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The strategy of creative self-representation to counter hegemonic representations of the black female body

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Introduction

In this article I consider specific artworks by South African female artists Tracey Rose, Zanele Muholi and Mary Sibande and discuss whether the strategy of creative self-representation can be employed to counter hegemonic representations of the black female body. Black women have and continue to be oppressed by the legacy and presence of institutionalised (and simultaneously internalised) forms of violence, which has rendered the production and reception of representation of black female bodies particularly problematic. In a world where the female body is propped as the mother of metonymy, a sign for one and many, nation and nature, does self-representation by black women inherently overcome this problem?

I argue that the artworks by Tracey Rose, Zanele Muholi and Mary Sibande discussed in this paper can be read as intersectional feminist critiques of cultural production[1]. I hypothesize that the strategy of self-representation is not essential in countering hegemonic representations. This can, however be accomplished by drawing on the complexity of this very problematic archive, and by creatively weaving together narratives[2] from the intersections of race, gender and sexuality.

I have selected four main artworks to be discussed and compared to contemporary and historical representations. This will take the form of a post-structural visual analysis. As not to oversimplify the complexity of each artist's oeuvre, I will provide context about the artwork proposed for analysis. This study therefore comprises of both visual and literary analysis.

I am suspicious of the capacity of creative self-representation to; in and of itself effectively subvert hegemonic representations, as this could be a simplistic approach to destabilize the historically distorted image of the black female body. At the same time, I do not assume this to be the sole intention of the artist. Also I acknowledge that the reference to black woman is not a homogenous category. The purpose of this paper is to problematize these artworks as representations that may or may not hold the capacity to generate multiple readings of the black female in order to answer this question.

[1] Here I include historical, pseudo-scientific representations and contemporary art, advertisement and tourist postcards, discussed in this paper.

[2] Drawing on narratives that are autobiographical and/or imaginary, that as far as possible speak about the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, class, etc.

It was certain that the discourse of race needed to take preference over and above addressing the injuries inflicted by multiple forms of domination in Apartheid South Africa. Patriarchy has and continues to be an influential aspect controlling the lived experience of women globally irrespective of race. Yet fractures in the international feminist movement revealed the power imbalance that exists between black and white women. To do the work required for ending domination against and/or within established systems of power, women had to utilise their own specific location as marginalised members of society as a site of power for self-determination.

There are parallels that can be drawn between black woman's participation in liberation efforts in the United States and South Africa. Back women's reluctance to join the Feminist movement in both countries stems from multiple factors, especially the prioritising of anti-racism, and subsequently the sentiment of exclusion from the feminist movement on the part of black female academics.

Artists such as Penny Siopis, Pippa Skotnes, Sue Williamson, Jean Brundrit, Lisa Brice and more have produced works which address feminist concerns. Many white feminist artists have articulated concern with marginality expressed through narrative, media appropriation and collaboration in an attempt to cross racial divides. *The Grey Areas*[3] identity and representation debate in the late 1990s encompasses the opinions of prominent public and academic perspectives where race, nationality, sex and gender at once come into question. Kaolin Thomson, Penny Siopis, Minnette Vari, Pippa Skotness and Candice Brieitz offer subjective critiques of patriarchy through their work. These artists, all of whom are white South African women dealing with race and gender in the early 1990s were accused of opportunistic objectification, and attempting to speak on behalf of or appropriating the black female body. This debate reflected the problematic nature of a representative, *membersonly logic* towards restricting representation to one's own demographic. This ultimately was a debate of cultural ownership in relation to the location of producer and the power of theorists.

In artworks with a feminist agenda from the early 1980s in South Africa were made by white women, partially because of the perturbed status of feminism within the liberation struggle as mentioned, but another vital reason was the limited number of black women artists (Schmahmann 2015:31).

[3] Called after the title of the publication Atkinson, B. & Breitz, C. 1999. Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art. Chalkham Hill Press: Johannesburg.

Enwezor, O. 1997. Reframing the Black Subject Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation. Third Text. 11(40), 21-40.

This is a direct result of systematic oppression, to the extent that the apartheid government banned black South Africans from various universities through the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 (Schmahmann 2015:31).

The art historical discourse of the nineteenth century black female body, exhibited, theorised and dissected in the name of science and entertainment seems rather exhausted. Yet historic ethnographic representations have inspired contemporary hegemonic representations in popular culture, thus the black female body continues to be maimed. Due to the damage inflicted on the physical body, and on the collective memory of a people, self-expression through art and literature is a space where many female artists of colour establish their sense of affirmation.

Feminism was initially unable to address the multiple concerns pertaining to black women. The feminist discourse of intersectionality[4] which articulates how race, gender, ability and sexual orientation intertwine is a concept vital to understanding how these categories function simultaneously in oppressing the most marginalised of people.

Marion Arnold in *Women and Art in South Africa* (1997) accounts for black female artists such as Helen Sebidi, Allina Ndebele and Norisa Mabasa have produced work which communicates their personal and socio-political collective struggle as black women at the time. Today identity politics is widely written about aided by the work of contemporary woman artists of colour such as Berni Searle, Senzei Marasela, Tracey Rose, Nandipha Mntambo, Mary Sibande and Zanele Muholi who express the complexity of body politics in a complicated space and time. In theorising about the black female body it is important to remain aware the damage of reductionism and essentialism. In this paper I demonstrate how a post-structualist methodology in analysing critical representations of the black female body in art practice in a postcolonial, post-apartheid South African context can be generative of multiplicity interpretations and therefore hold the possibility to challenge hegemonic representations of the black female body.

Artistic dealings with the body in the post-apartheid context, denotes the body as a social construct. I consider work by black women, in a post-apartheid context, who insert their body or image while

[4]A feminist theoretical framework which began in the US, by Kimberly Crenshaw who identified the way black women can be rendered invisible at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality and ability in the categorisation and recognition related to the category „woman" in feminist discourse historically led by white feminists.

Refer to Patricia Hill Collins"s book *Intersectionality* (2016), Sylvia Walby"s *The Future of Feminism* (2011), etc.

utilising various representational strategies such as performance, culturally coded signifiers and site specificity to subjectively reflect on how black women have been represented historically. The art works by Tracey Rose, Zanele Muholi and Mary Sibande discussed in this paper, weave together the elements which have contributed to the social construction of the black female body. The progress made by African-American post-minimalist, conceptual artists such as Adrian Piper, Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems who established this practice in the 1970/80s, is influential to their work (Enwezor 2004: 305) . Merely inserting ones image or preforming using the body, is not selfrepresentation given. To reflect, these artists draw on their specific location (sexuality, gender, ethnicity, place, space, etc.) and possibly present the viewer with a window into their subjectivity.

Some of South Africa's most celebrated black female artists experiment with forms of self–representation, by employing and/or undermining the visual language and signifiers that were once used to disenfranchise them. A combination of appropriation and inserting their image or body by various means, these artists draw into focus the complexity of a traumatic past and uncertain present, generating points of access that engage the individual in relation to the social. The lack of black female artists work within the archives of cultural production in the fresh post-apartheid South Africa some twenty years ago was a product of the pervasive nature of a racist patriarchal system.

Progressing beyond the use of art as a weapon for the struggle, artists of the 1990's on started to reflect upon their individual location in society, especially their histories and experiences formed by gender standards (Schmahmann 2015:35). Behind feminist art of this period is the notion of the personal is political, which is evident in the works discussed in this article by Tracey Rose, Zanele Muholi and Mary Sibanda.

Literature Review

Barbra Thompson laces a history of early photographic representations of the black female body in *Womanwood: Images Icons and Ideologies of the African Body (2008)*. Thomson highlights three representations of the black female body in early photography namely; the primitive, the sexual and the domesticated essential black female (Thompson 2008:149). The visual culture discourse involving these representations one can find in Gilman Sander's *The Hottenton and the Prostitute: Towards an*

Iconography of Female Sexuality (1985), the writing by bell hooks and Lorrain O'Grady in the 90s[3], among other writers. Tamar Garb's writing on colonialism and representation in *Figures and Fictions South African Photography in the Present Tense* (2011) is also useful especially his accounts of historical and contemporary photography[4] in South Africa.

Sander Gilman in his influential essay *The Hottenton and the Prostitute: Towards an Iconography of Female Sexuality* (1985) calls out European travellers, writers and (pseudo)scientists for how[5] black women were labelled as the most primitive of the human species. The representation of the primitive black female allowed for the justification and dissemination of sexist white supremacy, with its fantasy commodified in contemporary advertising, runway couture spectacle and tourist postcards.

The black female body was theorised to stand as a symbol for primitive humanity and again applying oppositional reasoning, was theorised and represented as a general symbol for human sexuality. Saaritjie Baartman (*The Hottentot*), exhibited and dissected posthumously, was regarded as merely an assemblage of parts; her genitalia and buttocks constituting all she was for the European observer. Generally, Feminist scholarship about the body has described how the obsession with the fragmented female body found both the act and representations of voyeurism and more obviously pornography, can be said to be the same psychological drive experienced by men in deriving pleasure through the objectification[6] and thus control over the black female body.

What one can observe in much of western art history is that black women are often represented in the role of servitude or at least hinting to the possibility, usually in the presence of white women (Gilman 1985:120). The black female serves within the narrative depicted, but is also positioned to

[3] More recently Evelynn Hammonds, Zine Magubane and Janell Hobson have written critically about some or all of these hegemonic representations of the black female body in Africa and the African diaspora.

[4] See Garb‟s dense introduction to *Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography* (2011)

[5] According to Gilman (1985:121) the white male intellectual through polygenic reasoning pitted himself against what was understood as his complete opposite: black women. This oppositional reasoning based on clearly racist ideology was used to describe all human characteristics with the white male possessing the upright characteristics of morality and beauty while the black female possessing the antithesis.

[6] Here objectification is implied both literally and symbolically.

serve the viewer[7], to highlight the desirability of the white woman, who is depicted, at times nude or naked.

