaze is one that elicits both confidence and shyness that tends towards femininity. This presentation of herself adheres to the idea of the construction of the female body to elicit both desire and normality in terms of fitting into a prescribed set of ideals. While she seems to counteract the active viewer's gaze, her demure expression softens that gaze, creating a desirable look, which adheres to passivity through such coyness.

Concepts of the Gaze in Relation to 'Real Beauty'

In *Angie* (2008), we see a complex act in the representation of the sitter. She looks directly at us, giving her a sense of agency: she is controlling the gaze between viewer and sitter, yet her dropped chin reveals shyness, and therefore the gaze objectifies the sitter because of her unease with a strong challenging gaze. The image therefore reveals that the gaze is not fixed; it can simultaneously adhere to and subvert, or challenge, the 'male gaze', as discussed by Mulvey. Angie's challenge to the idea that women has functioned as erotic object to be gazed upon by the person capturing such an image, and as erotic object for the spectator, lies in the fact that *Angie* has been given agency in how and where she wants to be represented. This subverts the traditional objectifying act of the photographer constructing the representation of the sitter. Furthermore, a female photographer is mediating the gaze. In this respect, the traditional 'male gaze' is no longer present, and Angie's direct eye contact is no longer an erotic act.

These traditional or older ideas around the gaze as discussed by Mulvey have become contested in contemporary theory, as the dynamics of the gaze have become constantly challenged and critically analysed in postfeminist society. Feminist art has historically challenged the oppressive and subversive ideas of the gaze as explained by Mulvey (Dekel, 2013: 18). Important feminist artists such as Cindy Sherman used various aesthetic tools to challenge the gaze, such as the self-portrait, which places the subject in control of how she is represented. One can then argue that Mulvey's theory on the gaze is not fixed; it is an idea open to contestation and one that has been challenged with the progression of feminist, and postfeminist, artistic practice and theory. *Angie* enables a realisation that the female gaze is a complex one that can simultaneously hold power, but also revert to being oppressive in the way that person is represented.

Furthermore, there is the issue of race. I speak of the African black body as one that has been constructed as being overtly sexual and exoticised. However, in this image, we are presented with a woman of mixed race. The juxtaposition of the various stereotypes found within the image become a site of tension and are

disrupted by the hybridity of the individual in the photograph. One could argue that her skin, by its very nature of being a mixture of black and white, counteracts rigid categories of what the white body and black body have individually been understood to incite.

Bieber's image entitled *Babalwa* (2008) works differently from that of *Angie* in terms of the gaze, as it is far more confrontational in the way the sitter addresses the viewer. The photograph depicts a curvaceous black woman dressed in white underwear and black heels, standing and looking directly at the camera in a non-descript white room. This image differs from the rest in the series in that we are not given a contextual indication of the environment in which the model is presented. This enables an emphasis on the individual herself - all indicators of who she might be, and the kind of environment she lives in, have been removed. In this respect the image leads us to focus on how she has set herself up for representation. This is not to say that the environment in which Babalwa was photographed is insignificant - I will address the significance of choosing such a surrounding later on - but it does emphasise the body that we are directly looking at.

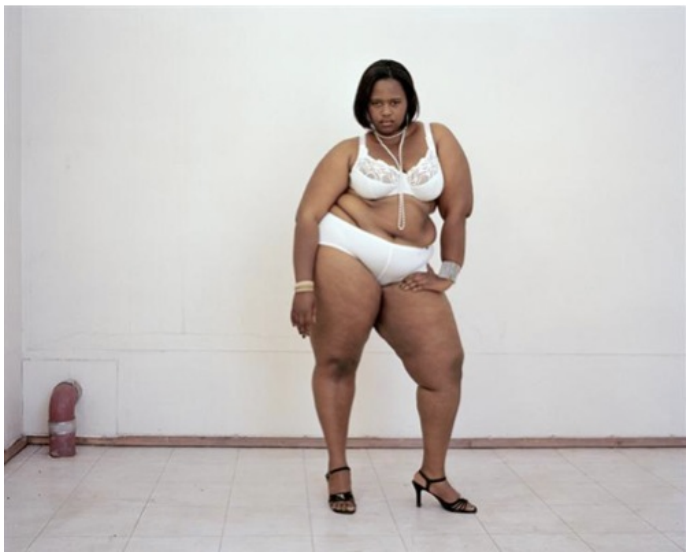

Figure 3.4
Jodi Bieber
Babalwa
2008

The first notable aspect of the image is the confidence that the subject portrays. She stands looking directly at the camera with her chin slightly dropped. However, unlike

in *Angie*, this slight drop of the chin does not come across as demure, but rather as an expression confrontation. She stands in a confident pose, with one leg straight, the other bent slightly outwards, and her hand on her hip. This pose suggests openness towards exposing her body and this, juxtaposed with the fact that she does not fit into societal norms of a slim and lean body, makes the image powerful. The kind of voyeurism that is related to the male gaze is diminished in that we do not feel as if we are looking without permission on an intimate and sexualised moment; rather, we are given a challenging gaze that invites us to look at this black body.

Her gaze challenges the fixed notions of the gaze as being passive for the sitter, and active – and therefore holding power – for the viewer; *Babalwa* therefore reveals an image that challenges pre-existing ideas of the way women are represented. We can therefore understand that Bieber's images enter into this realm of contestation; they express the instability of fixed ideas of gender perception as society continually reconsiders and re-establishes ideas on the relationship of the gaze with the camera. An image like *Babalwa* (2008) presents a direct gaze, but in a more exaggerated way than *Angie* (2007). Here we are confronted by a direct gaze that feels as if we are being asked to look and consider why we are looking, and the reactions we have to what we are looking at.

The gaze here becomes powerful and telling when analysed in relation to the body on display. In *Babalwa* (2008) we as viewers, are left feeling as if she wants us to address whether we feel discomfort from a body that is obese and confident of its difference from that which is expected when representing women's bodies. The body becomes key to understanding these images, particularly when looking at it in relation to beauty. The bodies presented are not traditionally considered as beautiful, but what Bieber is perhaps attempting, is to show that 'ugly' can be beautiful.

The choice of accessories in *Babalwa* is also interesting. Babalwa wears a pearl necklace and diamond bracelets. This choice counteracts stereotypical ideas that link blackness and africanness with beads. Babalwa adorns herself with clothing and accessories that are contemporary, which reminds us that women from so-called third world countries are just as socially part of modernity as Western women are.

Lastly, there is the empty environment that Babalwa inhabits in the image. This is very different from the rest of the images in the series, as most women have placed themselves in a domestic setting, with carpets and couches and so forth, surrounding them. However in *Babalwa*, the sitter stands in an empty tiled room with an exposed pipe on the right hand side. This starkness emphasises the body on display, yet it also suggests something more. The stark room feels cold and empty. The viewer is aware that the women in the series were photographed in their homes, and that this must then be a part of Babalwa's home. This empty concrete room could then allude to stereotypical ideas about how women from so-called third world countries are disadvantaged, and often poor.

However the complexity in the environment lies in its relationship with the way Babalwa presents herself and adorns her body. She wears lace white underwear, and pearl and diamond jewellery. These accessories indicate extravagance, wealth and excess, and therefore stand in stark contrast with the environment. This extravagance in accessories mirrors her body; her body is voluptuous and therefore alludes to the same kinds of excessiveness. This challenges the stereotypical notion of the third world woman as poor victim, a powerless woman of poverty. However, this excessiveness becomes even more complex, because by presenting excess, the image re-inscribes certain stereotypical ideas that stem from western ideology with regard to beauty and women.

Babalwa's excessive appearance, coupled with her extravagant adornments implies that she is indulgent, which relates back to stereotypical notions of black women as being exotic and overly sexual. Excess comes to represent all of the western stereotypes associated with black women. This is further re-iterated by the sensual pose that Babalwa presents to the camera. Babalwa stands in a pose commonly found in fashion and lingerie photo shoots. It is a pose considered to be 'sexy' and, therefore, this pose further enhances the appearance of an overly sexual, exotic, and excessive body. These complex constructions within the image are not immediate. At first, the image appears to subvert traditional ideas of the 'beautiful' woman, by depicting a woman whose body is not considered beautiful by normative western standards. However, on closer inspection, we see that the image does hold inherent stereotypes within it, but these stereotypes enable us to consider how the image

uses them as a way of critically considering what we expect when considering portraits of black women and concepts of beauty.

In many of the images in the series, the contrast of glamour in the accessories with bodies that differ from western idealised notions of beauty create complex juxtapositions that simultaneously adhere to certain stereotypes, while subverting others. This expresses the diversity and complexity of women's identities in South Africa. Each woman displays a number of contradictions, some that subvert, and others that re-enact, certain gender stereotypes. This expresses the multitudinous voices and identities that make up women, dispelling any clear binary categorisations of historical representations of women.

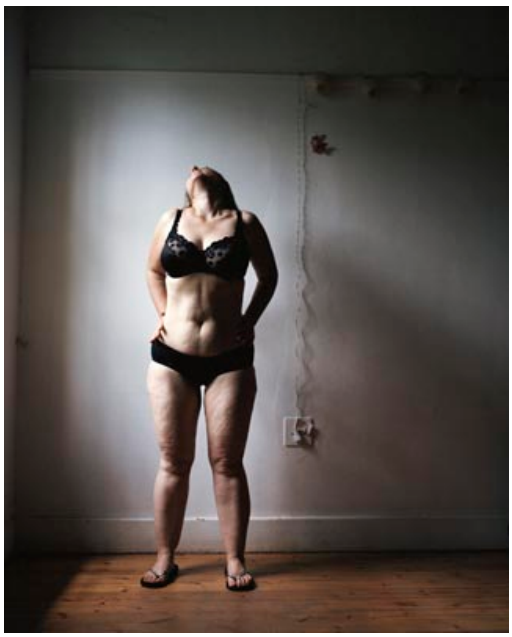

Figure 3.5
Jodi Bieber
Michele
2007

In *Michele* (2007), certain aspects of the image differ to Babalwa, while other aspects offer similar observations. In *Michele,* the gaze is denied. *Michele* depicts a white woman standing in an empty white room. There are no objects in the room, except for a long cord feeding into a plug running behind her. This image, unlike *Angie,* denies any gaze in the image. Michele stands facing the camera straight on, with her hands relaxing on her hips and her feet face slightly outwards from each other. She looks up towards the ceiling, denying the viewer a clear view of her face.

In this image, the gaze is very deliberately broken by the complete lack of eye contact. The denial of both the gaze, and the sitter's face, draws the viewer to Michele's body. This challenges the 'male gaze', as we cannot look at the sitter, which disrupts the desirable gaze. However, the image's emphasis on the sitter's body creates another relationship. The denial of a face, and the emphasis on the body (which is further highlighted by the dramatic window light that falls on, and highlights every curve of, the body) could be said to establish the body as an object. We simply look at the body, rather than at the sitter's face.

When looking at the body, we can see the strong chiaroscuro light on the sitter, which emphasises every 'imperfection' of her body. The image shows the viewer a body that is not slim; it has cellulite, and appears slightly aged. The emphasis on the body perhaps allows the viewer to consider how many images of women emphasise the body, rather than the face. This body, which stands outside of idealised concepts of desire, confronts our expectations when viewing a female figure.

The body is further highlighted by the chord on the wall that runs down the length of Michele's body. The stark environment in which she stands seems to contradict the intimate moment of revealing her almost bare body, and her black lace underwear. Her choice of footwear, slipslops, also appears rather odd in relation to the way in which she has dressed. Her footwear is casual, and not connotative of sensuality, whereas her underwear appears sensual. These juxtaposing elements challenge ideas of glamorised images of female bodies, and the denial of the gaze is what enables viewers to consider the ways in which female bodies are normally displayed in art.

