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Queering Vulnerability: Visualizing Black Lesbian Desire in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Rachel A. Lewis

This article examines visual art produced by lesbian human rights activists in South Africa that is emerging to contest racialized, gendered, and sexualized constructions of Black lesbian vulnerability in mainstream humanitarian advocacy. The article focuses particular attention on the work of South African Black lesbian visual artist and activist Zanele Muholi. Muholi's photographs grapple with the question of what it means to be a desiring sexual subject—to make oneself vulnerable to the other in the context of an intimate relationship—amid the quotidian reality of anti-lesbian violence. Framing Black lesbian vulnerability to sexual violence in relation to issues of economic precarity, Muholi's work demonstrates the need to link cultural advocacy to questions of political economy and development. By reframing and recontextualizing Black queer vulnerability in terms of the erotic—or the body's proximity to both pleasure and pain—Muholi opens up a space for visualizing Black lesbian desire in post-apartheid South Africa. In doing so, her visual activism shows how queer conceptualizations of vulnerability and precarity can provide the basis for the articulation of new sexual rights claims.

Keywords: Black lesbians / human rights / Muholi, Zanele / South Africa / visual art / vulnerability / transnational sexualities

“In the case of desire, we must ask,
what kind of world makes desire possible?”

—Judith Butler (1987, 24)

In an article published in the *New York Times* on July 28, 2013, journalist Clare Carter called attention to the growing vulnerability of Black lesbians within post-apartheid South Africa (2013). Despite South Africa's move to legalize gay marriage in 2006, the violent attacks against Black lesbians have increased significantly during the past ten years.¹ In her article, "The Brutality of Corrective Rape," Carter refers to the rape and murder of a number of high-profile Black lesbians in South Africa, including the soccer player Eudy Simelane, who was training to be a referee for the 2010 FIFA World Cup, and Noxolo Nogwaza, an LGBT human rights activist who was brutally raped and stabbed to death in 2011. Carter concludes her article with a statement from the lesbian and intersex rights activist Funeka Soldaat, who describes the atmosphere of pervasive fear and violence that underwrites the experiences of Black lesbians living in South Africa: "It's as if you are sitting like a time bomb. You don't know when it's going to explode. You are just waiting for it to be your turn."

Carter's depiction of Black lesbians in South Africa as disproportionately at risk of rape and sexual violence is characteristic of dominant representations of Black queer vulnerability within mainstream humanitarian advocacy. Indeed, the vast majority of human rights reports repeatedly stress how Black lesbians in South Africa suffer from "triple discrimination" by virtue of being female, Black, and lesbian. In the Human Rights Watch report, "We'll Show You You're a Woman: Violence and Discrimination against Black Lesbians and Transgender Men in South Africa" (2011), Black lesbian vulnerability to rape and sexual assault is frequently highlighted throughout the document. Departing from the usual format for human rights reports that typically situates personal narratives of violation within the framework of policy analysis and recommendation, "We'll Show You You're a Woman" is organized around a series of graphic descriptions of lesbian rape and murder in a manner that verges on a pornographic eroticization of these hate crimes. In this publication, as in the majority of reports documenting human rights violations committed against women and sexual minorities in South Africa, Black lesbians are framed as weak and vulnerable, while their attackers are presented as powerful and protected (Morrissey 2013).²

While it is certainly true that highlighting the vulnerability of particular groups is a common and often-successful strategy within mainstream humanitarian advocacy, the Human Rights Watch report inscribes Black lesbians in a cultural narrative of victimization that contributes to their continued oppression. As lesbian human rights activist Zethu Matebeni points out, the term "corrective rape" is itself highly problematic: "Marking certain groups as victims of a special kind of crime can make them vulnerable to unintended further victimization. Knowing that a victim has experienced curative rape immediately identifies her as lesbian, a category many (including certain institutions) still treat with disdain" (2013, 346). By sensationalizing and eroticizing lesbian rape, human rights reports render Black queer women hypervisible, making it difficult

for the latter to control how others view them.³ These racialized, gendered, and sexualized notions of Black lesbian vulnerability not only construct the frames through which queer women of color in South Africa can and cannot speak, but they actively perpetuate lesbian invisibility by failing to acknowledge the contexts in which Black lesbians assert agency and their identities and desires are affirmed. As Judith Butler (2014) observes, one way of managing marginalized populations is to distribute vulnerability and precarity unequally in such a way that essentialist notions of vulnerable populations get established within social discourse and policy. Such discourses, as Butler points out, problematically operate either to target a population or to protect it, strategies that belong to the same normative regime of power (111).

In this article I examine visual art produced by lesbian human rights activists in South Africa that is emerging to contest racialized, gendered, and sexualized constructions of Black lesbian vulnerability within mainstream humanitarian advocacy. Given the dangers of using the mainstream media to depict hate crimes committed against women and sexual minorities, it is perhaps not surprising that a number of lesbian human rights activists are turning toward alternative forms of media like photography, digital stories, and documentary filmmaking to represent the complexities of Black lesbian lives in post-apartheid South Africa. In this article, I discuss the work of South African Black lesbian visual artist and activist Zanele Muholi. Seeking to challenge the cultural narratives of victimization that underwrite dominant representations of Black queer women in South Africa, Muholi's work explores how Black lesbian bodies perform resistance through the mobilization of erotic vulnerability and precarity. Muholi's photographs grapple with the question of what it means to be a desiring sexual subject—to make oneself vulnerable to the other in the context of an intimate relationship—amid the quotidian reality of anti-lesbian violence. By reframing Black queer vulnerability in terms of the erotic—or the body's proximity to both pleasure and pain—Muholi's work opens up a space for visualizing Black lesbian desire in post-apartheid South Africa.