According to Gilman, it was believed that concealed in the representations of the white prostitute, is the notion of primitive black female sexuality[8]. The emphasis of the buttocks in representations of white women, especially white prostitutes in the 19th century reveals western fantasy about€ transgression, in to deviant sexuality. This point I will come back to when I discuss selfrepresentation through texts.

Erotic photography of black women during colonialism also portrays the fantasy of accessing transgressive sexual experience. *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (2002) by Deborah Wills and Cara Williams account for this phenomenon in the history of photography.

On the other side of the spectrum, the black female body is also represented as domesticated, or the domestic worker. In both cases there is an undertone of enforced repression. Tracing back, Barbra Thomson accounts for the photography in South Africa, and the Congo in the early 1900s taken by missionaries who described the initiation of control; the civilising mission in the name of moral Christianity which forced local women to wear European clothes (Thompson 2008:148). This control over the African women's body has passed over to contemporary times evident in the specificity of domestic workers attire, which draws its reference from western Victorian style (Corrigall 2015:153).

The Black Female Body: A Photographic History (2002) by Deborah Wills and Cara Williams also provide a useful account of *the mammy* trope in western popular culture. This is important to put into context the prominence black female as a perpetually labouring body and how this relates to representation.

Tracey Rose

[7] The trope of the black female represented in nineteenth century is evident in some of the most famous Western art works by Manet, Hogarth and Rossetti subtly portraying this trope (Gilman 1985:120).

[8] A prostitute‟s appearance and sexual identity was regarded as predetermined by genetics. The appearance of the prostitute was characterised by nineteenth century anthropologists as a woman of generally fuller figure build, especially in the buttock area. It was therefore conceived that prostitutes share physical characteristics comparable to the Hottentot (Gilman 1985:121). This is however strategically based on racist ideology.

Her performance work Span 1 & Span 2 has been critically written about by Kelly Jones in 2003, *Fresh: Tracey Rose* an Iziko South African National Gallery published catalogue.

The work was also reviewed by Annie. E. Coombes in 2003 in a book called *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*. Concepts raised by Desiree Lewis (2002) in Self-Representation and Reconstructions of Southern African Parts: Bessie Head's A Bewitched Crossroads also inform my analysis of Roses work.

Zanele Muholi

Zanele Muholi is a visual activist who works to bring visibility to the LGBTI (black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexual) communities. Her work has been reviewed in the press by Gail Smith in *Outlaw Culture* in the Mail & Guardian and another by Nonkululeko Godana's *Is Anyone Comfortable?* in This Day reviewing her first public exhibition *Visual Sexualities: Only half the picture (*2004). Both critiques outline Muholi's oeuvre and praise her for her activism. Since then Muholi's work has been critically written about by feminist academic Puma Dineo Gqola in *Only half the picture* published by Stevenson Gallery in 2006. In an online article *Mapping Our Histories: A Visual History of Black Lesbians in Post-Apartheid South Africa* Muholi describes a series called Massa and Mina(h) (2008) where the artists uses performativity to scenes inspired by her mother's 42 yearlong employment as a domestic worker (Muholi n.d:31).

More recently, the book entitled *Zanele Muholi: African Women Photographers #1* published by Casa Africa in 2011, provides an outline of Muholi's work from *Only Half the Picture* to her ongoing *Faces and Phases serie*s and includes essays by Muholi, Gail Smith as well as the editors Sandra Maunac and Mónica Santos. This book includes Muholi's experimentation with creative self-representation in 2009, but unfortunately provides no contextualisation of specific artworks.

Mary Sibande

Alexandre Dodd, Sahara Nuttall and Mary Corrigall have recently written critically on work by Mary Sibande. In the article *Dressed to thrill: the Victorian postmodern and counter-archival imaginings in the work of Mary Sibande* (2010) Alexandre Dodd points out that the South African domestic workers uniform owes its presence to colonial history, imagination and representation (Dodd 2010:468). Dodd alludes to the notion of self-representation through Sibande's alter-ego Sophie as

an exercise of freedom. Sahara Nuttall's essay *Wounds, Surface, Skin* (2013) has been helpful because Nuttall focuses on Sibande's conceptual and practical engagement with skin as a site of trauma, as well as healing.

Mary Corrigall in her essay *Sartorial excess in Mary Sibande's "Sophie"* (2015) describes that the domestic workers uniform in South Africa is an emblem of immobility and a means to subordinate staff within the household (Corrigall 2015:153).

Marion Arnold in an essay titled *Portraits of Servitude* (1996), is helpful as she gives an account of famous paintings made of domestic workers in South African art history, critically analysing Irma Stern's *Maid in Uniform* (1955), Dorothy Kay's *Cookie Annie Mavata* (1956), and Keith Dietrich's *Mnopeng, Mmamule and Mmathabeng* (1985). The questions she poses are insightful and stimulate my inquiry. Arnold's review highlights questions like "Can visual language and aesthetic factors make their presence felt when the subject matter is socially challenging? (Arnold 1995:95) Do they ameliorate or contradict the potency of the images?" Arnold discusses the problematic nature of negotiating the artist and subject relationship (Arnold 1995:95).

Theoretical Background

The fight for racial equality in South Africa as well as the African diaspora, was stabilised around specific conceptions of black masculinity. This phenomenon finds its roots in the institution of patriarchy. In the United States black women not only felt excluded from the category 'women' within the white lead feminist movement, but also felt unacknowledged for the role they played in racial activism. These sentiments are made though Black feminist criticism. The fractures in international feminist academia are due to the absence of interracial solidarity between feminist, on the academic frontline, reaching its height in the USA in the 1990s.

Cultural critics continue to engage in debate around representation within the feminist movement, thus the discourse around the sense of exclusion experienced by black female feminist far exceeds the scope of this paper. Patricia Collins and S Bilge have complied an *Intersectionality*. Reader (2016) which has added my understanding of intersectionality as a discourse.

This paper poses many challenges. I first need to understand what makes a text, in this case an artwork, an intersectional critique. I am studying what is self-representation, and whether it can be effective in countering hegemonic representations of the black female body. This is complicated by the challenge of conducting a post-structuralist visual analysis. An intersectional approach emphasizes the context, the specificity of layered (and marginal) identities represented, including those who interpret the representations, whilst a post-structural approach, emphasizes the interpretive expanse inherent, not within the texts but through the capacity of the active viewer to come up with interpretations that possibly have little to do with the intention of the author of a text.

A post-structuralist methodology will inform the visual analysis conducted. In writing post-structural art theory, rather than merely classifying an artist's "influences" to know what works from the past or present interest her, the focus starts with understanding why these texts are of interest to the interpreter/writer. The analysis of the text (in this case image) includes unpacking the denotative and possible connotative interpretations. The formal conventions, binary concepts, power relations and ideological frameworks that inform the production and reception of the text need to be unpacked (D'Alleva 2013:136). Then grappling with the producer of the texts intention in making, reusing or modifying visual images in his/her contemporary context, as well as posing how these decisions may affect the viewer of the work (D'Alleva 2013:135).

By interrogating an image in this way, one can weave together the complexity of location, time, histories, politics and economic factors which have informed its production. Significant here is to consider the social, political and institutional contexts - the exhibition space (museum, gallery, etc.) , race, gender, class relations – of the image.

Chapter 1:

Contesting Hegemonic Representations of The Black Female body as "Primitive" in the work of Tracy Rose

Issues of difference in matters of race, gender and sexuality merge in the work of Tracey Rose. Rose's early installations highlight the tension between the legal mechanisms of apartheid and the contradictions created for people living under this rule. Hair is a signifier of this tension which Rose explores in her work *Span I and Span II* (1997), performance works created for the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. The work was shown at the "Graft" exhibition at the South African National Gallery, curated by Colin Richards. Here Rose employs the connotations of hair as an extended metaphor explaining the confluence of race and sexuality.

In this section I unpack Rose's *Span ll* (1997), by comparing it to Figure 3: *Photograph of Drury's casts of Khoisan in the SAM*[9] (1911) taken in the South African Museum (**SAM**) which formed part of the famous *Bushmen Diorama*[10]. The photograph is reproduced in an essay *What's in a Name?: The Place of "Ethnicity" in the "New" South Africa* (2003), by Annie E. Coombes who discusses the mythmanufacturing in the visual landscape of post-apartheid South Africa including a focus on the **SAM** *Bushman Diorama*. Here I weave together why Rose's performance can be described as an intersectional critique of cultural production at the time. In this section I deliberate whether or not it is due to creative self-representation that this work successfully destabilises hegemonic representations of the black female body.

Span I (1997) that simultaneously accompanies *Span ll* (1997), consists of a paroled prisoner who carves the artists childhood recollections into a nearby wall (see Figure 2*).* The text written by Rose expresses the complexity of black hair politics internalised[11]. Here Rose employs a prisoner to perform her confessions (Fleetwood 2010:31).

In *Span II* (1997) Rose takes her gender and race apart as visible objects for classification. She does so by stripping down of all her clothes and body hair, making her body the object of study (Fleetwood

[9] For the purpose of this paper I will refer to the institution as **SAM**, although it is known today as the Iziko South African Museum or ISANG for short.

[10] This was a controversial exhibition of cast taken from living Khoisan during the early 1900s. The diorama was opened to the public in 1960 and taken down in 2001 (Coombes 2003: 219). For more detailed accounts consult articles by Ciraji Rassool, Patricia Hayes and Zine Magubane.

[11] In the autobiographical text Rose reveals how she was confused by, and to some extent believed racist stereotypes about hair.

2010:31). Naked and on display in a glass exhibition cabinet in the gallery, the artist sits on a television set which is positioned on its side, a revision of the reclining nude which recurs in western art history. Instead of using her body as a passive object of desire, Rose methodically knots lengths of her own discarded hair. The action is meditative and like penance- is evocative of Roses Catholic upbringing (Jones 2003:14). It also signifies the black labouring body, the foundation of colonial and modern privilege (Jones 2003:14). The black labouring body which is reiterated in *Span I* is discussed in chapter 2 and 3.