The denial of the gaze removes any relationship of desire with the sitter. She is unaware of us, and appears quite comfortable. This is emphasised by the relaxed way in which her hands sit on her hips, her slipslops, and how she faces the camera straight on, without giving any attention to the ways in which women generally pose to create a flattering presentation of the body. This casual display seems to counteract the ways in which women think about and present their bodies. The lack of a gaze, and the placing of her face in an awkward position, shows that Michele is

comfortable with her body and how it is represented. Here, confidence is not seen through a gaze, but rather through the lack of one.

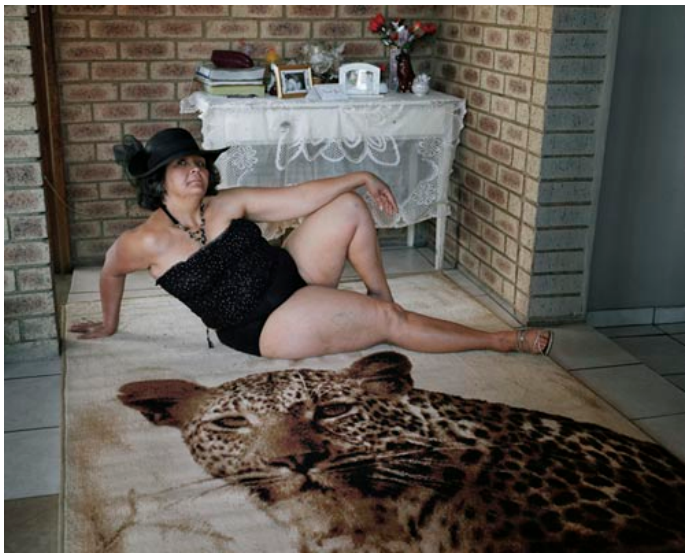

Figure 3.6
Jodi Bieber
Lucille
2008

In *Lucille* (2008). Bieber captures a middle-aged woman sitting on what appears to be an entrance floor in a bathing costume, accessorised with a large hat and necklace. The sitter has a voluptuous figure that reveals bruises and veins on her legs. She sits on a carpet that has a picture of a leopard on it. Behind her sits a table with photographs, books and flowers against a face-brick wall. The sitter, Lucille, reclines on the floor, leaning on her right arm and hand, while her left hand rests on her left knee, which is bent. Lucille lifts her chin and looks directly at the camera with a serious expression on her face. Her reclining pose is inviting; her arms are opened, creating a welcoming appearance and confidence within the sitter. Her chin is slightly raised as she peers from under her hat, as if she is interrogating us. Her expression is not particularly inviting.

Her hard gaze, without a smile or softness in her expression, tends to veer away from a glamorised representation. This is counteracted by her rather glamorous choice of clothing and accessories. Lucille wears no make-up, and reveals the scars and marks on her body, but wears a rather formal black hat, a smart bathing costume, a jewelled necklace and strappy silver sandals. The juxtaposition of these

features plays with the way we read the image. There is simultaneously adornment of the body, and revelation of the body in this image. Furthermore, the carpet on which she sits becomes a strong feature that draws the eye. The sitter's confident reclining pose, juxtaposed with the leopard, makes one think of the sitter as rather wild and flamboyant (also because of the adornment). The choice of sitting on such a carpet incites interesting connotations, such as wildness, yet it also implies a kind of gaudiness, one that reflects stereotyped ideas of Africa, as we are looking at something that reminds us of tourist art and craft. Just as in the choice of placing the leopard print throw in *Angie*, the carpet that Lucille chooses to lie on alludes to exoticised notions of Africa, and therefore re-inscribes certain stereotypes into the images, despite the apparent intention of counteracting and challenging idealised notions of representing women.

Once again, Bieber inscribes certain stereotypes, but then challenges them through the sitter's appearance, Lucille is not the exotic desirable African woman stereotypical representations would normally use to represent beauty. Lucille is older, mixed race, and curvaceous, and therefore subverts the notion of the exoticism of African women, but simultaneously shows that certain stereotypes (such as the choice to display the 'exotic' carpet) are still inherent, even within the culture that has been the recipient of these stereotypes.



Figure 3.7
Jodi Bieber
Claire
2007

The element of sexuality and eroticism in Bieber's images becomes an interesting tool for communication. Many of the women in the series are dressed in erotic or suggestive underwear, a feature that elicits particular observations with regard to subversion. *Claire (2007)* depicts an elderly woman. Claire stands in her kitchen, one hand against the kitchen counter, and the other holding a lit cigarette. She stands directly facing the viewer, wearing black underwear and black stockings, and her right bra strap is hanging off her shoulder. Her hair is grey and in short, loose curls.

Claire faces us, gazing directly at the viewer. This gaze is soft, yet displays confidence. The first thing that is noticed is the strangeness of the relationship between her age and the way she is dressed. As previously mentioned[18], beauty has traditionally been understood as encompassing whiteness, thinness, and youth. Here, we see an elderly woman dressed in noticeably provocative underwear. The juxtaposition of these two elements is at first startling because it is unexpected. The image challenges the idea of what is or is not age appropriate, and addresses how we do not associate sexual provocation with older women. Her body is exposed, displaying the effects of aging on a woman's body, yet it is not grotesque or abject as older age is traditionally considered to be. This is achieved through the direct gaze and the youthful way in which Claire dresses herself.

What stands out in this image is the clothing and accessories, and the relationship of these to the environment in which Claire positions herself. Her presentation is one that is sensual and erotic, particularly in a traditionally male gaze. The black-laced underwear is considered as being erotic, whilst the lit cigarette adds to this sensuality. Many erotic images of women generally depict them in sensual lingerie, and the cigarette has often been considered as a sign of provocation and 'loose' morals (Waldeck, 2011: para. 2), as well as a sign of insubordination (Lezard, 2005: para. 5). However, these objects are generally shown in connection with young women. In this way, *Claire* challenges ageist notions of beauty and erotic sexuality that are more often assigned to youthfulness.

[18] See Chapter 1, page 44.

This subversion is further emphasised by the choice of environment. The choice of posing in the kitchen is particularly tongue-in-cheek. Here is an older woman, wearing provocative clothing, but in a domestic, and often considered 'womanly', environment. The kitchen has historically been assigned as the 'woman's place' (Pujol, 1995: 13). According to Pujol (1995: 13), women have traditionally played a weaker role in economics. Pujol explains that women have historically been economically dependant on men, taking up roles as housewives and caregivers (1995: 13). *Claire* displays traditional ideas of eroticism and idealism that men assign to women, yet this is subverted by Claire's age and confident gaze, which accompany this untraditional image. In this portrait, certain stereotypes and ideals are established and displayed, yet they are simultaneously challenged and transgressed by displaying a woman who fits outside of the stereotyped notion of what traditionally constitutes beauty: youth. Furthermore, her confident expression creates a sense of power over her environment; it appears as if this is where she wants to be depicted. Her hand leaning on the counter expresses a strong sense of ownership, as if her power over her environment is not submissive or oppressive, but assertive.

A noticeable feature of all of the images in Bieber's series is the eroticism that is present. All of these images present bodies that stand outside of idealised notions of western beauty, yet all of them display eroticism. All of the sitters dress provocatively, and they all exude sensuality and sexuality. This creates another site of tension as the images simultaneously challenge ideas that only western 'beauty' can be erotic and sexually open, but also re-inscribe notions of overt sexuality as being typically African, and created purely by men. Discussions around the choice of underwear will be addressed in the comparative analysis in Chapter four.

The erotic sexuality displayed in many of the images adheres to the expected social norms of idealised notions of feminine beauty. This releases a tension in the way we read the image as we see the tropes and essentialist notions of what femininity is, performed by the woman in the portrait. This idea of performativity is significant, particularly with the knowledge that the sitter has chosen to present herself this way. In this respect, the model re-inscribes the same stereotypical expectations of feminine appearance that the images are attempting to dismantle.

As previously mentioned[19], power relations come into play in the photographic gaze, and the person being looked at also becomes significant in the desirable gaze. Mulvey explains that while looking itself is a source of pleasure, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at, which influences the way women present and negotiate their appearance in society (1989: 16). This idea of being aware of the gaze and moulding one's appearance and representation to the desires of society could be understood as the defining aspect of what Judith Butler categorises as "gender performativity" (Butler, 1999: 7)

Judith butler, in her book *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), explains that gender is performed. This means that the particular way in which we behave (according to our gender) is subconsciously taught at an early age. Butler explains that human beings enact the various feminine or masculine tropes that are assigned to the categorisations of gender through society (1990: 226). Many feminist theorists (such as Judith Butler, Simone De Beauvoir) have addressed how there is a distinction between sex and gender: that sex is biologically determined, but gender is socially and contextually determined (West & Zimmerman, 1987: 126).

According to Judith Butler (*Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, 2010: 8), we are subconsciously assigned gender roles through our interactions with society from a young age. Society instinctively determines the categories that define man from woman, and then perpetually inscribes these ideas onto a variety of things such as dress, behaviour, and social expectations. This results in further categorical expectations and ideals that individuals then strive toward so as to be a part of that society. The body then becomes subjected to normalising practices, in order to fit in with society's ideals and expectations. In doing so, human beings are enacting and performing their gender according to the ideals of society. This is done not only amongst women, but men as well.

[19] Chapter 3, page 87.

The Politics of the Gaze in Relation to Performativity

The idea of enacting gender becomes important when we look at the way women are represented in photography and society for that matter. In a series such as *Real Beauty*, the sitters have been given a degree of agency through Bieber's allowing them to select how and where they want to be photographed. Once there is a sitter, a photographer, and camera between the two, we could argue that the previously mentioned ideas of scopophillia, and the politics of the gaze come into being. These, however, are simultaneously uprooted by the photographer being female, as well as the agency that each sitter is given in choosing how she wants to be portrayed. Because the sitter is aware of there being a camera, and that these images are going to be viewed by the general public, we could argue that certain elements of performed desire and identity may subconsciously surface as that photograph is taken.

According to Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993), many theorists (such as Mary Wollstonecraft) have drawn attention to the way in which dominant discourses in society prescribe norms in relation to which subjects regulate their own bodies. Bordo explains that our bodies are continually and constantly shaped, trained and impressed in order to uphold societal norms (1993: 91), and we could therefore understand this behaviour as a form of performance. This behaviour is reflected in the ways in which women become involved in arduous regimes of dieting, make-up, exercise, dress and cosmetic surgery as they attempt to shape their bodies to societal models of a normative body. Judith Butler extends on this by stating that this disciplinary practice is the very process whereby gendered subjects come into existence (1990: 227). Bordo explains that such disciplinary practices are situated within power relations. She explains that women actively discipline their bodies not only to avoid social punishments, but also to derive certain kinds of pleasure (1993: 91). In this respect, these disciplinary practices are carried out to comply with societal forms and constructs of power, and are simultaneously practised through aspiring to hold certain kinds of power, such as desire.

According to Judith Butler (1990: 12), every time we dress, behave or interact, we perform gender. These gendered performances are ones which we act out ourselves and which others act out in relation to us. They are acted out in accordance with social scripts, prescribing ideals which are unrealisable, but which nonetheless provide the framework for our activities (Butler, 1990: 12). These dominant ideals reinforce the power of certain ideals such as femininity and masculinity where that which falls outside of the dominant ideal becomes understood as 'other'. With this in mind, we understand that the image reconstructs the performance, yet there lies a tension in this performance with regard to the title *Real Beauty*, which raises an important question: why display the tropes of femininity in a series that attempts to raise how beauty is undefined?

The images from the series are particularly interesting in that they establish many stereotypes, but we become aware that the models have chosen to represent themselves in this way. This representation exposes the inherent way in which women continue to identify themselves according to stereoptypical ideals, despite attempting to dismantle the essentialist binaries of what is feminine and what is masculine. While such an observation may not have been the intention in Bieber's work, the series elicits the response of questioning the seemingly stereotypical allusions to idealised femininity. The series shows how, in light of the agency given to the sitter by allowing her to decide on the pose and setting of the portrait, the model re-enacts the same oppressive systems of identification that the act of agency should challenge.