In part 1, I discuss Muholi's first collection of photographs, *Only Half the Picture* (2006), which engages with the structures of visibility and recognition that underwrite lesbian human rights narratives in South Africa. In part 2, I consider Muholi's more recent collections of photographs, including *Being* (2009) and *MO(U)RNING* (2012), along with the documentary about her work *Difficult Love* (2010). As I argue, Muholi's visual activism grounds discursive and cultural struggles for Black lesbian representation in South Africa in the material politics of everyday life and the daily struggles for resources produced by histories of colonialism and apartheid. Framing Black lesbian vulnerability to sexual violence in relation to issues of economic precarity, Muholi's work demonstrates the need to link cultural advocacy on behalf of human rights to questions of political economy and development. By reframing and recontextualizing Black lesbian precarity in terms of a *political economy of erotic vulnerability*, Muholi

conceptualizes vulnerability as a source of *potential privilege, as well as possible wounding*. In doing so, she frames vulnerability not as the opposite of sexual autonomy, but rather as a dialectical construct that underwrites the expression of desire more generally. Muholi's work thus demonstrates how the Black queer subject's encounter with erotic vulnerability constitutes a testament to the precarity of sexual autonomy. In this way, her visual art shows how queer conceptualizations of vulnerability and precarity can provide the basis for the articulation of new sexual rights claims.

**“Thinking Through Lesbian Rape:”
Documenting Black Queer Vulnerability in South Africa**

“As black lesbians, we need to initiate the process of theorizing hate crimes against us so that we may become the agents articulating our sexualities and genders through our own diverse voices.”

—Zanele Muholi (2004, 117)

Born in Umlazi, Durban, in 1979, Zanele Muholi studied photography at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg from 2001–2003. In 2009 she received an MFA in Documentary Media Studies from Ryerson University in Toronto. Since 2009, her photography has been exhibited widely both in South Africa and in numerous galleries throughout the world. Some of her most recent exhibitions of feminist and queer art include *Undercover: Performing and Transforming Black Female Identities* (2009) at Spelman College Museum of Fine Art in Atlanta; *The Progress of Love* (2013), a transatlantic collaboration between the Menil Collection in Houston, the Center for Contemporary Art in Lagos, Nigeria, and the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis; and most recently, *Isibonelo/Evidence* (2015), an exhibition of Muholi's latest work at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum.

Prior to her work as a visual artist, Muholi co-founded the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) in Johannesburg in 2002, one of the leading organizations devoted to eliminating violence against Black lesbians in South Africa. The organization's vision was to provide a safe space in which Black lesbian women in South Africa could meet and organize— one in which they would not be judged or discriminated against for their sexualities.⁴ One of the organization's main goals was to respond to the racial and class inequalities resulting from histories of colonialism and apartheid that deprive Black lesbians in South Africa of equal access to citizenship and education.⁵ In her essay, “Thinking through Lesbian Rape,” which forms the basis of Muholi's lesbian human rights activism, Muholi argues that in order to combat hate crimes committed against Black lesbians, activists need to address the histories

of colonialism and apartheid that inform the production of contemporary racial and economic inequalities in South Africa. She suggests that feminist activists need to unpack why Black women's sexual agency is so threatening to post-apartheid constructions of Black heterosexual masculinity. In "Thinking through Lesbian Rape" (2013), Muholi argues that the rape of Black lesbians constitutes an attempt to discipline African women's sexual and erotic autonomy by reinforcing their identities as heterosexual women and as mothers. Advocating for an intersectional and postcolonial understanding of the concept of patriarchy within transnational feminist organizing, Muholi suggests that it is only through acknowledging the embodied experiences of differently positioned women that feminist activists can begin to effectively challenge patriarchal structures of oppression within South Africa (2004, 122–23). She concludes her essay by calling for feminist activists working against gender-based violence to come into dialogue with Black lesbian activists in South Africa in order to "collectively create the kind of world in which we all feel safe" (123).

It is Muholi's lesbian human rights activism with the Forum for the Empowerment of Women that informs her work as a visual artist and, more specifically, her decision to document hate crimes committed against Black lesbians in South Africa. As Muholi argues, Black lesbian visibility is crucial to ending the violent attacks against queer women of color in South Africa because of its ability to counter the assumption that lesbian identity is "un-African."⁶ In "Mapping Our Histories: A Visual History of Black Lesbians in Post-Apartheid South Africa" (2013), Muholi reflects on the issue of anti-lesbian violence as a problem of (in)visibility and the racialization of discourses of sexuality in South Africa. As Muholi comments, she calls herself a visual activist because of the connections between visibility politics and the politics of visual representation in LGBTI human rights advocacy. Discussing how she moved from being a human rights activist to becoming a visual artist, Muholi argues that cultural articulations of Black queer visibility are central to the project of lesbian human rights activism in South Africa:

In the face of all the challenges encountered by Black lesbians 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. . . . Whatever I have captured and still capture is for the world to see that we exist as Black lesbians, women, trans men, intersexed, bisexuals, trans women—as queer Africans. (2010, 6)

The goal of Muholi's photojournalism was to develop a "critical gaze" along the lines of bell hooks's notion of the "oppositional gaze," one that enables economically marginalized queer women to use art and photography as a site of resistance and a tool for social change (hooks 1992). Specifically, Muholi's aim was to counteract the hypervisibility of Black lesbian vulnerability within

the mainstream media. Instead, Muholi sought to represent anti-lesbian violence in a way that does not revictimize or render queer women hypervisible.⁷ For Muholi, resisting cultural narratives of Black lesbian victimization meant training the women she worked with to become photographers themselves in order that they might begin to tell their stories in their own ways. As she writes,

I began to wonder in 2001 how I could turn myself and my community from being objectified to become the producers of our own histories, knowledges, and subjectivities. I was angry for having been used for the gaze of others. . . . I envisioned us speaking to each other using visuals because anyone can look and have thoughts about a photograph or a film, even if they are illiterate. . . . My objective was to produce work for the very same subjects I would capture . . . working to reduce the dearth of Black lesbian visual histories, narratives, and representation in the archives. Each and every person in the photos has a story to tell, so it becomes a visual narrative of some sort, in which we have to think beyond just the framed image on the wall in the gallery. (2013, 5)

In 2006, Muholi founded Inkanyiso, a nonprofit organization designed to teach visual literary and documentary production skills as a way of creating a queer media platform for Black lesbian communities in South Africa. By providing the women with cameras and money for their studies, Muholi engages in a materialist form of feminist art practice that connects questions of cultural representation and visibility to social and economic rights like access to education, shelter, and resources. She believes that her photographs, which “compel the viewer to see these women beyond the racialised and heterosexualised stereotypes that have been created about Black women in South Africa,” provide “the radical aesthetic for women to speak” (2006, 93).