Figure 3 is a reproduction of a photograph from the **SAM** archive which displays an assembly of Khoi women casts tactically taken from an angle that emphasizes the physical characteristics deemed signifier of 'pure' Bushmen[12]. The curators made a point to ensure that the display of the Khoisan casts was consistent with the emphasis on this physical anthology (Coombes 2003: 220). This standardised pose produced and disseminated was instructive for these early photographers quest constructed lexicon of 'primitive' types to visualise European superiority and thus approve colonial expansion (Garb 2011:14).

In *Span II* Rose places her body on view, reacting to such displays of non-western people in zoos, museums and royal courts. Rose in profile appropriates this lexicon, and juxtaposes it through the layering contemporary technology and offers a subjective critique of shallow signifiers of identity.

In this performance a bulk of this hair rests in Roses lap, which invokes connotations of pubic hair, by paradoxically covering her own. Pubic hair on a woman in the Western tradition is conventionally associated to sexual appetite, and immorality. In visual culture hair is thus the spectacle of dark female sexuality on display (Fleetwood 2010:31). Traditional European nudes serve up the female body for easy consumption (Coombes 2003:257). This work on the other hand is uncomfortable. The hair detached from the body in this work challenges possibly repulses the viewer.

For this performance Rose has shaved all visible body hair. This is a challenging gesture for a young woman as hair is a sign of female sexuality and femininity (Coombes 2003:257). In South African coloured communities hair is particularly political. During Apartheid it was a marker of racial classification, an element in determining the *race* of those who seemed to border on whiteness. Rose draws attention to the psychological effect and affect of this ideology, were many coloured people have internalised the racist notion that connotes thin straight hair as more beautiful than

[12] The black female body was regarded as a merely assemblage of parts, the genitalia and buttocks a sign for the 18th & 19th century European observer of primitive humanity, deviant sexuality and desire (Gilman 1985:121). The black female body was conceived as the most primitive of human beings through polygenic reasoning, and a general symbol for human sexuality (Gilman 1985:121).

thick kinky hair (Coombes 2003:257). Here Rose examines the psychological material of hair and skin, both of which bear on apartheid's mania with racial groupings as codes of pureness and impurity, difference and hybridity (Enwezor 2004: 35). Rose highlights the ambiguity of coloured identity in post-aparthied South Africa, and this absurd battle for 'racial purity' waged on the black female body.

Rose's unclothed body presented to a clothed spectator mirrors the power relation between the European spectators of black *specimens* in cultural institutions of the past. Rose complicates this power relation by not returning the gaze, an overturn of the feminist art historical notion of reclaiming agency by actively looking-back. Rose does not merely create an ameliorative response to hegemonic representations of the black female body. Concentrating on her action of knotting hair, oblivious of the gallery visitors, she is not a passive receiver of the gaze. This is a reaction to the easy consumption of the female body that was enthused by the *Bushman Diorama* (Coombes 2003:256). With hair in hand and Rose's inward demeanour she repels voyeuristic desire.

The glass cabinet Rose incorporated in this performance denotes the nineteenth-century style ethnographic museums, where glass functions to encapsulate, protect and preserve the objects on display. The work highlights the construction of knowledge about the black female body as primitive, to be contained and passively consumed.

The television loops a video of her own undressed body, filmed in the gallery from an anterior view a perspective which the viewer is purposely deprived of accessing. The video portrays Rose's movement within the cabinet, the frame fixed on the space between her breasts, where her hands are knotting (Coombes 2003:256). Framing the spectator's access Rose draws our attention to the unrecognisable space between categories of race, sex and gender. This can be read as a rearticulation the fragmentation[13] of the black female body, which relates to the very production of the casts in Figure 3. Zooming in on the unseen, through including the television Rose also acknowledges the contemporary time of media inflation.

The naturalism intended by the museum modellers of the Khoisan casts, is discredited by the photographers framing, which includes the museum space outside the constructed landscape set.

[13] The fragmentation of the black female body has taken place, through obsessive focus on specific parts represented in casts and photography (Rassool & Hayes 2002: 146). This sectioning-off of carefully selected parts of black female bodies (hand, foot, head, genitals) through representation has left traces which have undergone a confinement (museum) and dispersal in others (postcard) (Rassool & Hayes 2002: 146). This has interested feminist studies regarding identity formation and subjectivity for black women.

The Khoisan people like represented in Figure 3 where typically portrayed in front of their dwellings or in the landscape. This functioned to further naturalise them as "primitive," as people of the earth, and as culturally and politically un-complex (Garb 2011:14). Paradoxically Figure 3 can be read as a document of displacement, reiterated in how the overtly constructed appearance of the set is revealed in the photograph.

Through this coded assemblage Rose performs her uncertainty regarding her categorisation as 'coloured' during apartheid. Coloured identity discourse has received much currency through the broader discourse of hybridity by Homi Bhabha[14]. Attentive to the intersections of race, sex and ethnicity, Rose's work is an anxious negotiation of instability of these categories for identity formation. The performance is successful in this post-apartheid moment, as she explores how representations of her body historically became a signifier for blackness, primitive humanity, deviant sexuality as well as a contentious border between these intersections. Her 'blackness' or 'colouredness' as a colour coded signifier is less of the point in this paper, but it is rather her body as a discursively marked[15] entirety by blackness, by nature and overt sexuality.

The significance of site is an integral element of *Span II* (1997). While cultural history museums have presented settler histories, natural and anthropology history museums exhibited material culture, specimens pertaining to 'indigenous' communities, displayed with little difference between animal and human subjects (Coombes 2003: 220). Rose re-purposes the aesthetics of colonial domination[16] by using the elements thus far described and performs in the National Gallery, which is also a (previously) space for the construction of ideological relating to race, gender and sexuality. This is a building that is located adjacent to the **SAM**, with the performance running in tandem to the *Bushman Diorama* exhibition at the time. *Span* does not propose an objective truth like the casts the modellers of Figure 3, which were strategically presented for a 'knowledge' consuming viewer at the **SAM**. The *Span* performances critically disrupt the myths of Africa, as primitive and timeless.

Rose's choice of performance, surviving through video and photography is significant, because time becomes a meaningful element. The combination of performance and video can be interpreted as the blurring of real time and *reel* time, a productive mixing up of timelines. Thus this blend also seems to evoke a sense of disorientation. Rose's shifts in spatial dimension draws the reader to the

[14] See Homi Bhabha discussions on hybrity and coloured identity in *Culture's In-Between* (1996)
[15] Her body is marked by blackness, primitive instinct, sexual deviance informally and theoretically.
[16] Standardised profile pose, diorama representations, and spaces where ideology is generated and sanctified, such as a national gallery.

significance of history, through the inversion of signs, is a tacit questioning of 'a history written by whom?' This is a dialectic investigation, where past and present, race and gender are juxtaposed and/or woven to produce innovative points of access that are generative of varied interpretation.

The *Span* performances encompass the core themes of intersectional work, such as a commitment to understanding power relations in society, relationally though dialogue and interaction and an emphasising social context (intersecting categories of race, gender, sex, class, ethnicity, ability, etc. a person may simultaneously occupy) (Collins & Bilge 2016: 30). These themes intertwine in Roses work, and thus her work is increasingly complex as an active viewer can be engage with it on various levels (Collins & Bilge 2016:29). The conceptual complexity of this performance in dealing with the black female body is in itself a counter hegemonic act.

The work *Span* encompasses more than a play on the textbook institutional mechanisms that have disenfranchised black women. Roses body on display in a space previously dominated by white nationalist masculinity relation to the level of complexity in which Rose deals with hair, composes a physiological map visualizing the intersections of race, gender, ethnicity, etc. These intersections are rendered poetic but Rose has dealt with them in a rather concrete method.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau in *Representing Women: The Politics of Self-Representation* (1995) points out that many African American female artists such as Adrian Piper, Lorna Simpson, Renee Green, and Carrie Mae Weems, like Rose, reject the pressure to make "authentic" or ameliorative depictions of black people. Instead of over-simplification by producing 'positive' or 'negative' representations, these artists express their concerns with the multi-layered means by which race and gender are constituted within their own representational limits (Solomon-Godeau 1995: 298). Rose possibly influenced by the local and international identity discourse, which has inspired feminist, post-modernists and postcolonial artistic practice, among others since the 70s/80s, also does not provide a corrective response about the way women of colour have been represented.

In *Span I & II,* Rose redefines these restrictions through a palimpsest or even a contraposition of elements that draws on the viewer's visual vocabulary or archive to construct meaning. But this composition of materials can be interpreted in various ways, as described throughout this chapter. Rose represents herself and her body in relation to space and objects that have resonance in a racially sensitive time and space. The interpretation of the work is dependent on a plethora of factors relating to the viewer's engagement and access to culturally coded metaphors. The *Span*

performances thus take on a post-structualist dimension in that the viewer establishes the meaning of the work by weaving together interpretations of the various textual elements compiled by Rose.

The viewer's visual vocabulary thus plays a part in the subversion of hegemonic representation.

Desiree Lewis describes that the representations of the nineteenth century *other* are less about the conditions of the people/time than with the necessity to portray the conditions in specific ways. Through strong racial boundaries and difference stereotyped, the Anglo-Saxon anthropological frame aimed to prove western projections (Daniels 1999:105). Lewis explains that representations from the nineteenth century are merely evidence about its observers' intent, location and subjectivity (2002:273). Figure 3 is thus the product of a "discursive process of self-narration," by James Drury, his directors and fellow modellers[17] (Lewis 2002:273). Texts, written or image made by one about another can therefore be considered to some extent to contain self-projections.