This relates to Judith Butler, who explains that whenever we use a term or perform an act, we are engaged in a practice of citation (1990: 140). Our usage echoes imagined past and possible future uses, in a way that does not produce stability of meaning. As Butler explains, "The action of gender requires a performance that is repeated" (1990: 140), but these repetitions "are never simply replicas of the same" (1993: 226). Butler explains that if these performances are repeated in different contexts, then different meanings can emerge which subvert dominant ones. This is where *Real Beauty* becomes more than simply a stereotypical depiction of women. The performativity within the photograph, in light of our current context of a feminist and postfeminist approach to addressing representations of women, changes the

way we receive what is being represented. We are aware of the stereotypes represented because of our awareness of the discourse surrounding women's representation and roles within society. We are aware of the way in which the photograph has been used as a tool for constructing identities within society over the centuries. This enables us to realise the tensions of gender representation when we are faced with an image of this kind and, perhaps, this is what Bieber is attempting to elicit.



Figure 3.8
Jodi Bieber
Tina
2007



Figure 3.9
Jodi Bieber
Ndingi
2007

Performed gender is particularly seen in *Tina* (2007), and *Ndingi* (2007) by the environmental décor, as well as the choice in undergarments that each sitter wears. The first thing viewers may notice when looking at both these images is the pink and red décor. Both sitters recline on their beds. Tina's bed is filled with soft toys and Ndingi's, with red pillows, one of which has the word 'love' embroidered on it. Both sitters gaze directly at the camera, and both wear predominantly pink underwear. A prominent element in these images is the colour of the women's bed linen.

Tina's bed is covered in a pink duvet, with pink pillows. Tina also wears pink underwear. Pink is generally understood to be the colour that connotes 'love', or 'femininity' (*Pink. En/Gendering a Colour*, 2013: para. 2). The connotations then create a feminine mood in the photograph. So, when we look at Tina, we are immediately struck by the large amount of pink in the image. The softness, or

‘femininity’ conveyed in the image becomes more complex with the addition of the soft toys on the bed. The combination of the pink and the toys on the bed suggest that this is the room of either a very young, or teenaged, girl. However, Tina appears to be older than what her environment communicates.

The image seems to express the inherent condition of constructing one’s environment according to ideals set by society. Here Tina seems like a young girl because her environment is reminiscent of a teenager’s bedroom. Tina’s gaze appears to communicate a sense of lost youth, which is reinforced by the fact that she holds on to objects from her childhood. Her pink underwear seems too small for her body - the right breast does not fit into the bra. The performativity here lies in Tina’s inherent choices in the way she presents herself and her environment. This image reveals the inherent nature of gender, and how simple connotations of gender conventions become normalised and re-enacted by those assigned such gender categories. Tina unknowingly plays out gender conventions by decorating her room in pink, with soft toys; she therefore re-establishes the conventions that are constructed according to gender.

In *Ndingi*, these indicators of femininity are less overt than in *Tina*. Ndingi lies on a bed covered in a red duvet with matching pillows. The most prominent pillow sits behind her, a heart trimmed in pink fur with the word ‘love’ embroidered in yellow. Ndingi lies on her side facing the camera, with one arm resting on her hip, and the other supporting her head. She wears a pink lace negligee and black lace underpants. This image holds similar gender conventions to *Tina*. The red connotes love, while the pink heart and negligee connote femininity as constructed by society. Once again, these constructed indicators of femininity reveal the inherent nature of gender constructions and performativity. Each woman shows herself as stereotypically feminine through her choice of undergarments and environment. The images reveal how women are conditioned to like certain colours and garments that reflect their gendered selves. This does not mean that these women are complacent in such constructions, but it does reveal the deeply inherent nature of being subconsciously taught certain gender conventions.

Furthermore, Butler stresses that these gendered performances in society incorporate a presumptive heterosexuality, but also reflect class, race, cultural positioning and age (1990: 140). In terms of race, some of the images from the series present certain stereotypes concerning African identities with regard to women. This observation emerges from the response to the surroundings in which the model is positioned. If we go back to some of the previously analysed images, such as *Angie* (2008), the choice of the animal printed throw is interesting as we see this is a mock print of an animal hide, alluding to a fake, constructed idea of the 'African woman'. As mentioned in the previous chapter,[20] western art and literature perpetuated the myth of the erotically charged black woman. The inclusion of the leopard-print throw in *Angie*, and the leopard carpet in *Lucille* evokes ideas of 'primitivity' as it reflects back to stereotypical notions of an exoticised Africa. As in Muholi's *Being (T)here*, the throw and carpet are similar to the African beads, as they carry the same notions of the myths created out of the touristic consumption of African goods.

The images in the series hold tension within them as they simultaneously try to show agency, but then show how women re-inscribe these ideals and constructs. In this respect, one could argue that the images adhere to idealised representations of women, but it is the self-reflexivity of the images - the act of eliciting a response and critique of what is being shown - that challenges what is being viewed. The re-inscription of certain tropes reveals how through societal conditioning of identities into distinct and rigid categories and myths, women have been conditioned to re-enact these stereotypical representations on a continual basis.

The fact that Bieber's images have not been manipulated or airbrushed is of equal importance to the agency of allowing each 'sitter' to decide on how she chooses to be represented. We see every flaw of the body and face: scars, cellulite, skin discolouration and fat are all blatantly on display. This is further emphasised by the use of natural lighting. According to Bourdieu (Skeggs, 2007: 7), the body experienced is always a social body made up of meanings and values, gestures, postures, physical bearing, speech and language. Bourdieu explains that children

[20] Refer to Chapter 1, page 25.

intimately learn to experience wider structural features through the body, but this body experienced is not just an experience of the structural, but is always entwined with the child's physical and sexual presence in relation to others (Skeggs, 2007: 7). The experience and consideration that occur in relation to others determines the way in which we negotiate what is and what is not acceptable; this leads to the conditioning and disciplining of the body to comply with societal norms.

The fact that we are confronted with a body that exposes every 'flaw' or rather, every living reality of that physical form, makes us aware that we compare that body to our own. This opens up awareness that our own insecurities of our bodies are often related to a comparison with others within society. The decision to avoid manipulation, and the model's confidence in the exposure of her body, counteracts the coyness that occurs in negotiating our physical and sexual presence. This reinforces Bourdieu's idea that the comparisons that we practise in order to negotiate our own experienced bodies are a dialectical process that involves objectification, in which some features become objectified over time and become embedded in society and culture when they are repeated on a continual basis. The confidence that the model projects reveals how this body is not an object of disgrace because it stands outside of mass media's representations of the perfect body as slim and smooth; rather, it shows that this body is as deserving of admiration and pleasurable gaze despite its difference in comparison to normative conceptions of the 'ideal'.

The Agency of the 'Subject'

The choice of allowing each individual who was chosen to feature in the series to decide on how she wanted to be represented becomes particularly important. The agency in deciding how to be presented becomes a form of autobiography. These women are essentially creating an autobiography through an image. The idea of autobiography is particularly pertinent to ideas of the postcolonial subject in relation to feminist discourse. In *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (1998) the editors, Watson and Smith, compiled a number of essays that address whether autobiography is a model for imperialising the consciousness of colonised peoples, or whether it is a medium of resistance and

counter discourse which throws doubt on the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography. The women in these images are, to some extent, creating an autobiography, even though it is of a short moment in time.

They have chosen how they wish to be represented, which is similar to creating a self-portrait so, in some way, these images are partly autobiographical. Caren Kaplan, in her essay *Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects* (1998)[21], explains how feminist theories have entered debates around the concept of autobiography, questioning its generic definitions and traditions in order to challenge the primarily masculine conventions and canons of autobiography. The entire volume, as well as Kaplan's essay, relates particularly to written autobiography; however, Kaplan states that it can be related back to a variety of mediums that deal with autobiography. Kaplan addresses whether or not autobiography is recoverable as a feminist writing strategy in the context of transnational affiliations among women. Kaplan further explores how the term 'global feminism' has been co-opted in many cases into part of a neo-imperialist project that constructs western agendas and subjects for women in non-western locations (1998: 127). This links back to Chandra Talpade Mohanty's analysis that the function of the global in western feminist discourses reveals a process of dehistoricization, in which politics and ideology as self-conscious struggles and choices are written out.

Kaplan explains that the act of autobiography, in claiming these agendas and struggles for themselves, allows for a more accurately driven representation of the realities of women living outside of the west. Creating a first-hand account enables a deconstruction of the "master" narratives and genres, which reveals the power dynamics embedded in artistic production, distribution, and reception of images.

The mode of agency that each sitter has been allowed enables this very act of deconstructing master narratives and western accounts of the experienced realities of women. The choice of Angie's construction to present herself with the ephemera of mythical representations of the 'African' body, such as the unruly hair, and the re-enactment of the desirable gaze, opens up a platform for deconstructing these

[21] Featured in Watson and Smith's *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (1998).

indications of stereotypical representations. The act of placing them in the image creates tension between the idea of autobiography and constructed identity; however, this simultaneously asks us to question the assumptions of what it is to be an African woman.

As Kaplan explains, “For the subject of autobiographic writing (or photography in this case), to circulate in transnational culture as author, essentialist mythologies of identity and authorship must be challenged and bracketed in favour of reading strategies that acknowledge the complexities of power in the production of life writing from non-western locations” (1998: 127). This is precisely what the images do. They evoke and re-enact the very mythologies that construct them. There are, however, tensions within the representations (such as mixed race in *Angie*, and the confrontational approach of *Babalwa*) which acknowledge historical exploitation. The images reveal how the adoption of mythologies can become an inherent part of those being affected by these constructed essentialist identities.

What is particularly important about these images is how they reflect how women’s bodies have become a site of tension; they have become both symbols of inherent western ideologies, and also challenging sites of transgressing these western ideologies. What remains is that *Real Beauty* challenges many preconceived ideas of beauty, despite less awareness of this series in comparison to Bieber’s work after *Real Beauty*.

After ‘Real Beauty’

After *Real Beauty*, Bieber gained even more international recognition with her portrait of Afghan woman, Bibi Aisha. The portrait shows Bibi Aisha whose ears and nose had been cut off by her husband and brother-in-law after she tried to flee her abusive marriage. The image was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine, and won the 2011 World Press Photo of the Year. This was at the height of the American military invasion of Afghanistan. This invasion sought to abolish the Taliban regime, which is seen as violent and oppressive towards Afghan women (Dupree, 2001: 145). This image therefore became a fitting symbol of the violence inflicted upon

women by the Taliban regime, and was highly revered for its political and social relevance at the time.



Figure 3.10
Jodi Bieber
Bibi Aisha
2011

The image of Bibi Aisha could be considered one that reveals many of the preconceptions about women from the third world[22]. One could argue that the image of Bibi relates back to Mohanty's comments on how the problem with western feminism is that it essentialises and homogenises women's identities,[23] leading to notions of victimhood when addressing women from the third world. The image does reveal Bibi as a victim; however, the image has often been lauded for its ability to show strength within the sitter. Of course, photojournalism tends towards these kinds of images, as it has historically been generalised as a genre that attempts to objectively raise awareness of certain events for news media, and therefore often depicts the mistreatment of human rights around the world. Many journalists have applauded the image for depicting Bibi as a survivor, rather than a victim (Phillips, 2011: para. 6). However, the portrait still remains an example of the kinds of images the international community praises. The portrait of Aisha is still one that shows the

[22] Refer to Chapter 1, page 29.
[23] Mohanty states that Western feminism lies in the assumption of women as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires. This leads to a homogenous notion of the oppression of women, which in turn, creates an image of an average 'third world woman'. This generalised assumption constructs women of the third world as being ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, and victimised.

powerlessness and oppression that women often endure, and could therefore still be considered an image that depicts women from the so-called third world as being oppressed.