Crucial to Muholi’s notion of developing an oppositional gaze is the idea of resisting the racialized, gendered, and sexualized constructions of queer vulnerability that inscribe Black lesbians in South Africa in a cultural narrative of victimization. In her photography, Muholi grapples with the question of how to represent hate crimes committed against Black lesbians in South Africa in a way that does not objectify the women who have been sexually assaulted. Muholi is careful not to portray the women in her photographs as victims, noting that the lives of Black lesbians “are always sensationalized and rarely understood” (2004, 123). “Many of them feel violated,” she acknowledges, “and I did not want the camera to be a further violation. Instead, I wanted to establish relationships with them based on our mutual understanding of what it means to be female, lesbian and Black in South Africa” (123). By involving the Black queer community in her photography, Muholi’s visual activism circulates differently from the mainstream media’s representation of hate crimes committed against Black lesbians in South Africa. Seeking to counter the media’s objectification of Black lesbians, Muholi’s work embodies an alternative, collaborative feminist art practice that is made specifically by, for, and about Black lesbians.

Muholi's first collection of photographs, *Only Half the Picture* (2006), engages with the complexities of representing Black lesbian lives in post-apartheid South Africa. Exhibited under the heading, "What don't you see when you look at me?" *Only Half the Picture* interrogates the frames of recognition and visibility that underwrite representations of Black lesbian desire in South Africa. As Muholi's work suggests, struggles for lesbian rights in South Africa are haunted by "the contradictions of visibility," or the difficulties of representing human rights violations in a way that does not render victims of rape and sexual assault hypervisible.⁸ In *Only Half the Picture*, Muholi calls attention to the structures of visibility and invisibility, power, and vulnerability that mark Black lesbians as hypervisible and that fail to acknowledge the contexts in which Black queer women assert sexual agency. As Pumla Dineo Gqola (2006, 84) has argued, *Only Half the Picture* is "less about making Black lesbians visible than it is about engaging with the regimes that have used these women's hypervisibility as a way to violate them." Juxtaposing images of intimate bonds between female lovers with scenes depicting the wounds of hate crimes, *Only Half the Picture* grapples with the paradoxes of lesbian human rights in South Africa.

In the series of photographs from *Only Half the Picture* that depict the survivors of hate crimes, Muholi's images testify to the variety of responses Black lesbian women have to rape and sexual assault. In *Only Half the Picture*, Muholi includes photographs of women who choose to remain silent about their experiences of rape, along with women who are shown reporting hate crimes to the state. The image titled "Hate Crime Survivor I" which is prefaced by a legal case number, demonstrates the treatment of Black lesbian women in the criminal justice system in South Africa. As Muholi's images testify, Black lesbian survivors of sexual assault are frequently disbelieved when they report their crimes to the state and subjected to further violence as a result of the homophobia they experience at the hands of police. In "Hate Crime Survivor I" which shows a portrait of a woman visible only from her waist to her knees, the woman's hands are placed over her body, seeking to shield her from falling victim to the spectator's voyeuristic gaze (figure 1). This image is placed alongside a photograph of another woman who is lying face down on a hospital bed (figure 2).

In "Aftermath," the final image of the sequence of photographs depicting hate crimes committed against Black lesbians in South Africa, we see a large scar on the subject's thigh, which represents the trace of an older wound from a previous attack (figure 3). Alongside this image, Muholi (2006) includes the text, "Many lesbians bear the scars of their difference, and those scars are often in places where they can't be seen."

In "Aftermath," taken two days after the woman was raped for a second time, the positioning of the subject's hands function to shield and protect her body from the spectator's voyeuristic and objectifying gaze. The photograph



Figure 1: "Hate crime survivor I"



Figure 2: "Hate crime survivor II"



Figure 3: "Aftermath"

marks the trauma of rape and literalizes the psychic impact of sexual assault, while also showing how the threat of violence extends into the future. Through rendering visible the potential violence that lies beyond the frame of the images, Muholi's photographs testify to the complexities of bearing witness to rape and sexual assault. As her photographs suggest, while bearing witness to hate crimes could recreate vulnerability for the women involved, the possibility of future violence confirms that remaining silent about such atrocities is not an option.

At the same time that Muholi represents the Black lesbian body as vulnerable to violation, however, she also stresses the female body as a source of erotic agency and power. In *Only Half the Picture*, images of hate crime survivors washing after an attack are juxtaposed with photographs of women's menstrual blood, used sanitary towels and tampons, women wearing dildos and images of polyamorous Black lesbian couples. The photographs depicting female menstruation are placed alongside images of blood from the sites where Black lesbians have been raped and murdered. As Muholi (2006, 91) notes regarding the representational dualism of blood as a symbol of both female sexual power and vulnerability to violation, "The same blood that defines us as women is the same blood which we shed in the attacks against us."

In *Only Half the Picture*, the representation of female nakedness, including the naked photograph of Muholi herself holding a camera, further testifies to the ways in which Black lesbian bodies signify both vulnerability and strength. As Barbara Sutton (2007, 143) has commented regarding the naked body as a vehicle of political protest, "The body (clothed or unclothed) is the tool of protest *par excellence*. Most political protest is enacted through the body—from marches, to political theatre, to the chaining of the body to a tree or building." In *Only Half the Picture*, Muholi's own naked protest against the violent attacks perpetrated against Black lesbians in South Africa evokes the double meaning of nakedness as embodying both vulnerability and power in the form of resistance. In this way, Muholi uses bodily vulnerability as a mode of resistance, encouraging us to read *Only Half the Picture* as a visual diary of political protest, while simultaneously revealing how her own work as a visual activist makes her vulnerable to potential violence as well.⁹ By using vulnerability as a source of political protest, Muholi shows how Black lesbian bodies in South Africa perform resistance through the mobilization of erotic vulnerability and precarity. In *Only Half the Picture*, Muholi reflects upon the concept of Black lesbian visibility as a source of erotic power and as a site of potential vulnerability to violation. While her images of Black lesbian sexuality gesture toward the promise of pleasure, they also mark the possibility of violence. Through placing strikingly visible images of lesbian desire and pleasure alongside traumatic photographs of violated female bodies, Muholi gives voice to a representational ethics characterized by corporeal and erotic vulnerability. Such bodily vulnerability alludes to the threat of violence at the same time as it articulates vulnerability as the precondition for desire and erotic pleasure. In

this way, as Brenna Munro (2012, 198) notes, Muholi's work is "self-reflective about the vulnerabilities that visibility brings."