Span I & II can be interpreted as an expression of Rose's subjectivity, which resonates with other women of colour through their relation to hair. This draws attention to the broader process of 'thinking about difference' and how it is constructed and defined in relations between individuals and communities. Yet one can ask; what about Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans, Ndebele, Sotho, Tswana, Venda women who's response to institutional and representational regimes of domination that should also be represented? Rose cannot speak for the entire *coloured* community, let alone for other social groups. This demonstrates that cultural production does not discover margins but rather re-creates them, because there is a producer or author who decides what should be included (Lewis 2002:273). The authoring subject in this case Rose, selects memories and materials that serve her needs. Knowledge-production or authorship therefore automatically involves practices of control and omission.

Yet the Span performances in fact resonate with people locally, challenging the visual culture in post-apartheid South Africa but also resonates with people internationally (Jones 2003:15). Rose is at once observer and interpreter of society; maker and mediator of her subjectivity. Rose is critical of the power to represent and while incorporating the autobiographical text, is able to resonate with a broad audience. Rose does not merely replicate disenfranchisement through self-representation but challenges cultural production of ethnography and anthropology that was initially developed to disenfranchise her, produces an ambivalent power relation. She examines social associations of

[17] Head modeller at the SAM in 1911 (Coombes 2003).

power, gender, race, stereotype and history by utilising her body and the connotations that this brings, in turn challenging hegemonic representations of the black female body in the practice.

In conclusion, Rose utilises her body as a site for critical intervention. This is a tracing of, and interrogation of bodies of knowledge. Here Rose employs the connotations of hair as an extended metaphor to describe the confluence of race and sexuality, offering an intersectional critique on the hegemonic representations of the black female body as primitive. Rose engages this disrupted body as evidence of her agency. She highlights the absurdities of the apartheid classification system, communicated in this layered performance. This performance is an intersectional critique, in that it is an investigation of the many ways to understanding the representation of difference.

In going beyond the corrective strategies of representation and moving towards a questioning of mechanisms of knowledge-production, *Snap I & II* is a critical response to hegemonic representations of the black female body. Rose is successful in challenging hegemonic representations, a complex overturn of iconic visual codes. Through Rose's critical use of her own image she unpacks her identity as a black/ 'coloured' woman in a postcolonial, post-apartheid South Africa, while concurrently resonating with a local and international community.

Chapter 2

The Black Female Embodiment of Deviant Sexuality: the Prostitute and Lesbian body in *Being (T)here* (2009) by Zanele Muholi's

South African artist Lisa Brice has challenged the sex trade and the commodification of women in the early

1990s[18], and Jean Brundrit dealt with what it meant to be a women and a lesbian in patriarchal apartheid South Africa,[19] but it is Zanele Muholi who effectively mobilises a multiplicity of feminist concerns through her artistic practice. Muholi is a 'visual activist' working to bring visibility to the LGBTI[20] community.

She set the scene.

Through self-representation Muholi reflects on the act of making herself the subject of her own artistic exploration (2011: 45). During 2008-2009 Muholi experimented with herself as subject in her photography. It was during this period the work in Figure 4. *Being (T)here* (2009) discussed in this section, was made. In the previous chapter I concluded that an artist like Tracey Rose is successful in challenging hegemonic representations of the black female body, through a complex overturn of iconic visual codes. Through Rose's critical use of her own image she unpacks her identity as a black/ 'coloured' woman in a postcolonial and post-apartheid South Africa, while concurrently resonating with a local and international community.

In this section through a post-structualist lens I grapple with concepts of authorship[21] and intertexuality[22]. I consider if this ambivalent photograph is an intersectional critique of hegemonic representations of the black female body, and whether this is achieved or not due to the strategy of creative self-representation. Aiding this discussion are comparisons to images that discursively relate to Muholi's photograph.

(See Figure 4.)With shoulders back and in beaded skirt and collar, she[23] incites the spectators gaze. Her face is turned down, hands cover her breasts and her right leg, like an invitation, is raised, resting against the inner

[18] In her series *Sex Kitten* (1993) Brice expressed her shock after witnessing the exploitative situation of the overt sex trade on a trip to Thailand, particularly moved by the commonness of child prostitution. See Williamson, S. & Jamal, A. 1996. Art in *South Africa: The Future Present*. Johannesburg: David Philip Publishers

[19] Also see Williamson, S. & Jamal, A. 1996. *Art in South Africa: The Future Present*. Johannesburg: David Philip Publishers

[20] Lesbian, Black, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersexual people

[21] Post-structualists, particularly Roland Bathes argue that the very concept of authorship is a western Renaissance contention- instead they see texts and images as works that are embedded in the network of cultural representation, where the reader/viewer‟s context, and the conventions/ patterns of representation familiar to him/her, are as important as the author/artists intentions (D‟Alleva 2012:129).

[22] Intertexuality very basically refers the fact that texts exists in relation to other texts, and to the power relations and cultural expressions that form because of specific relationships and contexts. According to Post-structuralists, the resonance and relevance of texts owe more to other texts than to their own makers (D‟Alleva 2012:129).

[23] At this point in the paper, it is not clear where Muholi who inserts her body into the pictorial frame is in fact representing herself, or enacting/embodying a role from another text.

window sill. Pink fur, red lamps and purple curtains outline the frame. Framed within a dim red lit window she is on display, despite her self-conscious stance.

There is an overt sense of displacement of Muholi's black female body in Figure 4. The apparent sense of vulnerability of her stance and gaze seem to implicate the viewer in the process of objectification. One feels compelled to question this frozen fiction. Is the vulnerability of her gaze a weapon in the destruction of visual pleasure[24]? Or does it heighten pleasure of looking sadistically? Is the viewer in the dominating role? Is this her stage or is this her cage?

To assist this process of interrogation, I have researched other images which call upon similar questions.

There exist numerous archives portraying exotic erotica of black women in the west in the 20s, 30s and 40s (Wills & Williams 2002:98). The work of Ernest Benecke, Pierre Tremaux, Abdullah Freres lay testimony to this. Yet erotic photography of European travellers reveal the growing of this trope as early as the 1800s, made plain through the photographers obvious mediation apparent in the setting and posing enacted by black women for the photographs.

Deborah Wills and Cara Williams give a short description of two incongruous postcards in the United States National Anthropology Archive in their book *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (2002) which will be of assistance in dealing with the historicity of exotic erotica, posed as anthropology of diasporic black female bodies.

At the *World's Columbian Exposition* in Chicago in 1893 the *Midway Plaisance* was a main area for the display of non-western cultures. It was a place where Americans could "study ethnography practically," but this certainly had political objectives of casting the non-white as barbaric and childlike (Wills & Williams 2002:73).

The two postcards, Figure 5 & 6 respectively (both 1893) are images of the same young girl in the world fair, but are titled to specify that these are different young girls belonging to different tribes. In both images the girl stands, wearing a head wrap, a beaded belt, and draped in jewellery. On the table beside her is a bundled item of clothing. In Figure 5 while in a profile pose the girl labelled '*A Kroo Virgin'* turns to the camera to show herself, one hand cuffing her breast (Wills & Williams 2002:74). This pose looks uncomfortable, as if instructed awkwardly to do so. It bares resemblance to Muholi's masquerade in Figure 4, but instead of gracing her breast to reveal her body, as is the case of the girl in Figure 5, Muholi's hands grasp her breasts to conceal. One might read this image

[24] A tactic of challenging the patriarchal symbolic order in representations of women, Laura Mulvey proposes for critical feminist film production, in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1989:15)

by Muholi as a representation of a victim of a cruel reality. Her hands cover her breasts, possibly revealing a sense of over-exposure.

In Figure 6, the caption reads: "*A Pesseh Girl in Full Dress, same dress as the Kroo girl. This is usual dress, except the decoration.*" This is a clear fabrication since this is the same girl as the '*Kroo Virgin*' (Wills & Williams 2002:74). The photograph authenticated proof of a 'type' even if the type was constructed entirely by the photographer. The obviously incorrect captions demonstrates that there was no concern for the identity of the people exhibited and indicates how little so-called education was taking place at the world fair (Wills & Williams 2002:74).

Both of these images are dated 1893, 28 years after the abolition of slavery in the United States. It is unclear whether she is a model, a prostitute or slave. The chain around the girls left ankle that is visible in Figure 6 contrasts with her ankle bracelet on her other leg raises alarming questions about her circumstances (Wills & Williams 2002:74).

The body of the young girl in Figure 6 &7 and the body of the woman Muholi masquerades as, is a site of fetishism, because there is a pathological displacement of erotic interest on to an object. The Zulu inspired beaded skirt and collar Muholi adorns in Figure 4, seems to be out of place in this context. At a closer inspection, one notices that this is more of a costume, as the beads look like a cheap plastic imitation of traditional wear. Fetishism functions through the substitution of an 'object,' in these cases the beaded skirt/belt and collar, for some dangerous, but forbidden force; in this the case attraction to the black female body (Hall 2013: 256). The substitute then becomes eroticised, invested in sexual vigour, power and longing which cannot find expression in the object to which it is actually focussed (Hall 2013: 256).

After the first democratic elections in 1994, Candice Breitz produced *The Rainbow Series* (1997) during the progression of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings. *The Rainbow Series* (1996) (see Figure 7), consist of various collaged pastiches of tourist travel images, ethnographic photography of black females in traditional wear and pornographic images of white women. The work can be interpreted as a critique on the fetishism of both black and white female bodies, as well as the fragmentation of female subjectivity in South Africa. The images of black and white women used in this series are problematic, and together with the title is poignantly provocative. The 'rainbow' in the title refers to the myth in nationalist rhetoric of a united young post-apartheid South Africa.

Anne McClintock deliberates a year later in her essay "*No Longer in a Future Heaven": Gender, Race and Nationalism* (1997) the temporal irregularity within nationalisms- shifting between nostalgia and the progressive rejection of the past- thus nationalism's relation to time is thus dealt with as a *natural*[25] relation to gender.

[25] Embodying nationalism"s traditional principle of stability, women are consistently represented as the primitive and authentic body of national tradition, pictured as inactive, backward-looking, and natural. Men, on the other hand are

According to McClintock women were stereotypically fashioned as the symbolic bearers of the nation, but are deprived of any direct relation to national agency. Women appear in a metaphoric or symbolic role (McClintock 1997:90).