In *Real Beauty*, Bieber moves away from photojournalism, and counteracts general trends of portraying women as victims by constructing images that reflect agency on the part of those being photographed. Despite this, it is her documentary work, and particularly the image of Bibi Aisha, that has given Bieber her status as an award-winning press photographer. The image has come to frame Bieber's career, as can be seen in the way the Goodman Gallery (in Johannesburg) represents Bieber. On the Goodman Gallery website, Bieber's artist profile features her image of Bibi Aisha. The image was not taken for fine art purposes, or for the Goodman gallery, yet the Goodman offers the print for sale. Many of the available articles on *Real Beauty* begin with a mention of Bieber's image of Bibi Aisha, which is a telling sign of the kinds of images that the international community receives with fervour, despite *Real Beauty's* pre-dating the image of Bibi Aisha.

Bieber's background as a photojournalist becomes particularly important when addressing *Real Beauty*, as the series is considered to be a move away from photojournalism into fine art photography. The way in which the sitters in *Real Beauty* are represented was carefully considered and constructed with the thematic idea of what real beauty is to those being photographed.

Bieber's documentary work from her time at *The Star* tends to hold many of the pre-conceived conventions of documentary photography. Her documentary work displays the urgency and un-manipulated manner (Figure 3. 11 and 3.12) in which press photographs are conventionally understood, and exhibits a seemingly different aesthetic to *Real Beauty*. One could argue that her background as a press photographer has brought in an element of critical analysis to what she photographs. Documentary photography practitioners follow ethical codes that involve objectivity and criticality. This enables a documentary photojournalist such as Jodi Bieber to consider how one negotiates a more constructed and planned series in terms of what she is representing. Yet both her photojournalism and fine art portraits have won various international awards.



Figure 3.11
Jodi Bieber
Untitled
1993



Figure 3.12
Jodi bieber
The Train Carrying Illegal Immigrants back to Mozambique
2000

It could be said that Bieber's relevance as a documentary photographer has enabled her to gain recognition in her fine art work. Furthermore, her training in a form of photography that is generally considered to be based on truth and objectivity (although this has been contested as well) has possibly enabled a series that, despite being placed within a fine art trajectory, was conceived with very clear objectives and a critical awareness of the kinds of issues that could come into play when representing women through portraits. This influences the way in which we read the images: we consider them as critical rather than normative because we understand the series as a portion of a larger portfolio of work that appears to raise awareness and issues of individuals living outside the west.

The idea of *Real Beauty* as a counterpoint to general notions of what beauty is can be understood when considering Bieber's cross-over from documentary photographer to art photographer. We inevitably have to consider the influence of photojournalism on this series and understand that Bieber's press background could impact on the way the images are produced and received. The very title of the series can be read in a variety of ways: as a statement that this is real beauty or as a question of what constitutes real beauty. Given the nature of documentary photography, makes us consider various events and behaviours within society through the lens of 'truth', *Real Beauty* could be seen as an interrogation into what Naomi Wolf terms "the beauty myth" (1991). As documentary photography relies on uncovering and interrogating societal situations and events - a non-fictional narrative

that aids in investigation and uncovering in order to show truth - Bieber's press background could explain the possible trajectory of a series such as *Real Beauty.*

CHAPTER FOUR

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND CONSIDERATIONS OF THE POSTCOLONIAL AND POSTFEMINIST

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I addressed Zanele Muholi and Jodi Bieber's work as separate bodies for analysis. I explored how Muholi's work centres on issues of race and sexuality, whereas Bieber's work centres on concepts of beauty and performativity. Both photographers were analysed through an exploration of the gaze, the way the body was presented, and the way in which the works challenged or adhered to particular social constructions.

The first aim of this chapter will address each artist's work in relation to the other. I will consider if and how their works differ, and I will identify the similarities in their work in terms of production and the representation of the women. Once a comparative analysis has been presented, the second aim of the chapter will examine whether or not their work and the observations from my analyses relate to postcolonial and postfeminist discourses, and what effect these observations have on our understanding of South African art by women artists. This will include whether or not these two artists speak back to a western trajectory, or if they establish a canon of their own through a comparative mode of analysis. I will then. I will then consider what kind of a trajectory this establishes of South African women photographers.

Zanele Muholi and Jodi Bieber: An introduction to the Comparative Analysis

The works of Bieber and Muholi are quite different, yet are ideologically similar. Many of the differences are immediately obvious: Bieber's images do not disclose the sitters' sexual orientation, whereas Muholi emphasises and purposefully photographs lesbian women. Most of Muholi's images are in black and white, while Bieber's *Real Beauty* is in colour. These differences express the diversity of representations within the images.

This shows how South African women photographers do not necessarily work under similar trajectories in terms of style and meaning. The works stand as an account of each artist's individual approach to how women are represented. This becomes important when looking at the similarities of the images, for the similarities do not create a homogenised package of how South African women photographers approach the representation of women. Rather, the similarities give us an idea of the canon into which these photographers fit, and of the importance of these similarities in establishing a pattern in the images.

Comparative Analysis of Jodi Bieber and Zanele Muholi's Work

It becomes clear that we need to address the similarities and differences of the images by each artist, particularly the distinct features found in the images, which will enable a deeper analysis of what these images do and say in terms of representing women. The gazes present, the body and hair type presented, the accessories and clothing, and environment in which each series presents its sitters, all enable a deeper analysis and understanding of what the images say about the state of women's identities in South Africa.

Both series use nudity, though not always complete nudity. Both series show elements of nudity, literally uncovering the female body. This could also be interpreted as a figurative uncovering of women and of their identities: stripping their identities down to their very core. This idea becomes more complex when we examine the two series side by side.

The series are quite different from each other in terms of their content and aesthetics. Zanele Muholi's aim is solely to present black lesbian women in photography. She explains that her intent is to create an archive, to produce evidence of black lesbianism into the South African canon of art. Jodi Bieber does not focus on the sexual orientation of her sitters, but rather, investigates notions of beauty with regard to the female body in representation. Furthermore, the choice of colour in Bieber's series, in contrast to the black and white of Muholi's *Being,* is particularly interesting because of Bieber's background in photojournalism.

Traditionally, in photojournalism, the images are black and white. In a series that tends towards a type of documentary that records ideas of real beauty, the choice of colour adds a sense of fine art aesthetics. In contrast, Muholi's choice of black and white is interesting because the images come across as art - they are abstract, ambiguous, and it is not always clear who is being photographed. Muholi adopts an aesthetic that is linked to documentary work, and works under the term 'activist', yet her work is more than just that; it comes across as artistic. There are also evidently different ideologies with which each photographer approached her series. This shows that not all women artists are concerned with the same things, despite their working as women photographing women. Their differences in ideas and aesthetics exemplify the diversity of images being produced by women photographers in Southern Africa.

The Gaze in Comparison

The gaze became a central element in the study of each series, revealing interesting ways of communication with regard to each artist's images. Both series use the gaze to challenge traditional ideas of the gaze being an oppressive force. However, each series does so quite differently. Sometimes the images subvert patriarchal oppression by denying the gaze, while in other images, both artists use the gaze as a form of subversion.

In *Zinzi and Tozama III, Mowbray* (2007) (Figure 2.2), there is no direct gaze, in contrast to the very direct gaze of *Brenda* (2007) (Figure 4.1). The lack of a direct gaze in *Zinzi and Tozama III, Mowbray* subverts the oppressive gaze that is traditionally assigned to representations of women. Coupled with the ambiguity of the figure facing her back to us, the viewer may assume that they are looking at a heterosexual couple. These denials of outright sexualised and desired poses and gazes challenge what the viewer thinks they are looking at. Furthermore, the lack of a gaze emphasises the intimacy of the moment being captured and challenges notions of oppressive systems of representation, such as the 'male gaze'.



Figure 4.1
Jodi Bieber
Brenda
2007

This stands in stark contrast to *Brenda,* where we are struck by the particularly direct gaze. However, this gaze is not oppressive as is traditionally seen in representations of women. It emphasises her confidence, making it seem as if she is questioning our gaze and not as if she is the object of it. These particular gazes are not constant in each photographer's work.

Muholi also uses the gaze in certain instances to challenge the patriarchal gaze. In Muholi's *Refilwe and Vuyiswa I, Johanesburg* (2010) (Figure 4.2), the women in the portrait look directly at the viewer. However, the challenging gaze of this image lies within the fact that these are two women in an intimate embrace. The same occurs in *Angie*: she gazes directly at us. She challenges us to look on her imperfect body. The gaze is familiar in both images because we are aware of traditional representations of women.



Figure 4.2
Zanele Muholi
Refilwe and Vuyiswa I, Johanesburg
2010

In this respect, both images do two different things: first, they make us aware of the conventions of portraits of women; second, when we look at them beyond the gaze, particularly looking at the bodies depicted, the juxtaposition makes us aware that this is not 'normal' in relation to conventional images of women. These images use conventions to challenge the way we view and consider images of women. This is an important aspect, this sense of familiarity that lies within both photographer's work. Bieber and Muholi's work holds a sense of familiarity: we are familiar with the sensual and sexual nature that is being put forward to the viewer, yet there are certain elements that subvert this familiarity.

These gazes in relation to the bodies on display highlight the subversion that each photographer brings into her works. Both artists display bodies that challenge the norms and conventions of traditional representations of women. Bieber's bodies are not slim, smooth and airbrushed - they reveal scars and cellulite; Muholi's bodies, too, display scars, cellulite and other markings. These bodies are sensual and sexual in certain images, which makes them familiar, yet the corporeal "flaws" that are revealed challenge the oppressive nature of sensuality that is often assigned to and represented in images of women. Furthermore, Muholi's sitters are lesbian couples,

photographed by a lesbian female, which further subverts the act of the oppressive male gaze. Here we see that both artists use certain conventions: the sensuality and sexuality often involved in the male gaze is used, yet subverted and challenged by its juxtaposition with other factors, such as bodies and relationships that society does not normally associate with desire or 'beauty'.

The Environment in Comparison

The environment depicted in each series is also an interesting aspect to address in terms of how each artist visually negotiates women's identities in visual culture. Muholi's images generally do not give any context to the sitters. The environments in which they are photographed are mostly unseen. For example, in *Zinzi and Tozama, Mowbray II* (2010) (Figure 4.30), there is little indication of where the women live, or how they live in the image. All we see is a white curtain to the right of the two women in the photograph. This emphasises the unobstructed nature of the image. We are looking in on the intimacy of two women. All indicators of their social ranking are removed, and we are left to focus on the women alone. In contrast, Bieber's images often show a highly visible surrounding. In an image such as *Lucille*, we see many things that point to Lucille's social identity, such as her books, pictures, and decorative objects. These contextual objects all indicate what class or social distinction she fits into.



Figure 4.3
Zanele Muholi
Zinzi and Tozama II, Mowbray
2010

The sitters chose where they wanted to be photographed, and this indicates how women's identities are often moulded by the material objects they surround themselves with, and the environments which they inhabit. The women in Bieber's images become, to some extent, commodities in themselves because of their relationship to these objects in the portrait. The way they decide to display themselves amongst their possessions causes us look at them with this in mind. This creates an objectified body, a convention of traditional portraits of women by men photographers. However, this could be a very deliberate choice on the part of the photographer, as we become aware that these environmental choices enable us to truly consider a women's self worth in terms of her identity.

Interestingly, Muholi's images also use certain conventions in this respect, but in a very different way. Most of the women in Muholi's portraits are usually in bed, which becomes a symbol of sex and intimacy, particularly when shown with two women. Here, the female body is associated with sexuality and a place where a man and a woman would have sexual encounters. As a result, we view the women in the images knowing that they allude to sex and desire. However, the power of the images lies in the fact that the convention is subverted and challenged by two women being shown in an intimate pose, rather than a heterosexual couple. Once again, as with Bieber, conventions are used, but subverted by an awareness of these images as constructs.