"Difficult Love:" Human Rights and Erotic Vulnerability

"So many representations separate us from each other
that we have come to forget the feel of our own skin.
. . . Removed from our skin, we remain distant."

—Luce Irigaray (1985, 218)

In the documentary *Difficult Love* (2010), which examines the reception of Muholi's later works *Being* (2009) and *Caitlin and I* (2009), the artist discusses her desire to document Black lesbian vulnerability in South Africa not merely in terms of the quotidian reality of anti-lesbian violence, but as the precondition of desire itself. *Difficult Love*, commissioned and produced by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) for national television, situates personal narratives of female same-sex desire in relation to Black lesbians' collective experiences of poverty and lack of access to social citizenship. While the images in *Being* make visible a distinctly Black lesbian eroticism, they do so in relation to representations of racialized forms of sexual citizenship that deprive Black lesbians of equal access to social protection. In *Being*, Muholi's photographs consistently stress the intersectional nature of rights and the gap between constitutional protections (as in legal access to sexual citizenship) and the material realities that expose particular populations to violence without protection.

The emphasis on Black lesbian sexuality and erotica in *Being* caused the South African Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana, to walk out of the Innovative Women exhibition in which Muholi's and others' photographs were being displayed in 2009. Xingwana referred to Muholi's work as "immoral" and "against nation building" (Matebini 2013, 404). She claimed, "This is not art" and conflated the images in *Being* with pornography (Matebini 2013, 404).¹⁰ However, it was precisely such attempts to suppress Black queer women's sexuality that Muholi sought to redress in *Being*.¹¹ As the artist states, *Being* was designed to counteract the absence of erotic, intimate and loving photographs of Black lesbian women in South Africa. Commenting on her decision to represent the Black lesbian body as the subject of desire, she argues that

It is through capturing the visual pleasures and erotica of my community that our being comes into focus, into community and national consciousness. And it is through seeing ourselves as we find love, laughter, and joy that we can sustain our strength and regain our sanity as we move into a future that is sadly still filled with the threat of insecurities—HIV/AIDS, hate crimes, violence against women, poverty, and unemployment. (2009)

As in her earlier work, Muholi stresses the need for visual representations of Black lesbian desire in order to disrupt the persistent racialization of discourses of sexuality as white, male, and upper class—a perception of queerness that fuels much of the anti-lesbian violence in South Africa.

In *Difficult Love*, Muholi describes how her goal in *Being* was to depict Black lesbian vulnerability not merely in relation to hate crimes and economic precarity, but in terms of the question of vulnerability within intimate relationships—the kind of vulnerability and risks, in other words, that come from making one’s personal feelings public. As such, the documentary records aspects of Muholi’s work that deal with the subject of erotic vulnerability in interracial relationships. In *Difficult Love*, images from *Caitlin and I* (2009), a triptych in which Muholi’s Black body is seen intertwined with Caitlin’s white body, are framed in relation to the artist’s own personal narrative about her relationship with her then-partner Liesl Theron. As Muholi’s partner comments in *Difficult Love*, it was the former’s combination of strength and vulnerability that constituted the source of her attraction:

Zanele has some kind of—I don’t know how to put it exactly—I almost want to say a special energy. She has a lively energy. . . . If one really gets to know Z. better, however, you see that she has a sensitive side and vulnerability. And I also know that soft side of her. But it’s much more at an intimate level that I specifically know what affects her, what inspires her and those sorts of things. We’re seventies babies so we come from the same era. She experienced apartheid from one side and I from the other. So I think there are many things we can talk about, many things to sort out. Apartheid definitely left scars. Everything in our life has to do with class and race. So I think it’s just more prominent in our lives that there’s consciousness from both sides. (Muholi 2010)

By recording vulnerable, private moments within Muholi’s own relationships, *Difficult Love* situates the issue of the artist’s sexuality in relation to the question of what it means to make oneself vulnerable to the other in the context of an erotic encounter. As the above dialogue suggests, strength in the other can enable the acknowledgment of vulnerability on the part of the desiring subject because of the protection and care that expressions of vulnerability inevitably require. Thus, in the context of intimate relationships, the experience of vulnerability can be symptomatic of a privileged state of being that emerges from the opportunity to work through desire.

By conceptualizing vulnerability as a source of potential privilege, as well as possible wounding, *Difficult Love* frames vulnerability not as the opposite of sexual autonomy, but rather as a dialectical construct that underwrites the expression of desire more generally. Desire and vulnerability are not universal aspects of the human condition according to this analysis but the product of a dialectical juxtaposition of autonomy and relationality. Erotic vulnerability

constitutes the logical expression of love and desire in this context because of its ability to elicit a heightened sense of self-reflexivity on the part of the desiring subject. As Judith Butler (1987, 39) explains, the feeling of ecstasy produced by desire for the other reveals the desiring subject as intrinsically other to itself. Self-consciousness emerges from the experience of erotic ecstasy, or merger with the other, as a result of the subject's effort to "think inner difference," or the "mutual implication of opposites," as constitutive of the object itself (27). The reflexive project of desire becomes a consequence of the subject's search for self-recovery. Self-recovery is necessary in this context because the ecstasy that accompanies desire produces the subject as outside itself. This is what Butler means when she argues that what desire seeks, first and foremost, is the illumination of its own opacity (24). Through compelling the subject's search for self-recovery, desire paradoxically loses its reified character as an abstract and universal experience of merging with the other and becomes instead a highly particularizing condition. The particularity of desire emerges from the experience of erotic ecstasy—of being beside oneself—which produces a heightened sense of self-consciousness or self-reflexivity on the part of the desiring subject. As Butler explains, the self-reflexivity of the subject's desire for the other is translated via the process of its articulation: "Inasmuch as self-consciousness is characterized by reflexivity, i.e., the capacity to relate to itself, this is conditioned by the power of articulation . . . consciousness reveals itself as an articulated phenomenon, that which only becomes itself as articulation" (31). In this context, narrative articulation becomes a way to work through the dynamic and constitutive paradoxes of desire. For Butler, it is these self-reflexive narratives of desire produced by the subject's encounter with erotic vulnerability that constitute a testament to the precarity of sexual autonomy.