The Rainbow Series(1996) has evoked severe criticism, particularly from Okwui Enwezor, in his controversial essay *Reframing the Black Subject Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation* (1997) wherein he criticises Breitz Penny Siopis, Pippa Skotnes among other white South African artists, for their appropriating and 'anxious repetition' of clichéd images of black female bodies (Farber 2010: 306). Kendal Geers also adds that these artists commit racial exploitation of black women's representation by speaking on their behalf (Farber 2010:308).

Art such as *The Rainbow Series* was intended to be subversive, to pose questions about the use and miss-use of women's bodies as symbols, myths and metonymy for male desire. Typecasts continue to permeate many fields of visual representation, and imbalanced power relations are irrefutably implicated in the process, yet representing a subject is not the same as "speaking for" that subject (Farber 2010: 306). This work addresses the intersections of public and private bodies, individual and collective bodies that are mutually racialised and fetishized. Separate from the artist's objective, artworks are open to various readings. The work affectively highlighted the work that still needed to be done in blurring the boundaries between such dichotomies in the early development of South Africa's democracy.

At this point in history, it was too much of a generalisation to say that white women or male academics have silence black women. Today women, especially black women are changing historic constructions of public space[26]. A precursor to this movement in the fine arts can be found in Tracey Rose's performance work *Span I (1997)*, discussed in the previous chapter. The act of engraving Rose's autobiographic text on to the wall of the National Gallery is a sensitive example of this.

Since black women became a visual metaphor of the sexually debased woman[27], then her sex and the pornography associated with her customs was a fictional construct that was bought- and understood as such, on some level - by the consumers of her image (Wills & Williams 2002:49). In the nineteenth century, the black female was both a graphic sexual metaphor and an ethnographic specimen, thus her nudity was considered

represented as the progressive agent of national innovation, as powerful, historic and expressing nationalisms revolutionary principle of change (McClintock 1997:92).

[26] In the Fine Arts there is the black women artists collective based in Cape Town, *iQhiya*, and politically, much of the 2015 student activism at South African universities was mobilized by black women.

[27] Referring again to the discourse discussed in the previous chapter fuelled by Sander Gillman and his contemporaries.

acceptable because it showed her *exotic, animal nature* (Wills & Williams 2002:49). Muholi seems to be using masquerade for mimesis, mimicking this eroticism.

Yolande Daniels' gives an account of contemporary ethnographic representations which can be read as the eroticisation of black bodies for the consumption by men in her paper *Ethno-Porne: Four Brief Views into the Ethics of Imagining Black Bodies* (1999). This 'ethno-porn' could be consumed in publications such as the National Geographic in the mid-1900s and tourist postcards about African women (Daniels 1999:102). Muholi in Figure 4, similar to the way Daniels describes representations for tourist sites, "presents the slippage between the categories ethnographic, scientific, pornographic and artistic" (1999:102). Here the site of representation intersects with the juncture of scientific method and aesthetic projection.

Many artists responded to the *Grey Areas* debate by visualising their location as both subject and other within their work, according to Leora Farber in her paper: *The address of the other: the body and the senses in contemporary South African Art* (2010). Other factors that led to changes include the urge to move away from 'resistance art'[28][29] of the 1980 and the swift opening up of the once isolated South African art world to the global art market, in the form of exhibitions and global publicity engendered by the first and second Johannesburg Biennales which created a platform for artists to respond to the post-1994 liberty and the possibilities for renewal of identities through cultural production[30] (Farber 2010:306).

Since the early 2000s South African artists have a heightened sense of suspicion about the democratic government and began to undo the boundaries within concepts of ethnicity, race, gender, sex, class, etc. Muholi challenges herself and the South African visual economy in this manner through photographic self-reflexivity. Her practice can be characterised by a process of questioning the gaze. Muholi explores different modes of engagement in the representation of black female bodies, from working in documentary photography, performative experimental photography, and simultaneously multiple forms of LGBTI activism.

One might draw a connection to Rene Magritte's "window paintings" which incites modal uncertainty for viewers of these paintings-within-paintings, when looking at/through Muholi's window in *Being (T)here.* The window, props and red light in Muholi's work evoke references of the Amsterdam Red Light District. Thus within the

[28] This refers the production and dissemination of art as a weapon against the apartheid regime. In an internal ANC talk in [29] , activist Albie Sachs reviews his influential former declaration calling for "art as an instrument of political struggle" and declares that in post-apartheid South Africa, artists should enrich their creative imagination to reflect the freedom and individual narratives in the democratic present (Sachs 1990).

[30] Loera Farber has described that generally the mid-1990s South African art function under the index of the political, by grappling with social edifices such as race. While influenced by global the art economy, South African artists began to reflect on how identity could be unpacked in a young, fragile democracy (2010:306).

diegesis[31] this woman performed by Muholi, performs this gaze. In reading the photograph, the crudely cropped window frame can be read as a code which highlights ones status as spectator. This is because the spectator within the *diegesis* of Figure 4 and viewer of Figure 4 as a photograph, seem to merge.

This is a frame within the framing of the photograph. The frame functions to distance[32] the spectator from that which is being represented in the image, not allowing the spectator to forget that she/he is looking at a re()presentation. At the same time the frame distances the viewer, it illogically allows the viewer of the photograph, whether in gallery, book or internet form, to interpellate on to the street, looking into that window.

This can be interpreted as blurring the boundary between reality and representation.

In Muholi's *Being (T)here* the "*wild woman pornographic myth of black female sexuality*"[33] trope is embodied. The work can be read as a critique of the black female body exploited for profitable ends. Her work echo's elements of Daniels poignant reflection (that):

"In the millennial, post-colonial, post-apartheid period, sex is framed through which 'women of colour' are constructed as desirable. Sex is presented in nationalised contexts, catering to the private consumer of images or bodies. In the global context economy, we can view the world through the profitable industries of sex tourism." (1999:106)

The title of the work by Muholi suggests two locations simultaneously: *being here* and/or *being there*. This reiterates a sense of displacement. The ambiguity of space and place within the photograph, as well as in light of Farber's reflection on the conditions of the South African art world brings to mind a few associations. The increased opportunity for South African artist mobility and global exposure through residencies and exhibitions, as well as the rise of Black Feminism since the 80s, bred the conditions in the late 1990-early 2000s, for a growing demand on behalf of the galleries and art institutions, for black female members.

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[31] By *diegesis* I refer to a narrative or plot alluded to in the photograph. The word is usually used in writing about a film, but because Muholi"s work discussed is so evidently performance based, I employ this word mnemonically.

[32] Bertolt Brecht"s famous „Distancing Effect" is a style in theatre performance that never allows the audience to forget that they are watching a play, a representation of reality, not reality itself (Allen 2003:29). This notion has influenced my reading of the image.

[33] bell hooks reports that 90s popular culture provides innumerable examples of black female appropriation and manipulation of the „negative stereotypes" to either declare control over the representation or at least secure the profits of it (1992). Since black female sexuality has been represented in racist/sexist iconography as more free, many black singers, regardless of talent have cultured an image of sexually availability and rebellion (hooks 1992:123). She describes that in the 90s popular cinema and the music industry reveal patterns that portray heightened black female sexuality, evident in the archetypal roles of black prostitutes and strippers (hooks 1992:123). hooks also draws attention to the black fashion models cast as exotic, natural and sexually available.

One can thus read this artwork as a reflection of uncertainty of occupying a position of both insider and outsider, in the international art economy. Artists, particularly black female artists in this dual position might enjoy the acceptance into spaces previously inaccessible to them, but perhaps feel like props or fetishized entities. This red lit room thus comes to resemble Tracey Roses glass display cabinet discussed in the previous chapter. If she is revealing her sentiment within the international art world, she compares this to the linage of exploited black women. This is however, one interpretation of the work.

Within the *diegesis*, the woman is performing for a viewer in the street, while simultaneously; Muholi is performing this for the viewer of the artwork, the photograph. The work can be read as an image within an image, perhaps even a simulacrum, whereby there is no original woman, no signified attached to this signifier. Perhaps there is no woman, no-thing that her image reproduces or represents. Muholi is perhaps dealing with the nature of photography as understood post-structurally[35].

This photograph is usually read by a viewer in the format of an artist book or within the gallery space, thus her status as both subject and author would be contextualised. The photograph is also read among the Zuma trials, Xenophobia attacks and curative rape experiences/statists of 2008 that the viewer draws from intertextually.

According to Solomon - Godeau the focus on self-representation pursued by feminist art production in the early years of the American women's liberation movement was underpinned by the concern to represent female subjectivity and experience while the semantics of form and expression are entrenched with patriarchal constructions, irrefutably marked by the all-pervasive symbolic order, inseparable from patriarchal society (Solomon – Godeau 1995:298). In a sense, Muholi cannot escape this (because it is so ingrained into the way people read texts/images), and by using this patriarchal visual order to express her disapproval in it, she does not naively fall into victim of this radicalized patriarchal regime.

Muholi exercises her agency as a black lesbian woman through creative self-representation, to draw our attention to the layered history of objectification and abuse of the black female body. With this photograph Muholi presents a feminist intersectional oeuvre by incorporating elements that speak about the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. It is in her critical juxtaposition of these elements that Muholi's work can be read like untangling the bonds of racist and sexist representations of the black female body.

Figure 4 is challenging with or without the knowledge that Muholi is both subject and author of this image. Engaging with the image in full awareness of Muholi's context, only adds to the various ways the viewer can interpret the image. The knowledge that Muholi is lesbian, an artist, a leader and world respected activist is not

[35] Roland Bathes theorised about the assumption that photographs present us with the literal object (represented) itself (Allen 2003: 121). This is an assumption he refers to as „being-there" which is something Muholi seems to be conscious of as well (Allen 2003: 121).

what makes her self-representations subversive, but rather it is her critical creative engagement with her images denotative and various connotative (culturally coded) messages. Muholi counters hegemonic representations of the black female body by introducing a high level of complexity into her photography through masquerade and mimicry.