The Presence of Accessories and the Exposure of Underwear within the Environment

The presence of jewellery and underwear in *Real Beauty* also provides background information on these women (in this respect, Bieber's work becomes a sociological study of the kinds of social identities women hold, as opposed to Muholi's more particular study of lesbian identity). Jewellery represents wealth and adornment. Women traditionally wear jewellery to decorate their bodies, and therefore the body becomes an object on display. Lucille wears a chunky necklace and a flamboyant hat. These objects, coupled with Lucille's environment, which also displays objects, reveal Lucille as an object like those around her. Lucille is not slim, and youthful, and

would therefore not be considered an object of idealised desire, but this perhaps reveals how the ‘different’ body is also seen as an object. In this respect, Bieber shows that the act of adorning one’s body is prevalent amongst women, yet also reveals how society considers female bodies. Lucille expresses how bodies that stand outside of idealised norms are also treated as objects.

The critical observation of the body, and the way it is presented, complicates the conventions depicted. Muholi’s images show women who wear very little jewellery, or jewellery they wear on a daily basis, and which they likely never take off. It is not big or flamboyant, but understated. This detracts our attention from the gendered acts of adornment that have come to be associated with women, and allows for the image to become about the two women and their intimate embrace.

Body adornment is a cultural feature that has been prevalent amongst women for centuries. Many feminist writers and theorists (such as Laurie Hicks, Mary Roach, and Joanne Eicher), as well as social anthropologists, draw attention to how the body communicates meaning and plays a role in constructing power relation amongst individuals. According to Hicks (2005: para. 6), the body has historically and cross-culturally been marked, adorned and formed in accordance with prevailing human ideologies and social convictions. According to Roach and Eicher (1995: 1), personal adornment is an aesthetic act, one that is not born out of a vacuum, but a learned act from others. The undressing and dressing of the sitters in both series become important markers of the way in which women construct their identities, and markers of the historical ideologies that indicate certain aspects of identity (such as class, and status). Roach and Eicher explain that adornment becomes a notifier of certain symbolic aspects, such as a symbol of mood, a statement of social worth, as an indicator of economic status, and as a signifier of sexuality (1995: 1). Roach and Eicher further explain that adornment is often executed in an attempt to be considered aesthetically pleasing, as well as sexually enticing to the opposite sex (1995: 1).

Dress used to entice people may be considered within two settings: private and public. Private or intimate settings are indicated through the bedroom. This is seen through items such as lingerie, or a lack of garments, such as nakedness. So, when

we see underwear or nakedness, we subconsciously associate these women with sex. In *Real Beauty*, the underwear the women choose to wear is telling. Most of them choose lace or slightly transparent undergarments, which comes across as being sexier than plain, durable fabric underwear. This choice shows us that these women think about the way they are going to be viewed by the viewer, and that being sexually alluring is more aesthetically pleasing. In this respect, the underwear is utilised as a tool that re-iterates the idea of women as objects of sexual desire.

In comparison with Muholi's images, Bieber's women come across as being more sexualised, which is a result of their underwear. The underwear reinforces stereotypical fashion aesthetics, which are used to construct a sexualised female body. Muholi's images tend to feel muted in comparison. There is no straightforward nudity (we do not see breasts or genitals), and we do not see any clothing, apart from jeans in some images. Although the images are of couples in intimate embraces engaging in (however staged they may be) sexual acts, these women are not overtly sexualised. The sexuality does not come across as performed as is the case in Bieber's images.

This can be seen when looking at Bieber's *Dianne* (2007) (Figure 4.4) in relation to Muholi's *Being* (2007) (Figure 4.5). *Dianne* appears to more 'sexually enticing' in the way she is portrayed. The black lace underwear, paired with black high heels emphasises the idea of Dianne as an object upon which one gazes with desire. Underwear of this nature holds certain connotations, particularly that of sexual desire and the display of those sexual desires. According to Tseelon (1995: 14), fashion has historically functioned as a technology of social control, legitimising social distinctions. Tseelon goes on to explain that these ideologies have been evident for centuries. In Medieval times, anything deemed 'immodest' was considered transgressive and deviant. According to Tseelon, religion also played a role in ideologies pertaining to the female body. Within the earliest Judaeo-Christian teachings, the female body has been considered the location of seduction and sin (1995: 15). Tseelon further explains that in Medieval Christianity, the female body, either naked or decorated, was also constructed as the location of desire, and the 'ensnaring' of men. These ideologies were targeted at women's dress and

underwear. Anything that was too revealing or ‘seductive’ was considered immoral and deviant (Tseelon, 1995: 16).



Figure 4. 4
Jodi Bieber
Dianne
2007



Figure 4.5
Zanele Muholi
Being
2007

This idea has continued throughout history. In many popular magazines, models are often depicted in lace or slightly transparent underwear when the aim of the image is to elicit desire. When we look back at Bieber’s *Dianne*, we see that the image appears seductive, which is emphasised by Dianne’s pose. This pose elongates and

creates a fluid line from head to toe, and emphasises her breasts. According to Nelson (2010: 115), this pose has been handed down through western artistic discourse within the realm of the female nude as a symbol of the availability of the female body. Furthermore, the deliberate sexual confrontation that is created through her lifted arms, which lift her hair, elicits a pose that, in relation to the black underwear, suggests seduction.

It is interesting to compare *Dianne* to *Being,* which shows two women in a sexual embrace. This is emphasised by their complete lack of clothing. They are lying on a bed, in semi-foetal positions. We do not see the faces of the sitters. The image comes across as less seductively or sexually charged when viewed in relation to *Dianne*. This is achieved by the lack of eye contact in Muholi's image, as well as the lack of direct confrontation. These two sitters do not acknowledge the viewer and, so, the moment captured seems to be completely private. Muholi avoids displaying their gender, suggesting that gender is not important; rather, the intimacy of the moment is significant.

This is particularly interesting as Muholi is rather vocal about the images being about the highlighting of lesbianism, bringing lesbian relationships and identity to the surface of society. It is this subtle imagery, along with the vocal ideology, that makes the image so powerful. We are not confronted with blatant sexuality. We see an image that feels 'normal' - it comes across as comfortable, as an image that feels familiar. Yet, it is only on deeper inspection that we realise what the image is actually showing and saying.

That is not to say that Bieber's images entirely reinstate historical oppressive gender systems. While the domestic setting in which each woman places herself destabilises Bieber's images and challenges oppressive gender systems, the way in which each woman presents herself does seem to reinforce these oppressive gender systems.The environment in *Dianne* is not one that connotes seduction. It is not a setting that we associate with sexual activities, or desire. Rather, the setting creates an uneasy relationship in the image. *Dianne* is presented in a strange setting: there is a birdcage and a pinball machine in the background. This setting challenges the settings of domesticity or desire with which women are normally associated. The

environment is incongruous to Dianne and the way she is presented. Furthermore, Dianne's body, as I have discussed previously with regard to many of the images in this series, stands outside of what is normally considered seductive and alluring. Her body is not long and slender and we can see the blemishes and flaws of her skin. This challenges what we find sexually desirable.

The power of *Dianne* is its use of familiarity juxtaposed with disjointed aesthetic elements. We are familiar with the pose and the sexual display of this body, created by underwear the sitter has chosen to wear. Here, we see a woman who, as I have mentioned in this series before, is performing her gender and sexuality. The pose and choice of underwear indicate what women think to be the standard display of beauty. This image reveals the subconscious construction of women's identities, and how the way women display themselves is often in accordance with the way women have historically been presented: as sexual objects of desire.

The power of the image lies in a similar tool used by Muholi. The image seems familiar. We feel comfortable by the way she presents herself, yet this familiarity is challenged and disrupted by subtle aesthetic features, like the setting and her body, that offer something completely different from what we think we are looking at.

Both images ultimately use certain familiar indicators or conventions (such as sexuality and specific poses), yet manipulate and re-mould these familiar and conventional aspects to incite interrogation and reflection on the way in which women perceive and present themselves; they further make the viewer aware of the politics involved in the way images are read. This tool asks the viewer to consider what makes them comfortable and what does not when looking at images of women. It elicits the response of considering the inherent conventions and habits that viewer's use when consuming images of women.

Inserting the Marginalised into the Idealised: the Treatment of Beauty

An important issue to consider when looking at both works is whether or not they are simply attempting to place the marginalised within the confines of desire and sexual

allure. When we look at one of the common threads within Bieber's *Real Beauty*, that the bodies portrayed stand outside of normative models of the 'perfect' body as constructed by society, we need to consider if Bieber is simply making that which is considered 'ugly', beautiful. Similar considerations can be raised in Muholi's images: are they simply taking bodies that society considers marginalised or 'other', and placing them into a normal heterosexual scenario? The images might lead the viewer to further consider whether or not Muholi is also making the marginalised beautiful, as the images do portray beauty through the softness and intimacy captured. I first want to consider this with regard to *Real Beauty*.

The images do hold certain conventions of images that traditionally place women in desirable poses in order to display beauty. The sitters are in their underwear, and gaze at the viewer with desire at times. Yet they are women who are not typical of what is generally seen in fashion and beauty magazines. So, on one level, the images are trying to make that which is not normally considered desirable, beautiful. Yet the images work on a deeper level than this. They consider what the term 'beautiful' means, and the power relations that are involved in labelling something as 'beautiful'. The images are reflexive in that they reflect on themselves and how they fit into historical representations of women. The familiarity with the unfamiliar enables the viewer to consider the historical treatment of women's bodies in visual culture, while simultaneously inserting the marginalised body into images that are perhaps there to create a certain level of desire. Perhaps this is the strength of a postcolonial era. These two discourses could be considered as the dialectic which empowers those working within these systems (whether consciously, or by context) to have the freedom to address notions of beauty and the historical canons which construct such notions, through the very systems that these canons created.

The same could be said of Muholi's work, however, her images work on another level as well: that of lesbian identity in a country where black culture deems homosexuality as 'unnatrual' and deviant. Muholi's clear trajectory works in unison with the idea of the images, perhaps as a way of placing the marginalised body into canons of art. The familiarity of the images in terms of the sexuality and intimacy portrayed makes the viewer want to look at the images. The work is alluring, and this is further enhanced by the ambiguity of the gender of the sitters. In this respect,

Muholi is quite blatantly placing the marginalised body into realms that are normally allocated to heterosexuality, but this is her modus operandi. As Muholi explains, “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.” (Muholi, 2006: 6). In this respect, Muholi’s work is creating a visual history of lesbianism. She displays moments of lesbian intimacy in ways that we expect to see heterosexual couples.

This works in a similar way to Bieber’s work, as Muholi uses certain conventions to challenge viewer’s expectations when viewing images of women who fall outside of societal ideals. Furthermore, Muholi’s work uses certain aesthetic and visual indicators that challenge historical visualisations of women. This challenge of historical visualisations is particularly achieved through Muholi’s distinct play with the gaze, which was discussed earlier in this chapter. Muholi challenges traditional gazes by either denying the gaze, or by directly challenging the viewer’s gaze.

Perhaps that is what is dynamic and innovative about these artists: they reproduce recognisable motifs and conventions, making the images familiar. Yet, through a slight disabling of these conventions, or an upturning of certain tropes, the images come to challenge the viewer’s own perceptions of the way in which the female body has been dealt with in western canons that insert colonial and patriarchal actions upon the female body. So, what happens in the images is that they follow certain patterns and conventions, yet disrupt others. This juxtaposition enables dynamic images that constantly place the viewer on the edge of traditional visual interpretations, displaying the complexity of power relations that come into being when viewing images of women. Both Muholi and Bieber utilise these similar aspects in very different ways, creating difference within similarity, a key aspect of importance that has come from this analysis.

The Postcolonial Trajectory in Relation to the Works Analysed

It is now important to consider these particular observations with regard to postcolonial and postfeminist trajectories. I will consider what the postcolonial

features of the work are. The images by both artists are not neccessarily produced under postcolonial trajectories, or as a response to these trajectories, but rather to see how the social reality from which these theories are propogated is possibly evident in the artistic practice in society.