As I argue here, by framing desire in terms of erotic vulnerability and self-reflexivity, both Muholi and Butler recast the erotic encounter as a question of ethics, one in which the "working through" of desire presents, as Žižek would say, "an infinite task of translation, a constant reworking of our own particular position" (cited in Corrêa, Petchesky, and Parker 2008, 161). It is only by working through the paradoxes produced by desire and the experience of erotic vulnerability that the subject exercises social and ethical responsibility in relationships. This "working through" of desire is akin to what Hélène Cixous might refer to as an erotic ethics based on the *despecularization* of the other or, in her words, an erotic ethics that compels us "to love, to watch-think-see the other in the other" (1976, 893). As Cixous writes about the concept of the maternal caress—a caress that lies beyond the realm of visual identification and thus, by extension, the male gaze, "They do not fetishize, they do not deny, they do no hate. They observe, they approach, they try to see the other woman, the child, the lover—not to strengthen their own narcissism or verify the solidity or weakness of the master, but to make love better, to invent" (893). This erotic ethics, or the ethical imperative to "make love better," as Cixous might say, depends



Figure 4: "Being"

upon a critical awareness of the concept of erotic vulnerability, or the desiring subject's proximity to both pleasure and pain. I argue that it is this notion of erotic vulnerability—or the body's proximity to both pleasure and pain—that has the potential to deconstruct the false opposition between vulnerability and autonomy that is central to humanitarian framings—or “misframings”—of sexual rights discourses. In this way, queer conceptualizations of vulnerability and precarity can provide the basis for a new ethics of sexual rights. This is perhaps akin to what Audre Lorde had in mind when she suggested that by being in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, we begin to become “responsible subjects” (1984, 342).

It is the deconstruction of vulnerability and autonomy as mutually exclusive oppositions that constitutes the basis of Muholi's attempt to resignify Black lesbian desire and sexual rights in *Being*. The documentary *Difficult Love* opens with a series of images from *Being* that reflect upon the concept of erotic vulnerability in intimate relationships: (figure 4). In “Being,” the pose of the two women alludes to the stillness of sleep and reveals the protective tenderness of bodies embracing. The photographs visualize nakedness, vulnerability, and the need for safety and protection. While the images visualize vulnerability, however, they also represent the intimacy of Black lesbian relationships in post-apartheid South Africa, effectively countering the homophobic assertion that lesbian identity is “un-African.”

Crucial to Muholi's representation of lesbian desire and lesbian rights in terms of mutuality and reciprocity is the notion of the desiring touch, or the caress, as that which takes one out of oneself and toward the other. As Kelly Oliver (2001, 205) notes, in the caresses of love, there is no “subject” or “object/other”:

As a caress, touch has no object. . . . The promise and future of the caress are simply the erotic loving relationship itself. The caress seeks the continuation of relationship, the future of relationship, even while it constitutes it. But the caress cannot possess the other or the relationship; this is why it is a future without a content, a promise yet to come. . . . As such, the caress, and the look as caress, does not fix an object for a subject but opens a realm in which the two remain two but cannot be separated (205, 216).

By seeking only the continuation of the relationship, the caress, unlike the gaze, does not run the risk of totalizing or objectifying the other. Unlike visual perception, the caress is intimate and does not take place from a distance; it is a non-possessive mode of touching the other, one that signals the impossibility of completely possessing the other. Instead, the caress allows lovers to approach each other through their mutual vulnerability, which is produced as an effect of the erotic relation. Expressions of love and desire as crucial components of a sexual rights discourse grounded in the idea of erotic vulnerability are linked to the reciprocal vulnerability produced by the desire to care and be cared for.

The caress, in other words, which is based on loving looks, moments of intensities, and intimate gazes, is predicated on the despecularization of the other. In Muholi's photographs, the women do not pose for the camera; they are looking beyond the camera. In this way, Muholi's images seek to prevent voyeurism; in *Being*, the voyeur is framed as an unwelcome intruder who is encouraged not to objectify, but rather to witness, Black lesbian vulnerability. Muholi thus uses the ethical provocation of the caress as a symbol of erotic interdependency, one that offers a critique of sexual autonomy as the basis for lesbian human rights advocacy. In doing so, her work demonstrates that sexual autonomy is not a solution to the problem of representing Black queer vulnerability in South Africa.

Muholi's use of the caress as a way of visualizing Black lesbian desire in South Africa anticipates the recent turn toward notions of erotic vulnerability and precarity in the work of Judith Butler. However, while a number of scholars have noted Butler's turn toward the concept of vulnerability to account for contemporary forms of political violence (see, for example, Murray 2011), few have commented on the erotic dimensions of Butler's theories of vulnerability and precarity. And yet the desiring body is, by definition, a vulnerable and precarious body. As Butler (2006, 20–21) observes,

Each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability. . . . The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence. . . . Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing these attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.

When Butler (2012, 141) writes, “The exposure of the body points to its precariousness,” she is thus referring to desire as a site of both erotic ecstasy and possible dispossession.¹² While vulnerability is the precondition for desire and eroticism, it is also the condition of injury and violence. For Butler, sexual rights discourses need to reflect the ways in which the body is both “bound” and “unbound” by desire, the body's proximity to pain and loss as well as pleasure (2011, 384). As she argues, the body survives only by virtue of its “ecstatic existence in sociality” (384). She writes, “We are always something more than, and other than, ourselves. . . . Let us face it. We are undone by each other. If we are not, we are missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire” (2004, 51). For Butler, desire and mourning, which expose the contingency of sexual and bodily life, constitute the basis for imagining an alternative political community, one that is composed of, as she puts it, “those who are beside themselves” (51). Recognizing how we are “bound up with others” means acknowledging the role played by the body and erotic vulnerability in the field of politics. As Butler (2011, 385) argues, “One's life is always in some sense in the hands of others. . . . This implies struggling for



Figure 5: “LiTer III”

and against dependency, negotiating exposure to those we know and to those we do not know. Sometimes these are relations of love and even of care, but sometimes they are relations to anonymous others, to institutions, to states, or to nongovernmental agencies.”