Chapter 3

Sophie on Decolonising the Domestic: Challenging representations of servitude in the work of Mary Sibanda

Sophie is Johannesburg-based artist, Mary Sibande's sculptural and photographic alter-ego. As inspired by Sibande's great-grandmother, grandmother and mother who all worked as domestic labourers, Sophie in different stages of her genealogy, travels through public spaces in Cape Town and Johannesburg, asserting her whimsical presence. Sibande's meandering through media, time and space speaks of her uncontained sense of freedom to play with her history. In this section I analyse a photographic work by the artist, titled *They Don't Make Them Like They Used Too* (2008) (see Figure 8) and compare it to Édouard Manet's painting *Olympia (*1863) (see Figure 10) while focusing on the depiction of Laure, a model described as African, Caribbean, who is painted as the black maid offering Olympia a bouquet of flowers.. With this comparison I discuss whether the strategy of creative self-representation can be employed to counter hegemonic representations of the black female body.

In the work *They Don't Make Them Like They Used Too* (2008) (Figure 8), Sophie stands with her head lowered in concentration, poised in the act of knitting a jersey, branded by a Superman logo. Filling up much of the foreground, is her iconic voluminous blue dress, the mid-point between the South African domestic workers uniform and the Victorian noblewoman's dress. Sophie might have some trouble performing any obligations of cleaning and cooking in this dress. She also wears a crisp white head scarf, and a starched apron. Her skin appears impossibly matte black, plunging her into the realms of fiction.

Sophie stands at the centre of a viewer's gaze, surrounded by an abyss of whiteness.

This colossal photograph exhibited in public space, spans the surface of a side of a building (as seen in Figure 9) which is a gesture on Sibande's behalf to counter domestic workers invisibility. The significance of site, much like discussed in the performance work by Tracey Rose in the first chapter, is an integral part of reading an artwork. Located near the junction of Dorp Street and Market Street, in central Stellenbosch[34], the enlarged photograph of Sophie can be seen[35]. Stellenbosch generally

[34] Stellenbosch is a university town in South Africa's Western Cape Province.

[35] Sibande has printed an edition of 10 archival digital prints of this photograph, but for the purpose of this paper I will be discussing the work in the context of public space.

associated with affluence, wine farms, galleries and Afrikaans culture, and a place that has one of the highest GDP in the country, it is also a place where many black and coloured women from

nearby towns work as domestic workers in the white-own homes, guest homes, hotels, etc. Like most spaces in South Africa, much progress has been made towards social equality, yet the economic situation for most black people makes it difficult to break out of the cycle of poverty, leaving labour and domestic service the only prospects for employment[36] for the majority.

Located less than a five minute walk away from the public artwork, are the Stellenbosch Museums which are dispersed around the town centre. The frequent spotting of coloured women dressed in 17th century Dutch domestic colonial wear, might frame the experience of Sibande's work in different ways, depending on how the person interprets the work and social dynamics of Stellenbosch. As I frequently pass this artwork on my way to class, I often wonder how other people interpret it[37].

The title of this work: *They Don't Make Them Like They Used To* (2008) also leaves room for varied avenues of interpretation. The voice that expresses this phrase seems to be ambiguous. Is it Sophie referring to the quality of jersey's on the market today? Is Sophie referring to the hero, for whom she is knitting the jersey? Or is this the voice of some anonymous person who is unhappy about their domestic worker. Is this Sibande who is parodying people who complain about the quality of their domestic workers?

Europe, America and South Africa share the reality and hegemonic representations of the black female in service, as the domestic worker and/or nanny. The historical discourse of coercion, labour and cultural appropriation relating to black bodies, must be kept in mind, in this regard, complicated in Tracey Rose's gesture in her *Span I* (1997) performance, where she employs a 'coloured' paroled prisoner to carve out her confessions, paralleling her presence in her performance in *Span II* (see Figure 1 & 2). Disenfranchised by colonialism, slavery, racism, segregation, apartheid, patriarchy, and the historical socio-economic effects thereof, the black female domestic worker suffers from multiple layers of oppression. The domestic worker in South Africa is associated with invisibility.

[36] Stellenbosch University (SU) is to some extent still thought of as the birth-space of the apartheid government, despite much effort on behalf of the institution, staff and students, to bring change. It is significant to note that domestic and maintenance staff at the university last year (2015) has protested against outsourcing, a system that maintains workers economic oppression.

[37] These recurring thoughts, as well as my interest in subjectivity have inspired my interest in black female representation.

Countering this by making her hyper-visible, Sophie is performed by Sibande as a proud black female icon.

The title of Édouard Manet's painting *Olympia (*1863) (see Figure 10) effectively omits the presence of Laure in the painting. This might seem like a rather petty comment, but this sense of exclusion can also be interpreted in analysing the composition rendered. One can read Laure's insertion into the narrative portrayed as a supporting character, highlighting the desirability of Olympia the white modern Parisian prostitute. Similar scenes recur in Western photography in the 1850s, especially evident in photographs by Jacques Antoine Felix Moulin (Wills & Williams 2002:38). Although is Sophie is also not referred to by name in the title of the photograph of her, the photograph is not titled with a pronoun like in the case of Olympia, but left open for multiple readings as earlier described.

Black women have perpetually been represented occupying roles of servitude, which have *served* to naturalise a historically and economically imposed position of subservience. Barbra Thomson has written on photography in South Africa and the Congo in the early 1900s which reveal how missionaries marked the initiation of control over the black female body, (through the so-called 'civilising mission' in the name of Christianity) by coercing traditional African women to adopt European clothes (Thompson 2008:148).

Similarly, Mary Corrigall in her essay *Sartorial excess in Mary Sibande's "Sophie"* (2015) Corrigall refers to the domestic workers uniform in South Africa as a sign of fixity. The domestic workers uniform, particularly in South Africa declares difference between the white family and black employees. It renders the worker an extension of the property, binding the worker to the household and therefore marking the workers even in public spaces (Corrigall 2015:153). The discourse of public and private space has received much feminist currency through the work of Griselda Pollock and her contemporaries. In the South African context, as discussed by Anne McClintock[38], Anne Coombe[39] and Desiree Lewis[40] have written extensively on women's connection to the realms of private, domestic space in the previous chapter

[38] Consult: McClintock, A. 1997. "No Longer in a Future Heaven": Gender, Race and Nationalism. In *Dangerous Liasons: Gender Nation & Postcolonial Perspectives*.

[39] Consult: Coombes, A.E. 2003. *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*.

[40] Consult: Lewis, D. 2009.Gendered Spectacle: New Terrains of Struggle in South Africa in Body Politics and Women Citizens- African Experiences.

The name ‘Sophie’ and the uniform put emphasis on the way in which this naming embedded servitude into her family line. ‘Sophie’ was the ‘English’ name bestowed to Sibande’s grandmother by her white employer (Corrigall 2015:155).The domestic worker’s uniform and that of the noblewoman’s traditional facade both exude a fixed her social position, but when they converge they breakdown the master–servant dichotomy, or if not, the margins between the two have been blurred, thus allowing or encouraging Sophie’s social mobility (Corrigall 2015:155). Sibande claims the streets of South Africa for Sophie’s domain, for Sophie to roam, and later rage through[41].

In Figure 8 & 9, it is evident that the dress in reality would hamper Sophie’s ability to fulfil the tasks of a domestic worker. It would physically limit her ability to move. Sophie wears a hybrid dress, a fusion of the South African domestic workers uniform and the Victorian aristocratic formal women’s dress. Separate, both forms of attire are static, stuck in the past, and by fusing the two, Sibande reflects the current condition of disruption[42].

The domestic uniform was also implemented to desexualise the black female body according to Alex Dodd (2010:468). Ethnographic and pseudo-scientific research about black women in the 17th to 19th century, focussed on the black female body, as a site of primitive sexual deviance (Thompson 2008:149).

In Manet’s painting *Olympia (*1863) (see Figure 10) Laure, although not dressed in a servants uniform, wears an over-sized dress and head wrap. The contrast of her concealment compared to the naked reclining Olympia pictorially reinforces her diminishment. Despite Griselda Pollock’s fascinating account that establishes Laure, the actual African- Caribbean-descendent nanny-turn model, as a modern city woman, one cannot deny the calculated polarity of representational strategies, employed by Manet through formal elements which are more richly coded, than expected at first glance. This makes the work a reflection of the modern Parisian conceptions of racial difference. The painting reflects the black female body in the west as a working class woman.
In that sense she is similar to Olympia.

[41] Sibande develops the character of Sophie: who starts to poses intense mythical power, evident in the increasingly expanding size of Sophie‟s dress and sweeping presence all over urban spaces.

[42] 44 Many South Africans are, through collective action, protest and petition, standing up against oppressive systems and institutions, particularly young people, culminating in the #FeesMustFall 2015, LGBTI movements, etc.

Sophie is also a working woman, though it is unclear for whom she is knitting the jersey in Figure 8 & 9. Is it for a superhero, an employer or for herself? In the photograph Sibande poetically brings to mind the role many black women have and continue to play in rearing white children as a nanny, or a 'live-in' domestic worker. The work can be interpreted as drawing attention to the vital role black women have had in the rearing and care of specifically white young boys, who perhaps grow up to swiftly disassociates from their caregivers.

In *Wounds, Surface, Skin* (2013) Sahara Nuttall's highlights Sibande's engagement with the idea of skin as a site of trauma and a site for restoration (2013:427). In performing the character of Sophie for her photographic series, Sibanda paints her skin matte black, which brings to mind relations of store mannequins and Barbie dolls (Nuttall 2013:427). The effect of this creates doubt on the part of the viewer, as he or she is unclear as to whether Sophie represented in the photograph is Sibande's body or a sculpture (Nuttall 2013:427). Sophie speaks subtly to a society that has mass-produced and reproduced, the conditions which has forced black women into occupations of servitude, rendering them into objects that can be dressed and domesticated to fit easily into the background of the household in an apartheid and post-apartheid South African context (Nuttall 2013:427).