There is currently no explicit literature dedicated to what makes art postcolonial,; however, academic courses and exhibition programmes are slowly starting to consider what characteristics particularly feature in art that we could consider as postcolonial. According to Robert Summers, in his course, *Postcoloniality and Diaspora,* presented in the Spring of 2010, postcolonial art generally consists of visualities that were produced in response to the "aftermath/s" of colonialism (2010: para. 1). Summers explains that work under this term reflects issues of national and cultural identity, race and ethnicity, and sexualities. Many scholars such as Homi Bhabha and Kobina Mercer argue about whether or not there is a postcolonial period in existence right now, using other frames of reference. However, if we consider what Muholi and Bieber appear to consider in their images, their work could be understood as having certain postcolonial considerations embedded within them, even if this trajectory is not one that the photographers consciously considered as part of their artistic practice.

There are various aspects that we could consider as elements of postcolonial trajectories. Both Muholi and Bieber photograph women who are considered to be outside of societal norms. In Muholi's case, these women are black lesbians, women that are not considered normal in terms of white heteronormative practice. They are also women who are considered as 'other' within their own cultures. In Bieber's case, they are women whose bodies fall outside of idealistic notions of beauty, particularly within popular culture's considerations of beauty, which are generally constructed according to western principles. Their choice of capturing women becomes a politicised act within itself. Considerations of the representation of women almost immediately enter into a discourse around legacies of repression and oppression, a concept often addressed in postcolonial theory. Furthermore, both photographers represent women from South Africa, a country that is still dealing with the legacy of colonial oppression. When considering identity, race, and sexuality, we inevitably become involved in issues of legacy and historical rule, for context is a key aspect of

understanding cultural aspects of representation. In order to understand how women are considered and represented, it becomes essential to look at the history of a culture, at the way women have been historically considered within that culture, in order to understand what then results from particular histories. Therefore, by photographing South African women while addressing ideas of race, sexuality, and identity, both artists are inextricably caught up in these current considerations. Whether consciously or subconsciously, their work enters into many of the dialogues that postcolonialism has produced.

There are various, and more, specific characteristics that can be considered to enter a postcolonial dialogue. Muholi's images do so through the juxtaposition of 'normal' and 'other'. Her choice of seemingly heteronormative sexual intimacy, challenged by the realisation that this intimacy is between two women, opens up considerations of western models of heteronormativity, as well as social legacies of distinct social binaries that the west has set in place. This is clearly a postcolonial issue as it deals with the way women are traditionally represented. Muholi's work is reflexive: it considers and blurs the distinct binaries constructed by society, and the inclusion of race and sex reiterates the postcoloniality of the work.

In Bieber's work, the postcolonial can be identified in its challenge to western and oppressive conceptions of beauty. The images enter into a historical survey of what is considered beautiful by society, and in looking at the past, the images raise issues that deal with racial and sexual identity histories in an attempt to dismantle and challenge historically constructed ideals. Concepts such as beauty might not address concepts of postcoloniality outright, but looking at the female body and how women have been represented within South Africa inevitably leads to considerations of the postcolonial. The consideration of the legacies of colonialism on women and their identities is something that is important in light of the construction of binaries and power relations during colonialism. These constructions have an impact on not only men, but also women, and the way they are considered and represented. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), postcolonial enquiry seeks to reinstate the marginalised in the face of the dominant. In this respect, Bieber's images are speaking to a postcolonial trajectory. The images are instating women who fall outside of idealised models of beauty into artistic ranks.

Considerations of idealised models of beauty are not postcolonial, however the consideration of oppressive forces and categorisations on a minority shows a connection to the challenging aspects of racial identity in the images.

The women in the images, particularly images such as *Angie* and *Babalwa* (Figure 3.3 and 3.4), show the African body, which is considered as deviant. Angie is deviant for her blurring of racial boundaries, while both Angie and Babalwa have bodies that are not idealistically slim or white. Bieber presents their bodies as a form of beauty, that these bodies are, indeed, beautiful. However, Bieber also shows white women, and these women also stand outside of normative models of beauty. These images of white women can be argued not to fit into the considerations of postcolonial theory, as they are women who were not subject to the dominant and oppressive powers of colonialism. Their link to a postcolonial voice lies in the fact that they are women, and that women in colonialism, be they white or black, have all been subject to the legacy of colonialism.

When we look at the images, issues of class and race are inherently present in the environments in which each woman has been photographed. So, while the images are about the physical aspects of the women who are represented, their environments and choices of representation are telling in the way such bodies have historically been treated in western patriarchal societies (which is a society that is directly linked to colonialism). However, the images touch on postcoloniality in a generalised manner, and deal specifically with beauty and address ideas of cultural concerns with beauty. These concerns are not primary to postcolonial thought, as political and economical systems of oppression hold a considerable amount of consideration and enquiry in postcolonial discourse. What could be considered to be a postcolonial link in Bieber's work is the politics of the body that she addresses. Theorist Gwendolyn Mikell explains how African women's representations are inevitably linked to both feminist and postcolonial issues and discussions. As Mikell explains:

> *"Discourses on sexuality and feminism in the sub-Saharan African region are political projects that reflect specific class, cultural and religious interests, and are based on a human rights strategy.*

> *Identifying gender-sex roles and identities in Africa has grown out of insights into post-colonial societies where the social and ideological structures of communities, and relationships in the public and private domains, remain essentially polyandrous.*" (Mikell, 1995: 422)

Nkolika Ijeoma Aniekwu argues that any consideration of women in postcolonial countries (whether it be feminist considerations, or other) become postcolonial issues, as women in African postcolonial countries have been affected by both colonial and patriarchal oppression (2006: 146). According to Aniekwu, women did occupy high level positions in pre-colonial African communities. That is not to say that they were of equal footing, but women held certain positions of power within their communities (2006: 146). Aniekwu goes on to explain that during colonisation, the early state progressively centralised society, and religious, cultural, and corporate model ideologies were used to restructure men and women's positions. Women's dual sex roles were often ignored, and women began to experience social inequalities in cultural, political, religious, and other realms as the state and society 'developed' (Aniekwu, 2006: 146).

Considerations of the 'Third World' and Representing Class

The inextricably linked relationship between feminism and postcolonialism is what warrants a consideration of whether or not these images work within a postcolonial trajectory. In Bieber's work, it is in the diversity and class considerations displayed in the settings presented that a postcolonial consideration could be raised. The images display women from so-called third world Africa. These women have been generalised into categories of the oppressed and oppressive. Generally, in feminist and postcolonial thought, white is the oppressor and black the oppressed. However, this becomes more complex when considering these distinctions in feminist thought.

There is then a division between white women and black women. So, if we were to look at female identity with regard to feminism, the fact that all are women means that all are essentially oppressed. On a more complex level, there are different levels of oppression within the 'category' of women. Within a postcolonial trajectory, all of these women hold various degrees of power and powerlessness. They are all

subjects of feminism and are all victims of umbrella terms such as third world women, simply because they are women in Africa. Yet Bieber's display of the different classes through the environments behind each woman, and the adornments and clothing worn, reveals the complex power relations between women in the so-called third world. Stereotypically, the western world has often termed black women as victimised, and on a lower social and income bracket in the postcolonial world. However, *Real Beauty* reveals the diversity of class and its relation to race in the images. If we pair two images of black women with two images of white women from the series, we see certain economical class distinctions, but no clear distinctions of poverty versus wealth in relation to black versus white.

If we look at *Babalwa* (2008) (Figure 3.4) and *Michele* (2007) (Figure 3.5), both are standing in environments that are stark, and display unfinished surfaces of walls. This could connote a lower bracket income. In *Claire* (2007) (Figure 3.7) and *Lucille* (2008) (Figure 3.6), however, both women occupy spaces that appear to be comfortable middle-class dwellings. This shows the blurring of binary class categories often assigned to different races in supposed third world countries. This expresses the diversity of class distinctions in South Africa. The images therefore challenge categorical models presented by western thought.

What creates cohesion within this diversity is the fact that all of the women, despite their surroundings, are dressed in provocative, or alluring, underwear. Most of the women in the series wear desirable underwear, such as lace, satin, and brocade. This shows that all of these women, despite their diverse surrounding environments, still display their own inherent constructions as learnt by and from society; it also reveals the universal tendency of women wanting to look desirable. They have all chosen to appear sexually desirable, which reveals the inherent legacy of patriarchal ideologies that women still adhere to, despite partaking in acts of breaking down societal ideologies. This enters into a characteristic of postcolonial enquiry.

According to Osha (2004: 276), there is a need in postcolonial theory and practice to rehumanise the very domain of sexuality in the postcolonial country; one of the ways to do this is to recognise that, besides understanding sexuality as something that is difficult to measure and compare, sexuality and sexual pleasure are culturally and

socially constructed. This is what ultimately speaks to a postcolonial trajectory in the images - that these representations show us that many choices and behaviours are an inherent result of following social and cultural constructs.

The Postfeminist Trajectory in Relation to the Works Analysed

Postfeminism in South Africa is a slightly more complex matter with regard to its presence in society. Feminism infiltrated society much later in South Africa than in other western countries, mainly due to the apartheid liberation struggle. As previously mentioned[24], there is a lack of texts and studies around postfeminism in South Africa, largely due to the fact that it is a relatively new concept, and South Africa is still dealing with feminist issues. However, the artistic practces of artists such as Muholi and Bieber reveals certain postfeminist ideas, particularly through their diverse representations of women.

Zanele Muholi and Jodi Bieber's images do not represent all women as being the same. There is a complexity in the way each photographer approaches her 'subject', an approach that represents multiple voices from diverse societal experiences. The images reveal postcolonial, feminist, and postfeminist considerations, explicitly and implicitly. Both photographers work without these considerations. Their work is not done as a survey of these theories, yet the work becomes a practical example of the way these theories are a result of inherent societal power relations.

Muholi's series could be said to hold feminist ideas in that the images are of women, by a woman. Muholi and Bieber express women's experiences through their art, a key idea with regard to feminist art. However, the postfeminist identity within the images lies in the exposure of the marginalised identities that are represented. Muholi is not just photographing women, but is representing a marginalised area of society, that being lesbian women. Her choice of representing the experiences of lesbian women in South Africa counteracts the heteronormative models in society, a representation that could be linked to feminist notions of gender liberation. It is the choice of considering the diversity of gender systems that makes the images operate

[24] Chapter 1, page 16.

within a postfeminist trajectory. Muholi's images explicitly explore sexuality, rather than women's experiences in general. She represents a community that is overlooked and considered as deviant within a democratic society. In this regard, the images go beyond the political systems of equality that have been put in place in South Africa, and reveal lesser known narratives and issues that still remain inherent in society, despite the equality systems that have been put in place to protect the majority of women. Muholi's decision to represent the unheard voices of particular women communicates how, despite laws to protect women, and despite the rise of feminist movements and politics within South Africa, there are still certain areas of society where women's voices go unheard. Women are still treated with little respect, understanding, or consideration of their identities within a democratic society, as seen in the treatment of black lesbians in the country.

There are a number of features in the images that reveal the postfeminist nature of the images. These are: the subtlety of the sexual nature of the images, the blurring of gender distinction and the intention of considering the legacy of constructed social ideals that create binaristic categories in society. While the images are feminist through Muholi's own identification as an activist, the images are not blatantly political, which is achieved through the subtlety of what is being represented. As previously mentioned[25], we do not see the genitals of Muholi's sitters; the sexual acts shown are not explicit, but are rather intimate. Muholi does not create discomfort; she creates images that invite the viewer to look and consider what they are looking at. This subtle approach becomes a form of activism through the questions raised when viewing the images. They encourage the viewer to consider the relationships presented. The intimacy and beauty of what is presented thus becomes a subtle kind of activism - a form of allowing the minority to speak, to show the normality of their experiences.

The blurring of gender in the images, as previously discussed through *Zinzi and Tozama III, Mowbray* (2007) (Figure 2.2) reiterates this idea. The figures presented are androgynous; lesbian stereotypes of butchness are discarded, creating an image that is not 'uncomfortable'. The normality of the image, and the intimate and relaxed

[25] Chapter 2, page 61.

nature of the two women challenges the stereotypes and deviant associations often associated with lesbian women in South Africa. The images break down binaristic divisions between men and women; they explore the blurring of sexual boundaries by displaying homosexual love.