For Muholi, as for Butler, there is always the possibility that interdependency and erotic vulnerability can lead to violence. In *Being*, we witness the intimacy of relations of love and care between Black lesbians and yet, as



Figure 6: Installation view of *MO(U)RNING*

spectators familiar with Muholi's work, we are also aware of the threat of violence that lies beyond the frame of the photographs, an absent presence that haunts Muholi's visual representations of lesbian desire. As Sutton (2007, 143) observes, female nakedness can always be received as signifying vulnerability to violation: "Woman's nakedness entails risks: no matter her own wishes, a naked woman cannot completely control the interpretation that others will ascribe to her naked performance. The slippage from nakedness, to sexualization, to objectification, to violence is always a possibility."

The antithesis between love and violence is further evident in one of Muholi's more recent photographic exhibitions, *MO(U)RNING* (2012), in which erotic images from *Being* are juxtaposed with the media's spectacular coverage of lesbian rape and murder (figure 6). *MO(U)RNING* was a response to Muholi's grief over the theft of twenty external hard drives of photographic and audio material from her home in 2012. As a result of the theft, Muholi lost the *Queercide* project that was created to record hate crimes committed against LGBTI individuals around the continent, and that included footage from the funeral of Ugandan LGBT rights activist David Kato. In *MO(U)RNING*, Muholi presents the photographic and visual documentation that was not lost. The exhibition investigates the murders of lesbians and transgender individuals in South Africa and across the continent and seeks to document the power of love in Black lesbian communities amid the brutalities of hate crimes. Some of the antitheses foregrounded in the work are love and hate, life and death,

power and vulnerability. Commenting on the sense of antithesis and conflict in her work, Muholi observes that her world is one in which “love is juxtaposed with violence” (Zvomuya 2012).

In *MO(U)RNING*, however, Muholi figures love as an antidote to hate and oppression. In this exhibition, Muholi relies on the transformative power of lesbian love and erotica to counteract the violence of lesbian rape and murder. As Oliver (2001, 216) has commented regarding the ethical and political power of love and its representations to overcome oppression, “The notion of love itself . . . must be open to social and political transformation. Love . . . must be reinterpreted and elaborated, especially in terms of its performative dimension.” Butler (2009, 61) similarly asserts that the ontological condition of precarity is the precondition for erotic love: “The very fact of being bound up with others establishes the possibility of being subjugated and exploited. . . . But it also establishes the possibility of being relieved of suffering, of knowing justice and even love.” As Butler intimates, while the body’s precarity through exposure can lead to vulnerability, such exposure and, with it, the risk of dispossession is necessary for knowing love. And it is precisely through knowing love that the subject is able to strengthen its boundaries against the possibility of oppression and exploitation.

While *MO(U)RNING* advocates Black lesbian visibility as a possible solution to overcoming domination, however, Muholi also acknowledges that Black lesbian vulnerability to violence requires social care in order for love to flourish. In the documentary *Difficult Love*, Muholi comments on the use of the harsh background to frame her images in order to signify the extent to which many Black lesbians are forced to negotiate their sexuality amid conditions of extreme poverty as well as homophobia. The documentary prominently features the story of a Black lesbian couple, Petra and Praline, who were evicted from a homeless shelter for being lesbians. In *Difficult Love*, Petra and Praline articulate their sexuality in relation to their everyday struggles for survival and access to shelter. As Praline comments regarding the homophobia she experienced from her family and friends because of her relationship with Petra and the extent to which she and her lover had to hide their sexuality to remain within the shelter,

My friends blamed me. My family also, when they found out it was a lesbian thing between us. . . . From the time that we were here no one knew we were from this little corner. Many of the people don’t know we’re lesbians. Most think that we’re mother and daughter. So for the seven months that we’ve been here we’ve lived under that little alias, mother and daughter. (Muholi and Goldschmid 2010)

In *Difficult Love*, Muholi comments that the story of Petra and Praline is central to her work as a visual artist and to the project of lesbian human rights activism in contemporary South Africa:

With this documentary . . . I wanted to highlight the issue of those lesbians who have been shunned by their families and have nowhere to turn to. South Africa has shelters for abused women but there are no shelters that are geared towards lesbians or lesbian friendly. When a lesbian accesses these shelters and their sexual orientation is discovered, then their lives are in danger. They also get harassed by the other occupants. For a progressive country like South Africa this is a sad state of affairs. (Muholi and Goldschmid 2010)

As Muholi's narrative in *Difficult Love* suggests, if Black lesbian vulnerability signals a need for social care, then wounding responses are inappropriate.

By framing Black lesbian vulnerability to violence in relation to issues of economic precarity, Muholi stresses the need to connect lesbian human rights advocacy with questions of political economy and development. In doing so, her work begins to articulate a political economy of erotic vulnerability as the basis for sexual rights. A political economy of erotic vulnerability encourages us to resituate sexual rights discourses in relation to the question of privilege, the privilege that comes with access to protected vulnerability, or the ability to pursue intimacy once one's basic needs have been met. In doing so, a political economy of erotic vulnerability grounded in the idea of the desiring touch, or the caress, shifts human rights discourses away from notions of autonomy and individualism—the bedrock of liberal humanist thought—and toward an intersectional framing of rights, one that seeks to account for the structural conditions that make desire possible. For, as Muholi's work suggests, when desire gets abstracted from questions of economics, the privilege of protected vulnerability goes unchecked.

Situating visual representations of Black queer intimacy in the context of everyday struggles for survival, Muholi anticipates the turn toward questions of political economy in Butler's recent work on vulnerability. In "Vulnerability, Precarity, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," Butler critiques Levinas for failing to link the notion of vulnerability in the context of the face-to-face encounter with a politics of the body (2012, 147). As she argues, precarity only makes sense if we identify access to basic social needs, such as love and shelter, as clearly political issues (147–49). By conceptualizing erotic and bodily vulnerability in terms of social protection and uneven access to sexual citizenship, Butler deconstructs the idea of precarity as an ontological condition and instead reframes universal understandings of human precarity as inherently paradoxical. She argues,

As soon as the existential claim is articulated in its specificity, it ceases to be existential. And since it must be articulated in its specificity, it was never existential. In this sense, precarity is indissociable from that dimension of politics that addresses the organization and protection of bodily needs. Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency. (2012, 149)

In Muholi's work, Black lesbian precarity in post-apartheid South Africa is similarly articulated according to a paradoxical logic, one that deconstructs the idea of an essentialized queer vulnerability as the basis of human rights. Rather, within Muholi's representations of queer intimacy, the paradoxes of lesbian human rights are put to productive political use in order to affirm, as Wendy Brown (2000, 228) says, "the impossibility of justice in the present" and "the conditions and contours of justice in the future." Through her visual articulation of a political economy of erotic vulnerability, Muholi counters the hypervisibility of Black lesbians within post-apartheid South Africa by deconstructing the idea of universal precarity as the basis for human rights. In Muholi's work, essentialized notions of queer precarity become self-cancelling, as Black lesbian vulnerability is reframed in the language of desire. The result is that Muholi's visualizations of Black lesbian desire exceed the dominant regimes of representation that attempt to contain them. In doing so, Muholi's mobilization of erotic vulnerability and precarity as the basis for lesbian human rights activism constitutes an ethical provocation to rethink the kinds of sexual rights claims that are imagined as possible.