By contrast, Olympia's radiant reclining body dominates the spatial dimensions of the frame in Figure 10. She is represented by Manet on centre stage. She would be the lead star on a Victorian *Sex and the City* season. Though closer to reality than Sophie, Olympia is portrayed as an authentic modern Parisian woman, challenging the viewer with her demanding gaze. Her gaze at the time was considered extremely scandalous, since she daringly stares back to meeting her viewer's eye. Olympia's garb consists only of shoes, a bracelet, an orchid placed in her hair and a string tied in a tight bow around her neck. This is a similar use of garment/object as the beaded skirt worn by Muholi in Figure 4, discussed in the previous chapter. Thus to represent Olympia and the 'ethnoporn' star played by Muholi as entirely naked, would be less provocative.

The intense contrast between the dark of the background and the light of Olympia lying on her bed has drawn much attention[43]. Though middle and bourgeois gentlemen employed the services of prostitutes, this was meant to be kept private, and not want to be exposed, especially within a gallery).

[43] This was discussed by contemporary critics of the 19th century as well as in the analyses by Griselda Pollock among others (Grigsby 2016).

Sophie - in domestic worker simultaneously - aristocrat regalia, not only adorns the walls of galleries and museums, but brands streets and cities as her own. In domestic worker and aristocrat regalia and possibly breaks down the servant/master dichotomy. This form of appropriation subverts concepts of colonial repression associated with the archetypal domestic workers uniform, as a means of recovering autonomy (Corrigall 2015:154)

Sibande employs strategies of masquerade, performance and mimicry. Sophie's character evokes the relation between South African colonial past and the postmodern, postcolonial contemporary, through returning to of 19th century Victorian themes within a contemporary context (Farber 2010:316). Sibande suggests fresh conversation around race, hybridity, class and difference through her use of mimicry[44]. By critically incorporating autobiographical elements and imaginative play she breaks down the fixity of self and other.

Similarly Zanele Muholi and Senzeni Marasela also deal with the legacy of domestic workers in their family.

In *Massa & Mina(h)* (2008) Muholi experiments with creative performance based photography to deal with the racial matters of female domesticity- confronting the situation in the South African context, in which it is common for black women to work as domestic employees for white households (Moholi n.d: 31).

Senzeni Marasela has also challenged racialised regimes of representation of black women through drawing on the story of her mother's experience of coming to Johannesburg in search for work as a domestic worker. Marasela re-enacts her mother's roaming through unfamiliar territory, a narrative expressed through the photographic series *Theodora Comes to Johannesburg* (2003- present) (Williamson 2009: 114).

Feminist theory proposes that visual culture and its disseminating cognitive mechanisms (fetishism, scopophillia, and voyeurism) have been devious in the ways by which women are constituted as bearers instead of makers of meaning (Solomon - Godeau 1995: 298). Many feminist artists, have developed representational strategies, working within film and photography so as to acknowledge

[44] The sign of „double articulation" through which the longing for an improved identifiable "Other" as a subject of difference that is the same but not exactly-the-same, is realised (Farber 2010:315).

the symbolic order even as they subvert, undermine or politically 'expose' them (Solomon-Godeau 1995:299). An example of this would be Cindy Sherman who staged scenes of stereotypical women, in doing so critiquing the "constructedness" of the category of 'woman' as well as the ways in which this classification is produced and expressed, revealing that the notion of a genuine femininity outside of the image is essentially fictional (Solomon-Godeau 1995:299). A similar conceptual foundation can be read to be employed in the work by Sibande and Marasela.

According to Pumla Dineo Gqola in *What is slavery to me? Postcolonial/slave memory in postapartheid South Africa*, self-representation for marginalised people (especially Khoi, African, and Brown women) is a method of engaging the history of erasure and disenfranchisement (2010: 49). I argue that it is in the act of self-representation, that the actual countering of hegemonic work is being done.

Lorain O'Grady 'who has famously challenge the back-grounding of the black female attendant, modelled by Laure in Manet's *Olympia*, has also expressed concern about "reclaiming the body as a site of power of black female subjectivity" (1999). Again, representing anybody seems to create new margins, for those not represented.

Although the body is an important space for self- affirmation especially for black women who experience oppression in various forms, representation of self/self –representation, , it is not an essential part of countering hegemonic representations of the black female body.
This is because representations of self, by other black women, can be read in fact hegemonic, depending on the viewer's intertextual interpretation of the image.

My initial question I proposed when contemplating about this photograph enlarged in public space, was concerning the *affect* of the work possibly has on domestic workers and other viewers, who have no idea, that this is in fact a photograph by Sibande herself; as the artist and subject of the work. For if the image is read as one portraying a domestic worker (not the hybrid worker-noble woman), this would perpetuate black female subservience, perhaps even glorifying it. Yet it is impossible to decode every possible reading, as viewers draw from their own context, their specific visual and contextual archive, and conceptual patterns to formulate interpretation intertexually. What makes Sibande's work subversive is representing the black female body through blurring the boundaries between self and other, servant and madam, as well as grappling with the feminist intersectional elements of race, sex and gender, etc.

Conclusion

A text, in this case a photograph, owes its relevance, not entirely to the author or photographer, but to other texts/images activated by the images/texts that the interpreter accesses to construct meaning (D'Alleva 2012:129). Thus whether or not, it was Muholi's intention to counter hegemonic representations of the black female body, it can be interpreted as such due to other texts (historic photographs, academic discourse, contemporary representations) that frame the interpretation by readers/viewers.

For self-representations to be interpreted as counter-hegemonic representations of the black female body, these self-representations needs to present access points to activate, or speak to an audience as subversive forms of representations.

These access points that activate a viewer's interpretation of a text, as subversive, can be established through culturally coded material (or other texts) that are juxtaposed, like in the example of Tracey Rose's performance work *Span I & II.* Here the uses of hair as a physiological (ethnic) material, bodies and site specificity, etc are access points.

Zanele Muholi and Mary Sibande work with strategies of masquerade and mimicry to establish these access points.

All of these artists use their body in some form or other in their work.

Yet this is not what makes counter-hegemonic representations of the Black female body, but rather it is the use of the body [45] and black female representations creatively, so as to prevent easy consumption and invisibility.

These artists work with elements that can be interpreted as the intersections of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc, and in doing so present a viewer with black female representations that are inherently complex, and demand critical inquiry.

In conclusion the artworks by Tracey Rose, Zanele Moholi and Mary Sibande discussed in this paper can be read as intersectional feminist critiques of cultural production.

The strategy of self-representation is an additional factor in countering hegemonic representations.

By drawing on the complexity ofrepresentations of the black female body, and creatively weaving from the intersections of race, gender and sexuality, hegemonic representations can be destabilized. In this process the texts produced generative interpretations on numerous levels.

[45] Theoretically, it is not essential that the artist uses his/her own body.

Appendix

A

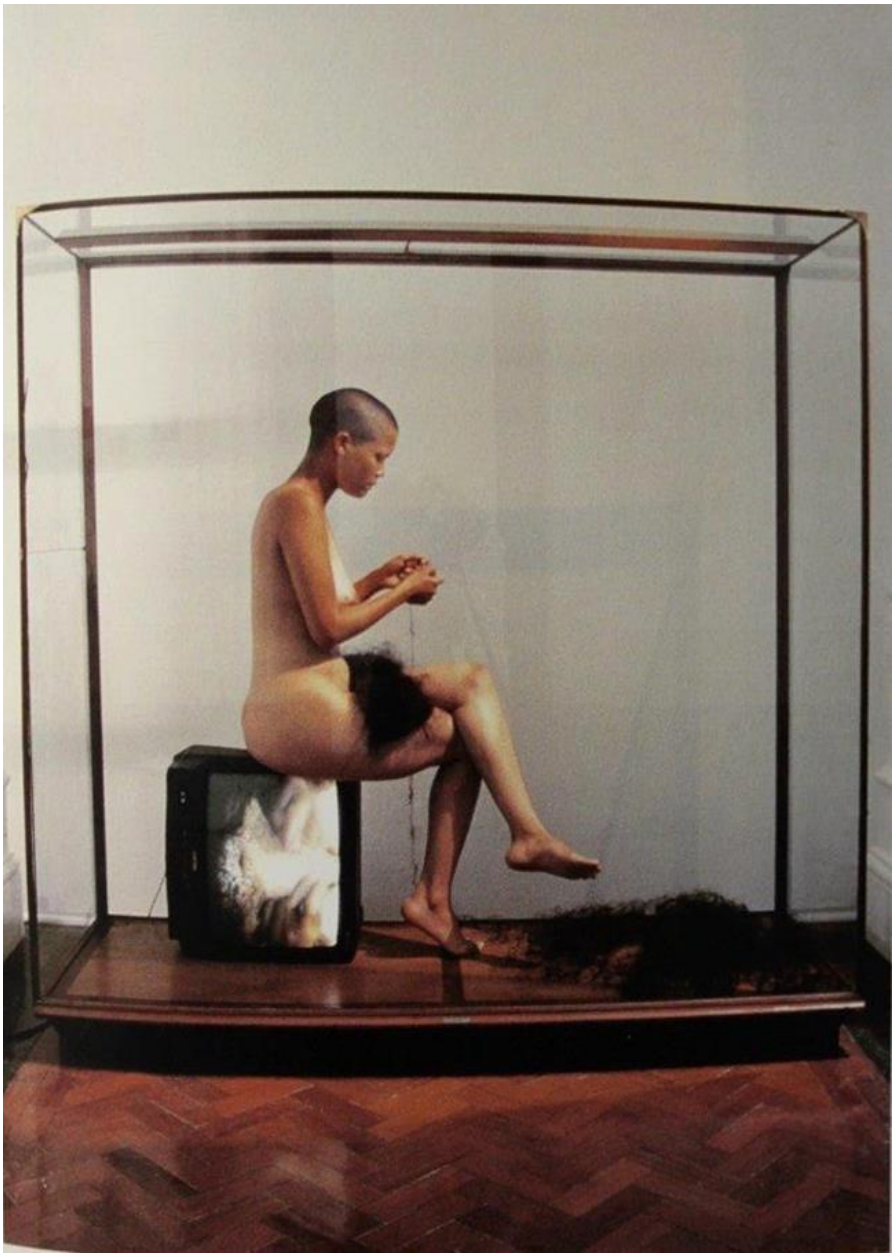

Figure 1. Tracey Rose

Span II (1997)