Furthermore, they reveal the pluralistic nature of women's experience, identity, and sexuality. This is achieved through the personal approach Muholi takes to each image. Each image is titled with the names of the women in the photograph.They are no longer just subjects, but real, named women. The images are not just a reaction to white oppression and patriarchy as a result of colonial systems, but also of black oppression and patriarchy, and of the unequal relationships within both sexual and racial politics. The images reveal that within black culture there are also power relations where lesbian women are punished and disregarded due to unequal power systems that regard lesbianism as un-African. In this regard, the images reflect a diverse range of societal issues, revealing how feminism has not necessarily given voice to racial and sexual minorities.

According to Rutland (1999: 74), postfeminism is understood as being a liminality that moves from the exclusionary logic of either/or to the inclusionary logic of both/and. Nancy Whittier (2010: 228) describes the postfeminist generation as one that is not homogenous or unified, but is rather a result of many narratives and concepts that aim to create a diverse and pluralistic discourse on the constructions around women and social experience.

Genz and Brabon in their book *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (2009) address the complexity of postfeminism with regard to feminism. They begin by looking at the intersections of feminism and postfeminism, situating the latter in relation to earlier or other forms of feminism. Genze and Brabon explain that early postfeminist theories were a backlash to second wave feminism; they (the postfeminist theories) were considered as a critique against feminism (2009: 8). However, postfeminism then developed into a critical practice that addressed feminism, and then moved to more contradictory practices that addressed the complexity of postfeminism in relation to feminism. Genz and Brabon explain that postfeminism is neither a rebirth of feminism, nor an abandonment of feminism, but

rather a complex resignification that harbours within itself potential for backlash as well as innovation (2009: 8). They explain that it is therefore extremely difficult to contain the definition of postfeminism as it is so contradictory and pluralistic. To try to contain it would be a critical shortcut, and in order for it to achieve its full potential, we cannot expect neat answers, but should rather understand and accept its often open-ended conclusions (Genz and Brabon, 2009: 8).

Gamble offers an understanding that reveals the interconnectedness of postfeminism to other movements and theories, defining postfeminism as, "a pluralistic epistemology dedicated to disrupting universalising patterns of thought, and thus, capable of being aligned with postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism" (Gamble, 2001: 50). Gamble goes on to explain this defining element of postfeminism by explaining that within academia, postfeminism is the outcome of feminism's intersection with these anti-foundationalist movements, where the 'post-ing' is seen to denote a shift in feminist thinking and, specifically, in the way in which women, as the subject of feminism, are conceptualised (2001: 50). Furthermore, postfeminism becomes the study and critique of previous models of feminist thought, addressing the problematic tendency to try to determine a unifying cause of and common solution to women's subordination. It is a rejection of the assumption that feminism is based on a unified subjectivity.

It is here that postfeminism manifests from Bieber and Muholi's works. On one level, the images reveal feminist ideas. Muholi addresses women's experiences through personal portraits that represent individual women's identities of sexuality and agency in presenting themselves through their personal experiences of love. In Bieber's work, women's issues of beauty and the body are revealed, all of which are integral to feminist artistic practices. However, Muholi's work goes further into issues of postcolonialism, as previously discussed, therefore creating a postfeminist trajectory which displays the intersectional qualities of postfeminist theory. Jodi Bieber also displays this plurality of theories in that her work intersects issues of race, gender, and class, representing the diverse roles of women in society, as well as the inherent constructions that have remained as a result of oppressive and constructed systems of representation.

Muholi creates a sense of unity within her images by choosing to represent lesbian women. In this respect, the images become a kind of collected history. Muholi represents lesbian women who have been subordinated in society. However, it is the way in which she challenges previous models of universality amongst women, by displaying a minority as a collective, that shifts the work from being a homogenous representative of women to an inclusive representation of women. Muholi's blurring of gender distinctions of certain sitters blurs societal boundaries of what women are or should be. They are not feminine or masculine, but can be both, and personal human experience should not be assigned according to gender or sexuality. In this respect, the work reveals the diverse nature of sexuality, while challenging western feminist notions of victimhood when addressing women from so-called third world countries. Muholi's sitters show agency: they are active in the photographic moment as women who choose to be with other women; women who choose to show their homosexuality to society; and women who play an active role in revealing the constrained and oppressive systems that are at play within their own lives.

Bieber's images continue on from this in that they consider the western constructions of what is considered as beautiful, and reveal the diverse nature of women's identities. Jodi Bieber's work shows the interconnectedness of feminism and postfeminism in that she challenges western notions of beauty that are similar to other feminist artistic practices. By presenting bodies that stand outside of societal norms as art, Bieber does what many other western feminist artists have done decades before. They reveal how women in Africa are not necessarily very different from women from the west; they are not necessarily victims, or exotic creatures, but are women who also show the inherent results of constructed ideals of beauty. In this respect, Bieber's images could be said to show a unifying element of women's experiences, an idea which goes against postfeminist thought that critiques the homogenising tendencies of feminism.

It is in the way that Bieber reveals the diversity and complexity of class and race, that we could align a postfeminist narrative to in the series. The image of Babalwa standing confidently and dressed in rows of pearls and lace lingerie challenges western feminist ideas of women from third world countries as being poverty-stricken, and victims. Babalwa defies this through her strong position in the image

where she appears to be in control. The juxtaposition with the stark environment challenges what the viewer expects to see in such a stark room. Babalwa's class distinction becomes difficult to read, which therefore challenges the kind of distinctions made by western feminism with regard to women from the third world.

A postfeminist reading of Bieber's series could be identified through the simultaneous challenge to and adherence to particular societal ideals. Bieber's images often attempt to overturn certain ideologies and gender stereotypes, yet simultaneously reinscribe certain gendered ideologies. As was previously discussed, Bieber reveals the inherent nature of beauty ideals, as expressed in the way the women in Real Beauty generally dress in alluring underwear, or pose in stereotypical positions.

We could therefore understand that artistic practice in South Africa does communicate many of the societal issues and situations that women are exposed to. The work challenges ideals, categories of race, sexuality, and class and the systems that construct them, yet they simultaneously reveal the power systems that are still at work in society. This simultaneity and plurality is what stands out as their strengths. They reveal a complex interconnectedness between postcolonial and postfeminist issues by displaying contradictions and opposing realities that fall outside of generalised practices around western feminist theory. Their plurality reveals how certain essentialist practices still exist, and are still inherent in the experiences of women, to a certain , while also displaying the transgressive and challenging ways in which women in South Africa navigate their identities and representation.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The aim of this dissertation was to investigate the extent to which discourses of postfeminism and postcolonialism inform the production of selected portrait photographs by Jodi Bieber and Zanele Muholi. The dissertation was interested in how cross-cultural and transnational formations counteract first world feminist notions of a singular, generalised identity of 'woman'. I particularly looked at female photographic portraiture and the way in which women working under postcolonial terms represent women. Through critical analysis of selected works by Zanele Muholi and Jodi Bieber, I considered key aspects of the photographs that arose as interesting challenges to singular and homogenised notions of representations of women from so-called third world countries. I began with the understanding that representation in art has become a way of reflecting on the way women have been constructed in visual culture, and that the image of the female body has become an object onto which the ideals and desires of a particular culture can be mapped.

However, my research showed that postfemisnism is not necessarily present South African society. I argue that South Africa is simultaneously in a state of feminism and postfeminism whereby gender equality is still a key issue amongst South African women scholars and activists, yet their approach to feminism is often mobilised through postfeminist considerations. Issues of equality are often approached through considering the legacy of apartheid, paying particular attention to the pluralistic and diverse nature of women's experiences in South Africa. A theoretical approach to these considerations would be too narrow and oppressive in terms of the realities of women living in South Africa. It therefore became very important to express these findings in a more practical way that would be more accessible in terms of representing the reality of postfemnist and postcolonial theories in South African society. In this respect, photography, as a tool to show how these theories are at work in society became a way of identifying the gender and political issues of trying to represent South African women. The research into photography as a tool showed how the photographic image lends itself to being an important marker of the inherent ideologies and hierarchies present in society.

According to Liz Wells in *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (2004: 282), one of the functions of art is to explore and comment upon individual and social worlds of experience. Historically, art has been understood as contributing to the myths and discourses which inform ways of making sense of and responding to cultural phenomena, therefore helping us to locate ourselves within socio-political hierarchies. Looking at photographic examples of representations of women appeared to be an accessible realm in which to explore the way in which South African women are represented within South Africa, as well as how theories of postcolonialism and postfeminism manifest within South African society.

Despite counter-discourses around ideological identities behind the representations of women living outside of the west, there still remains a large gap in the need for a more inclusive and diverse representation of women. By looking at particular photographers and the way they represent women in South Africa, the current research could either be re-asserted or challenged through the critical analysis of particular photographs. The evidence of the analysis undertaken presented some interesting findings into the realities of representation with regard to women living in South Africa.

I began by looking at the key themes and ideas behind each artist's series and then engaged in a more in-depth analysis of particular images. I considered their images in relation to one other, and how the images spoke back to a postcolonial and postfeminist trajectory, paying particular attention to whether or not the images communicated the kinds of issues surrounding gender, race, and identity with regard to women in South Africa. These considerations allowed for the discovery of how the images we create become indicators of the kinds of discourses currently circulating around topics of postcolonialism and postfeminism in countries outside of the west. Zanele Muholi's work challenges the hetero-normative ideals and standards of both black, and South African culture by portraying women who fall outside of hetero-normative models. Through her intimate portrayals of lesbian women, the gender binary of male/masculine and female/feminine is disrupted. Through a critical analysis of a number of portraits, Muholi's work reveals cultural notions of what is acceptable when representing the black female body, and elicits a consideration of how society relates to images of intimacy and nudity. Muholi reveals a number of

features that challenge historical and societal stereotypes around the black female body. She does this through disrupting the male gaze, representing sexuality as ambiguous, and through revealing and concealing certain aspects of black lesbian women.

In the images researched, Muholi often avoids the direct gaze associated with the objectification of women in art. The denial of the gaze denies the objectification of the women in the portraits as it breaks the relationship of desire between the viewer and sitter. Furthermore, the power of the subversion of the gaze lies in the simultaneous use of ambiguity, whereby some of the women depicted do not appear as women when first viewed. The ambiguity of figures creates familiarity. This ambiguity resists shock tactics and spectacle. Once the viewer establishes that the image is of two women, it enables the viewer to question what they find acceptable or unacceptable with the image. It further asks us to question the reasons for immediately assuming that the figure is male, revealing our own inherent dispositions as to what we expect when seeing seemingly sexual images of two people.

The ambiguity of the figure also alludes to ideas of stereotyped identities of lesbian culture. While the images are gender ambiguous, they are not overtly masculine, but rather sculptural in the way the body is photographed. Muholi's use of fluid, curved lines challenge stereotypical ideas about lesbians being masculine. Here Muholi uses femininity to subvert gender expectations. In this regard, Muholi uses aesthetic choices in various ways that subvert gender stereotypes and generalised expectations of society. Furthermore, Muholi subverts the objectification of these women through agency. Muholi's models are real lesbian couples who volunteer to be photographed, which counteracts the fear of asserting one's identity, as these women take agency over their identity through allowing Muholi to capture and share the personal reality of their lives.

Another aesthetic choice that challenges stereotypical representations of the female body is the use of concealment. Muholi often conceals the sitters' bodies and genitals. The concealment of sitters bodies means that these women are no longer sexual beings onto which the desires and stereotypes of the 'over-sexualised' black

body can be placed. The concealment reveals that their sexual choices are not simply physical, but emotional and psychological.

In contrast, other images of Muholi's use certain gender tropes, such as exoticism and eroticism, explicitly in order to reveal certain historical stereotypes that have been used in the representations of black African women. In *Being (There)* Muholi inserts many visual stereotypes, such as exoticism and overt sexuality, but subverts them through her own identification as a lesbian, as well as through disrupting idealised postures and presentations of herself. The use of these stereotypes allows the viewer to see the constructed nature of representation. Furthermore, it creates the effect of a body that is commodified and on show, expressing the historical treatment of the black female body.