Conclusion: Toward a Political Economy of Desire, Pleasure, and Erotic Justice

"As bodies, we are always for something more than, and other than, ourselves. To articulate this as an entitlement is not always easy, but perhaps not impossible."

—Butler (2004, 59)

In Muholi's recent exhibition, *Isibonelo/Evidence* (2015), at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art in the Brooklyn Museum, the initial image encountered by spectators as they enter is that of a large photograph of a Black woman's hands holding a South African passport opened to a page stamped with the words "deceased" (figure 7). The passport belonged to Disebo Gift Makau, a South African lesbian who was raped and murdered in 2014 and whose body was found semi-naked on waste ground with a lead pipe forced down her throat. On the other side of the wall is a detailed timeline of hate crimes committed against Black lesbians in South Africa since 2009. Facing the timeline at the other end of the gallery is a blackboard containing anonymous Black lesbian testimonies of rape and sexual assault, all of which are handwritten in chalk. Around the corner, a short video, entitled *Being Scene* (2012), based on Muholi's earlier collection of photographs in *Being*, is playing on a loop. The video contains blurred black and white images of Muholi and her partner having sex alongside an erotically explicit soundtrack. Walking further through the gallery, one encounters colorful photographs of same-sex weddings and a large



Figure 7: Installation view of *Isibonelo/Evidence*

installation that includes the video *Ayanda and Nhlanhla Moremi's Wedding* (2013). Placed directly opposite the wedding video is a coffin containing flowers and a black and white self portrait of Muholi.¹³ The coffin is positioned next to another collection of wedding photographs, entitled “Koze Kubenini XX” (“Until When XX”).

By juxtaposing images of wedding celebrations with scenes of violence and mourning, Muholi's recent collection illustrates the precarious path that Black lesbian communities in South Africa must walk between celebration and mourning, between queer visibility and erotic vulnerability. As Muholi's images testify, while Black lesbian representation is crucial to countering the symbolic violence that renders the lives of queer women of color ungrievable, such visibility also makes Black queer women vulnerable to material, everyday forms of violence and discrimination.¹⁴ In *Isibonelo/Evidence*, the passport with which Muholi opens her exhibition importantly links Black lesbian vulnerability in South Africa to questions of sexual citizenship. Muholi's call for solidarity with Black queer migrants in *Isibonelo/Evidence* thus connects the contemporary challenges facing queer refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants with the kinds of ongoing legacies of apartheid that stratify sexual citizenship and access to social protections. From Black lesbians in South Africa who experience the ongoing inequalities resulting from histories of apartheid, to Black lesbian migrants who attempt to seek asylum in South Africa only to be met with the homophobia and xenophobia of state officials, to Black lesbians who choose to leave the continent and seek asylum in the West and whose fate

is often that of detention and ultimately deportation, Muholi's activist gesture of solidarity with queer migrants is a powerful reminder not to underestimate the role played by citizenship in the transnational production of Black lesbian vulnerability and erotic precarity.¹⁶

By beginning from the kind of transnational feminist Black lesbian praxis that understands vulnerability and autonomy as interrelated and intimately tied to issues of sexual citizenship, Muholi's visual activism opens up a space for conceptualizing lesbian human rights narratives in a way that links campaigns for erotic justice to questions of political economy and development. As Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar (2004) have noted, the subject of female same-sex desire among poor women in the Global South has fallen outside the cracks of both lesbian studies and critical development studies. They argue that whereas lesbian studies has failed to engage with the complexities of living in places where political violence and struggles for resources inform how women articulate their sexualities, development theorists still privilege gender as a central category of analysis with the result that heteronormative presumptions about female sexuality remain intact (495). Swarr and Nagar stress the need for feminist scholars to bridge the gap between development theory and praxis and lesbian studies by conceptualizing new frameworks that attempt to situate the subject of female same-sex desire in relation to questions of economics. Only then, they argue, will lesbian studies be able to productively intervene in current debates within transnational feminist and queer theory about what it means to think female same-sex desire globally and transnationally.

By stressing a political economy of erotic vulnerability as the basis for lesbian human rights advocacy, Muholi's visual art creates spaces for new narratives of female same-sex desire to emerge within transnational feminist and queer activism. Through articulating a conception of lesbian desire that centralizes the question of differential access to social resources, Muholi shows how Black lesbian vulnerability in post-apartheid South Africa cannot be thought outside interlocking structures of oppression, such as heteronormativity, racism, classism, and xenophobia. In doing so, she demonstrates how theories of erotic vulnerability might help to better account for the intersections among gender, race, sexuality, class and citizenship in lesbian human rights narratives.

As Muholi's work also suggests, a theory of sexual rights grounded in the notion of erotic vulnerability, or contingency, allows us to pose the problem of identity in lesbian human rights narratives. In this way, theories of erotic vulnerability and precarity help to open up a space for conceptualizing gender-based forms of persecution without foreclosing the possibilities for the expression of female sexual agency. In the context of South Africa, for example, as Swarr (2012, 963) notes, Black lesbian masculinities signify both erotic power and vulnerability to sexual violence in the form of patriarchal backlash against women's perceived sexual and gender transgression. A theory of rights grounded in the notion of erotic vulnerability opens up a space for conceptualizing such

gender-based forms of persecution without foreclosing the possibilities for the expression of female sexual agency in lesbian human rights narratives. As Muholi's work demonstrates, thinking vulnerability and agency together is crucial to effectively mobilizing Black lesbian vulnerability and precarity as a form of resistance.