Installation performance

Mixed media

South African National Gallery

Image courtesy of the artist

(Jones 2003:17)

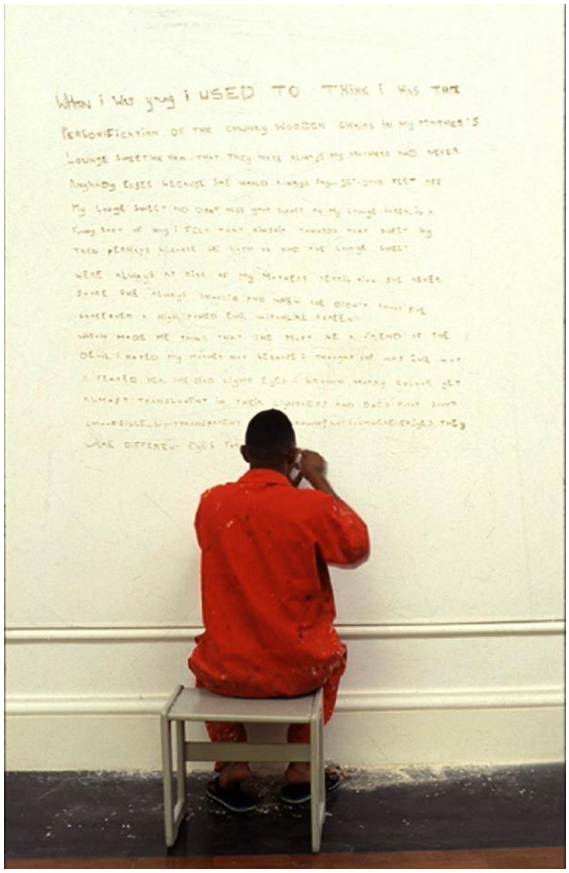

Figure 2. Tracey Rose

Span I (1997)

Installation performance

Mixed media

South African National Gallery

Image courtesy of the artist

(Bedford 2003:16)

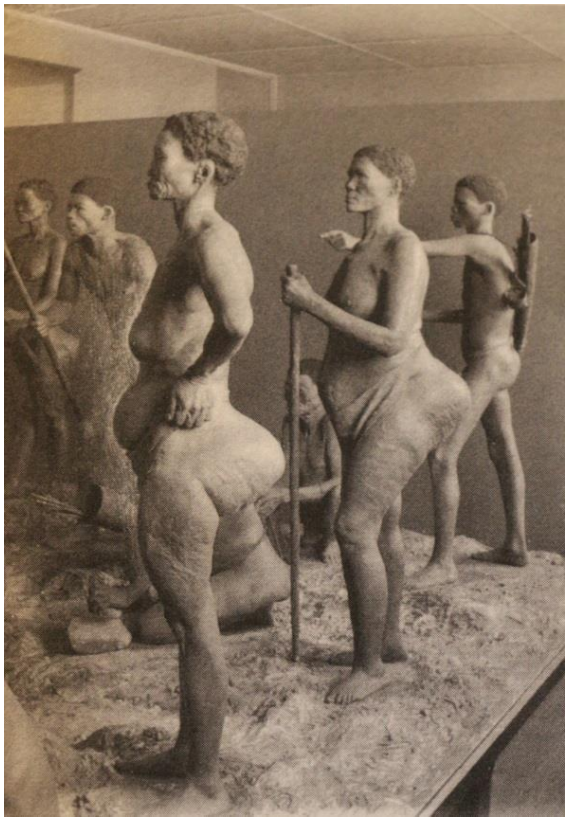

Figure 3. Unknown Photographer

Photograph of Drury's casts of Khoisan in the SAM (1911)

Circa

Courtesy of the South African Museum

Iziko Museums of Cape Town

(Coombes 2003: 219)

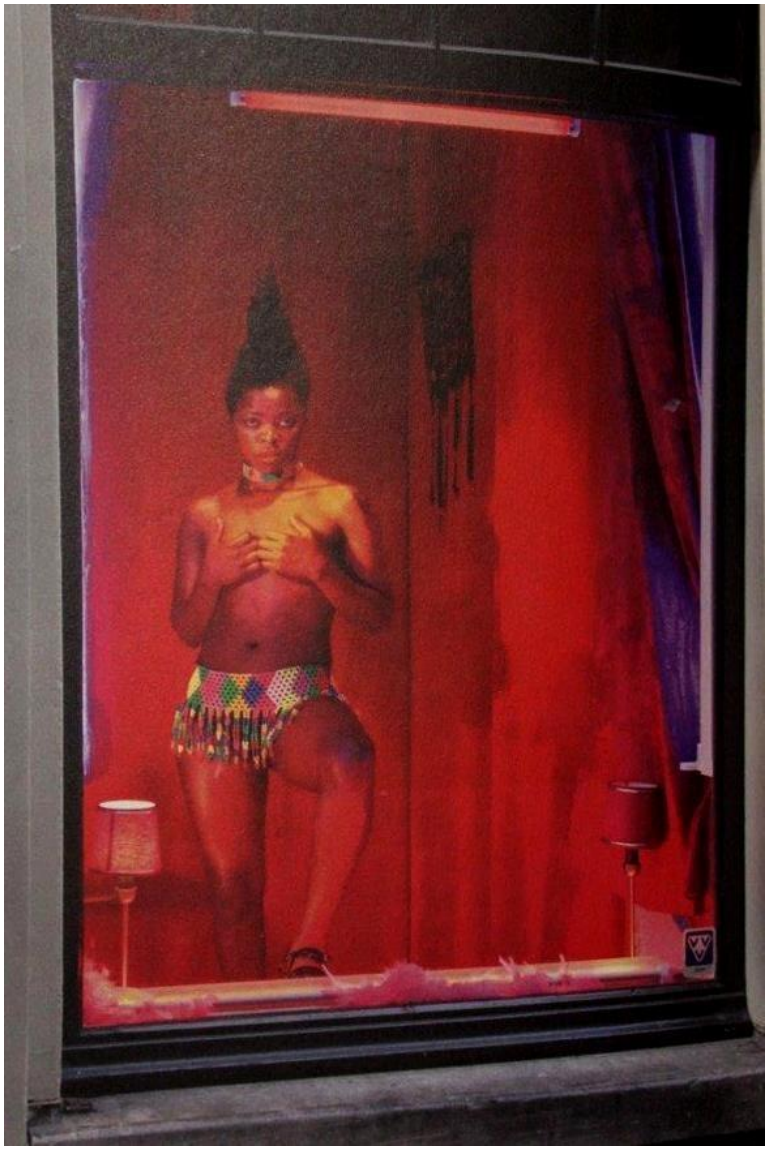

Figure 4. Zanele Muholi

Being (T)here (2009).

Digital photographic print.

Courtesy of Stevenson Gallery.

(Muholi & Smith 2011:n.pag.)

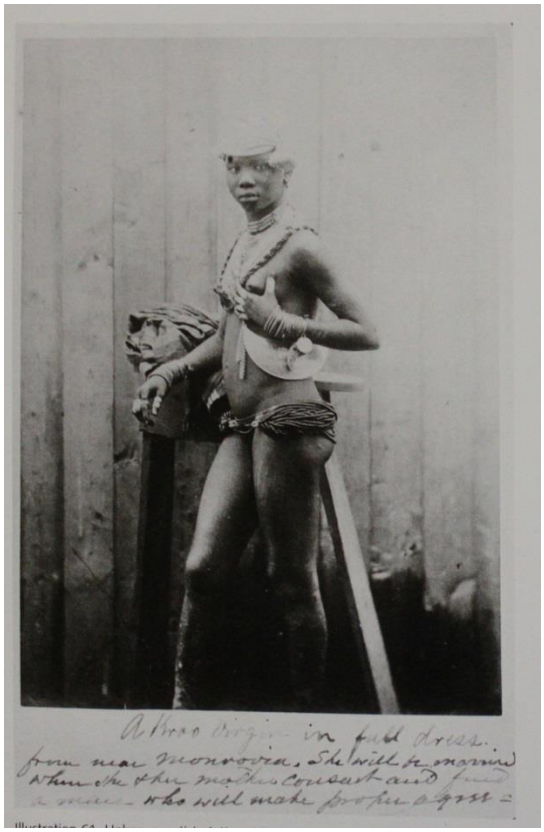

Figure 5. Unknown Photographer++

A Kroo Virgin in Full Dress, Postcard (1983)

National Anthropology Archive, Smithsonian Institute

(Wills & Williams 2002: 74)

Figure 6. Unknown Photographer

A Pesseh Girl Full Dress, Postcard (1983)

National Anthropology Archive, Smithsonian Institute

(Wills & Williams 2002: 74)

Figure 7. Candice Breitz

Rainbow Series #1 (1996)

Cibachrome Photograph

152.5 x 101.5 cm

Ed. 3 + AP

http://www.candicebreitz.net.

Figure 8. Mary Sibande

They Don't Make Them Like They Used To (2008).

Digital photographic print on cotton rag.

(Holm 2014:19)

Figure 9. Mary Sibande

They Don't Make Them Like They Used To

Digital print

Stellenbosch Market Road

https://www.capetowndailyphoto.com

Figure 10. Edouard Manet

Olympia (1863)

Oil on canvas

130.5 x 190

Musee d'Orsay Paris

(Wills & Williams 2002:37)

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Illustrations

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