Muholi's work uses particular conventions and disrupts subtle aspects of these conventions in order to reveal how the black female body has been constructed in society. By simultaneously using and disrupting certain stereotypes, Muholi's work is diverse and complex in its visual signals. They appear comfortable and familiar yet, on closer inspection construct these feelings in order for the viewer to respond on a deeper level to what is being presented. Muholi reveals the manipulative nature of the photograph: how certain elements can be constructed to create an interrogative viewing process when viewing her work. She counteracts ideas of sameness and homogeneity by overturning conventions through the very use of such conventions.
When analysing Jodi Bieber's series *Real Beauty*, my analysis looked at the way in which Bieber portrayed women, and the kinds of identities played out in the series. The first notable aspect was the agency of the sitters. All the women chose how they wanted to be represented, revealing the way they saw themselves or how they wanted to be seen. Many of the images revealed similar characteristics that Muholi's showed. Bieber simultaneously subverts and denies particular constructed ideas of 'woman' and feminine representation, while in some she incorporates stereotypes as a way of negotiating each woman's identity presence in society. Bieber reveals inherent constructed notions of identity, but simultaneously challenges them by revealing the constructed nature of identity.

Like Muholi, Bieber presents the gaze in diverse ways whereby each gaze presented creates different results in terms of representing women. In *Angie*, the gaze appears to re-inscribe traditional stereotypical representations of women. This reveals the inherent nature of acting out certain gender ideals. In others such as *Babalwa*, the gaze challenges the passivity of the gaze. The gaze is therefore not fixed. It can simultaneously adhere to, and subvert or challenge the 'male gaze'. Furthermore, Bieber's images resist the mediated relationship of sexual desire between viewer and subject because Bieber is a woman photographer. The elicitation and participation of sexual desire related to the male gaze is denied. In some of the images, the gaze is denied, focusing on the body of the woman in the image. The most notable aspect of all the images is the 'normal' bodies presented, rather than slim, toned idyllic bodies, Bieber represents women that are all very different from stereotypical ideas of beauty. The denial of the gaze emphasises the body and incites a consideration of what we expect to see in a series depicting women in their underwear.

A number of images also consider class distinctions that society constructs. Many of the women wear modern and luxurious jewellery and lingerie. These are material objects that are contemporary and modern, which reminds us that women from so-called third world countries are just as socially part of modernity as western women are. These accessories and lingerie are at times juxtaposed against seemingly lower class environments (such as empty concrete rooms). This in relation to the adornment of some of the sitters creates a tension that challenges the so-called third world as being disadvantaged, and often poor. These accessories indicate extravagance, wealth and excess, and therefore stand in stark contrast with the environment. This reveals that women from the third world are not homogenous, but contrary to generalised systems of identity perpetuated by the west.

However, this became even more complex on further analysis. The extravagance of adornment re-inscribes certain stereotypical ideas (such as excess and overt sexuality as associated with black women) that stem from western ideology with regard to beauty and women. Furthermore, many of the sitters (of various races) dress provocatively, and they all exude sensuality and sexuality. This erotic sexuality displayed in many of the images adheres to the expected social norms of idealised

notions of feminine beauty. There is tension in the way we read the image as we see the tropes and essentialist notions of what femininity is, performed by the women in the portraits. This observation led to an important part of the research: that Bieber's images hold tense juxtapositions where certain tropes and stereotypes are challenged and subverted, but others are re-inscribed, revealing the inherent nature of gendered behaviour. These juxtapositions and sites of tension within the images express the diversity and complexity of women's identities in South Africa. Each woman displays a number of contradictions, ones that subvert, and others that re-enact certain gender stereotypes. This expresses the multitudinous voices and identities that make up women, dispelling any clear binary categorisations of historical representations of women. Bieber's series expresses how the legacies of certain ideologies remain in society, while other stereotypes are wrongly assigned, and often are not existent in society as is generally assumed. What is particularly important about these images is how they reflect how women's bodies have become a site of tension: they have become both symbols of inherent western ideologies, but also challenge western ideologies.

My last chapter used the results from the image analysis in Chapters two and three to establish whether or not these two artists speak back to a western trajectory, or whether they establish a canon of their own. I looked at whether their work related to postcolonial and postfeminist discourses, and what effect this had on our understanding of South African art by women artists, and what kind of a trajectory this established for South African women photographers.

My analysis revealed that South African women photographers do not necessarily work under similar trajectories in terms of style and meaning. The works stand as an account of one individual artist's approach to how women are represented. Various similarities and differences were found between Bieber and Muholi's work. It was realised that the similarities did not create a homogenised package of how South African women photographers approach representing women. Rather, the similarities presented gave an idea of where and what kind of canon these photographers fit into.

A number of interesting findings resulted from the visual analysis. First, there was the awareness of conventions in the images. Certain constructed conventions stood out, which initially appeared rather contradictory to the concept of challenging western constructed stereotypes. On deeper analysis, however, they displayed some interesting aesthetic tools. Both photographers make us aware the conventions of portraits of women, yet certain elements (such as the bodies in Bieber's series, and the same-sex ambiguity in Muholi's *Being*), make us aware that these series are not 'normal' in relation to conventional images of women. Both photographers use conventions to challenge the way we view and consider images of women. Furthermore, these conventions create familiarity. The viewer is familiar with the sensual and sexual nature presented, yet there are various elements that subvert this familiarity. Both artists ultimately manipulate and re-mould familiar and conventional aspects in order to incite interrogation and reflection on the way women perceive and present themselves. This manipulation of conventions makes the viewer aware of the politics involved in the way images are read.

The sexuality often involved in the male gaze is used, yet subverted and challenged by its juxtaposition with other factors, such as bodies and relationships that society does not normally associate with desire or 'beauty'. The bodies represented in both Muholi and Bieber's work are not what society usually aligns with notions of idealism. Both artists display bodies that challenge the norms and conventions. These bodies are sensual and sexual in certain images, which makes them familiar, yet the revelation of their perceived flaws challenges the oppressive representations of sensuality that are often assigned to and represented in images of women.

In my last chapter I began with a comparative analysis of Muholi and Bieber's work. I then looked at their work in relation to postfeminist and postcolonial discourse, considering how these discourses affect the way we read such images. I found that these two discourses could be considered as the dialectic which empowers those working within these systems (whether consciously, or by context) to have the freedom to address notions of beauty and the historical canons which construct such notions, through the very systems that these canons created. South African women photographers therefore create a canon of their own through using and manipulating traditional western canons of art that construct idealised representations of women.

I first addressed the notion of postcolonialism with regard to each artist. It became clear through the research for this dissertation that the choice of both artists to capture women became a politicised act in itself. Considerations of the representation of women almost immediately enter into a discourse around legacies of repression and oppression, concepts often addressed in postcolonial theory.

Muholi's choice of seemingly heteronormative sexual intimacy, challenged by the realisation that this intimacy is between two women, opens up considerations of western models of heteronormativity, as well as social legacies of distinct social binaries that the west has set in place. This is clearly a postcolonial issue as it deals with the way women are traditionally represented. Muholi's work speaks back to a postcolonial trajectory in that she subverts western ideologies, and challenges western hetero-normative patriarchal systems of representation by showing the black lesbian body - a body that transgresses western idealism. Furthermore, Muholi's images subvert and challenge stereotypical depicitions of black women that were perpetuated by white Europeanism (as seen in the case of Sarah Baartman in the 19th Century).

Jodi Bieber's work reveals certain postcolonial ideas by challenging western and oppressive conceptions of beauty. The images enter into a historical survey of what is considered beautiful by society. Her choice to depict women who stand outside of western ideals, as well as the choice to consider the oppressive forces of western culture on women from the third world, highlights the postcolonial aspect of *Real Beauty.*

Furthermore, the postcolonial may not be seen directly in the considerations of beauty in the series, but when we look at the images, issues of class and race are inherently present in the environemnts in which each woman has been photographed. So, while the images are about the physical aspects of the women who are represented, their environments and choices of representation are telling in the way such bodies have historically been treated in western patriarchal societies and, therefore, enter into postcolonial considerations. In Bieber's work, it is in the diversity and class considerations displayed in the settings presented that a postcolonial consideration could be brought forward. The images display women

from so-called third world Africa. These women have been generalised into categories of the oppressed and oppressive, and Bieber's images challenge this binary through the complex paradox of excess and meagerness that are often simultaneously present in the same image (such as in *Babalwa*).

I then considered how Muholi and Bieber's work reflected a postfeminist trajectory. My research showed that both artists' work is inherently feminist as they both express women's experiences through their art, a key idea with regard to feminist art. However, the images also reveal a postfeminist identity through the exposure of marginalised identities. Muholi is not just photographing women, but is representing a marginalised area of society, that of lesbian women. Her choice of representing the experiences of lesbian women in South Africa counteracts the heteronormative models in society, a representation that could be linked to feminist notions of gender liberation; but, it is in the choice of considering the diversity of gender systems that makes the images operate within a postfeminist trajectory. Muholi's images explicitly explore sexuality, rather than women's experiences in general. She represents a community that is overlooked and considered as deviant within a democratic society. In this regard, the images go beyond the political systems of equality that have been put in place in South Africa, and reveal lesser known narratives and issues that still remain inherent in society, despite the equality systems that have been put in place to protect the majority of women.

Furthermore, Muholi's images go beyond representations that speak back to white oppression and patriarchy as a result of colonial systems. They also speak of black oppression and patriarchy, and of the unequal relationships within both sexual and racial politics. The images reveal that within black culture there are also power relations where lesbian women are punished and disregarded due to unequal power systems that regard lesbianism as un-African. This revelation in the images goes back to issues of postcolonialism, and therefore displays how postfeminism is intersectional, and crosses ideas of both feminism, and postcolonialism, revealing the multiplicty of voices that lie in Muholi's work.

Jodi Bieber also displays this plurlity of theories in that her work intersects issues of race, gender, and class, representing the diverse roles of women in society, as well

as the inherent constructions of beauty that have remained as a result of oppressive and constructed systems of representation that have been perpetuated by the west. Jodi Bieber's work shows the interconnectedness of feminism and postfeminism in that she challenges western notions of beauty that are similar to other feminist artistic practices. By presenting bodies that stand outside of societal norms as art, Bieber does what many other western feminist artists have done decades before. R*eal Beauty* reveals how women in Africa are not necessarily very different from women from the west. They are not necessarily victims, or exotic creatures, but are women that also show the inherent results of constructed ideals of beauty. However, this idea does go against postfeminist thought to a degree because it re-inscribes the homogenising tendencies of femnism. However, it is in the way that Bieber reveals the diversity and complexity of class and race, despite the similar inherent qualities of each sitter, that one could align a postfeminist narrative to the series.

Real Beauty challenges ideals, categories of race, sexuality and class, and the systems that construct them, yet simultaneously reveals the power systems that are still at work in society. The series reveals a complex interconnectedness between postcolonial and postfeminist issues by displaying contradictions and opposing realities that fall outside of generalised practices around western feminist theory. Their plurality reveals how certain essentialist practices still exist, and are still inherent in the experiences of women to a certain degree, while also displaying the transgressive and challenging ways in which women in South Africa navigate their identities and representation.

Zanele Muholi and Jodi Bieber's images do not represent all women as being the same. There is a complexity in the way each photographer approaches their 'subject', an approach that represents multiple voices from diverse societal experiences. The images reveal postcolonial, feminist, and postfeminist considerations, both explicitly and implicitly. Both photographers work without these considerations; their work is not done as a survey of these theories, yet the work becomes a practical example of the way these theories are a result of inherent societal power relations within society. When we survey the images of both artists, the complexity of being a South African woman photographer, and the complexities of the experience of being a South African woman are revealed. Both artists use the

conventions and stereotypes that have been constructed to represent women from third world countries, yet they manipulate and subvert these conventions to challenge oppressive systems of representation, and reveal how women artists and South African women themselves are plural, contradictory, and heterogeneous.

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