By stressing a dialectics of erotic vulnerability as the basis for sexual rights claims, Muholi demonstrates how cultural advocacy can provide a model through which to account for the paradoxes of lesbian human rights in contemporary South Africa. Through her work, Muholi teaches us how to recognize worlds in which violence and erotic agency coexist and in which vulnerability can be a source of both pleasure and danger. For, in contemporary South Africa, freedom does not always mean sexual autonomy; it can also refer to the privilege that accompanies the state of protected vulnerability. Translating the concept of erotic vulnerability into lesbian human rights narratives without the former becoming appropriated as a tactic of patriarchal governance is a far from easy or straightforward task, however. As Butler reminds us, women "know" the dilemma, or paradox, of erotic vulnerability only too well. The challenge, as she notes, has to do with demanding a world in which erotic vulnerability is protected without being eradicated and with insisting on a path that must be walked between the pursuit of sexual autonomy and the ecstasy that is produced by desire (2006, 42). As I have argued here, however, by encouraging us to claim something other than sexual autonomy as an alternative to gender-based forms of violence, queer conceptualizations of vulnerability and precarity can help us to come closer to imagining the kind of world that makes desire possible.

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Notes

1. In 1996, the South African Constitution became one of the first in the world to officially prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. This was followed in 2000 by the Equality Act, which specifically outlawed hate crimes. In 2006, South Africa legalized same-sex marriage by way of the Civil Union Act, thereby giving same-sex partners the option to legally register their relationship either as a marriage or as a civil partnership.

2. The Human Rights Watch report, "We'll Show You You're a Woman," reproduces graphic statements from male rapists as well as from male police officers in charge of

interviewing victims of sexual assault. The report also includes lengthy testimonies from victims regarding their experiences of rape and sexual violence. For further analysis of the kind of rhetoric typically used to frame Black lesbian vulnerability to rape and sexual assault in South Africa, see Morrissey 2013.

3. For a discussion of the hypervisibility of Black lesbians in South Africa and the social movement strategies designed to counteract Black queer women's oppression, see Currier 2012.

4. The primary aim of FEW, as Ashley Currier (2012, 52) notes, is to offer "protected visibility" for Black lesbians in South Africa.

5. As Muholi (2013, 17) notes, the violence that Black lesbians encounter in South Africa is directly related to their collective experiences of poverty; their lack of access to adequate transportation and housing make them especially vulnerable.

6. Xavier Livermon (2012, 315) similarly argues that in order to create possibilities for freedom, Black queer subjects in South Africa need to disrupt heteronormative constructions of Blackness through enacting cultural visibility in the public sphere. As Currier (2012, 18) also notes in her work on LGBT social movements, the racialization of discourses of sexuality in South Africa necessitates that LGBT movement organizations cultivate "an intentional visibility strategy," one that promotes "the Africanness of the movement."

7. As Muholi (2004, 123) comments regarding her desire to act as both witness and advocate for the Black lesbian community within South Africa, "My location as an activist and community worker within the lesbian community allows me to testify to the constant revictimisation that lesbians face after experiencing the trauma of rape. I see first-hand how these women's sexualities and their genders are questioned and interrogated by police, doctors and the media. I hear my wider African community deny these women the right to live their sexual and gender identities."

8. For an analysis of how structures of visibility and invisibility characterize human rights discourses more generally, see Hesford 2011, 12.

9. As the artist has written about her position as an "insider" within the Black lesbian community in South Africa, "This insider status also comes with the fear of being the next hate crimes statistic, especially because I am known publicly. Just as there is an issue with the safety of my participants when their faces are recognized in my photos, so there is an issue of safety for me. I too get scarred by fear" (Muholi 2006, 91).

10. As Zethu Matebeni (2013, 406) comments regarding the ways in which Xingwana's reception of *Being* was affected by colonialist and post-apartheid constructions of African womanhood that deny women access to sexual and erotic agency, "The minister's gaze and self-looking is narrowed and clouded by histories of the violation of Black female bodies. On seeing two Black female bodies together and undressed, she could only imagine pain, violation, torture and a version of pornography. She is unable to see, or rejects the capacity in herself to see, in the images pleasure, joy, beauty, intimacy and eroticism." Matebeni argues that Xingwana's response to Muholi's work is symptomatic of heteronormative presumptions about female sexuality, according to which only the heterosexual male gaze is able to consume the naked female body, a body that remains permanently susceptible to violation as a result of masculine objectification.

11. As Muholi (2009) writes, "The work is aimed at erasing the very stigmatisation of our sexualities as 'unAfrican', even as our very existence disrupts dominant (hetero)

sexualities, patriarchies and oppressions that were not of our own making. Since slavery and colonialism, images of us African women have been used to reproduce heterosexuality and white patriarchy, and these systems of power have so organized our everyday lives that it is difficult to visualize ourselves as we actually are in our respective communities.”

12. As Butler (2009, 32) explains, precarity is a “politically induced” condition that deprives particular populations of social and economic support, leaving them at heightened risk of poverty, disease, injury, violence and, in some cases, premature death. For Butler, it is this “legalized violence” by which certain populations are prevented from accessing the resources needed to minimize their precariousness that exposes them to “violence without protection.”

13. At the opening private view of the exhibition, Muholi entered the Plexiglas coffin and lay there naked with flowers strewn across her body. As the artist commented regarding her performance of vulnerability, “It’s about a life that’s been ended unexpectedly and violently. . . . Lesbians are victimised and end up lying somewhere in somebody’s yard in some crime scene. In Brooklyn that night, that space will become a crime scene” (Muholi 2015, 11).

14. As Kylie Thomas (2014, 119) points out in her work on visual media in post-apartheid South Africa, we need to keep asking how the legacy of apartheid “continues to negate the possibility for those forms of sociality without which mourning remains impossible.”

15. The Organization for Refugee, Asylum and Migration has documented the precarious position faced by sexual and gender minority refugees in South Africa. As they have observed, not only do queer refugees encounter the kind of xenophobia that all migrants face, but they also risk having their asylum claims dismissed as a result of the homophobia and/or transphobia of the immigration officials evaluating their claims (ORAM 2012). In the case of lesbians, this usually means being accused of not being “lesbian enough.” For a discussion of the challenges to lesbian asylum claims and the social construction of lesbian migrants as “deportable subjects,” see Lewis 2013 and 2014.

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