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Subversions of Sensuality Within Lesbian Photography: Reflections on Zanele Muholi and Claude Cahun

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Abstract

The self-portraits of Claude Cahun and Zanele Muholi reveal a connective history of lesbian artmaking outside the expectations of both gender binaries and patriarchal oppression. Claude Cahun (French, 1894-1954) used photography as a means of self-expression and subversion. Cahun created work that challenged depictions of women as moldable muses or models for a male artist to control during the Surrealist movement of the 1920s and beyond. Cahun's 1927 self-portrait, Don't Kiss Me, I'm in Training fuses both hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine elements to create a dynamic and influential depiction of gender non-conformity within the lesbian experience. Zanele Muholi, a South African artist born in 1972, explores the intersection between Queer and African identities within their self-portraits taken over 2012-2020, entitled Somnyama Ngonyama. The collection demonstrates the ways in which photography can be used to subvert objectifications, to rewrite and reclaim white-washed histories, as well as to explore intimacy within lesbian partnerships. Muholi's Bona III subverts expectations of what it means to be in control of one's sensuality. From the sensual modesty of La Grande Odalisque (1814) by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres to the fervent orientalism of Lenhert and Landrock postcards (c.1900), this research contextualizes the exploitation of lesbian sexuality, and the ways in which Muholi and Cahun engage with and counteract these complex histories.

I. Introduction

Representation of queer bodies in mainstream art history has been a continuous battle for the LBGTQ+ community. When we think about what requirements an artwork must have for it to qualify as “queer representation,” it becomes obvious that there is no one way to create queer art, nor is there just one way to understand it. My research is primarily focused on *Bona III* (2019) by Zanele Muholi (1972-present) and *Don’t Kiss Me I’m in Training* (1927) by Claude Cahun (1894-1954), and the ways these works intersect and interact through their subversions of lesbian sensuality. The artworks and lives of Cahun and Muholi represent the complexities of queerness and the art of masking (and unmasking) their identities at two very distinct points in history: between World War I and World War II, and in the Post-Apartheid era in South Africa. Both artists subvert the expectations of sexualization within lesbian partnerships, specifically the fetishization of gender non-conforming and non-white bodies within photography. The works of Cahun and Muholi showcase an under-represented history of lesbian artmaking. My analysis of sensuality within the portraiture of Cahun and Muholi demonstrates the importance of gender non-conforming representation within the lesbian community, as well as the recurring themes of reflection and rejection across the larger lesbian artist collective.

The photography of Muholi and Cahun are connected through an overarching narrative of subverting or rejecting the male gaze through independent self-portraiture. In their re-imaginings of hyper-sexual stereotypes of lesbian identity, both artists focus on unabashed displays of gender nonconformity. Looking closer at these artists’ bodies of work, we are able to better understand the role of the lesbian artist in the resistance and rebellion against patriarchal standards of beauty. The similarities and differences between the works of Muholi and Cahun reveals the deeper significance of self-portraiture in the creation of a queer art history, as dictated by queer artists, for a queer audience. The act of self-portraiture informs us on how queer identities, relationships, and communities have been misrepresented by the art world, and in turn, misrepresented by the world at large.

Cahun created artwork at the turn of the twentieth century, while Muholi has been creating for the entirety of the twenty-first century. Despite this considerable gap in time, both artists work through remarkably similar subjects and societal impositions. Though Cahun may have lacked our modern-day queer terminology, their engagement with the Surrealist movement of the 1920s contextualizes them within a critical moment of scholarly and social understanding on how female and non-binary bodies are used (and abused) in the art world. Muholi creates artwork that explores what it means to be African and queer, as well as the intersectionality of both identities. This topic directly connects to how embedded structural racism and homophobia are the world today. Furthermore, societal expectations of female and non-male sexuality have evolved over time, standards of beauty and femininity have remained strikingly stagnant. Reflecting on past icons of idealized femininity, such as the *Venus of Urbino* (1534) or *La Grande Odalisque* (1815), one finds remarkable similarities to modern-day supermodels and beauty icons, such as Gigi Hadid, Lily-Rose Depp, and Kylie Jenner.

The common thread connecting these standards of beauty is engagement with the male gaze.

II. The Construction of the Female Nude

The nude female form has been a source of endless inspiration for artists across the globe, and throughout history.[1] Depictions of the female nude have varied from spiritual portrayals of fertility and prosperity to symbols of protection by a higher, divine power. These representations, despite their lasting cultural relevance, have been constructed primarily by a colonial male perspective and exploited by a colonial male audience. One of the most culturally significant examples of this phenomena dates back to the fifteenth century with Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1485) (Fig. 1). This iconic painting portrays the Roman goddess Venus, emerging from the sea, standing in *contrapposto* upon a scalloped shell. She is naked, but still modestly covering her breasts and genitals. Her complexion is fair and her body is thin; she is the idealized everyday woman, not just the Goddess of Love. This representation acts as a centerpiece to all other European female nudes that followed in its footsteps-–the modest, and yet, still sexually available, fantasy.[2]

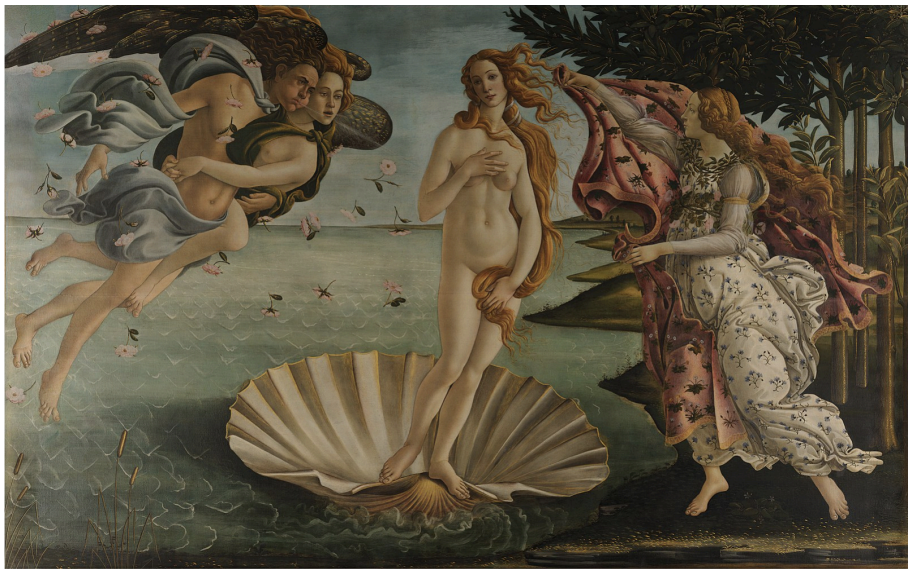

Figure 1, Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1485 ca., tempera on canvas, 68'' x 109'', Uffizi Gallery, Italy.

[1]Joanne G Bernstein, "*The Female Model and the Renaissance Nude: Dürer, Giorgione, and Raphael," Artibus et Historiae* 13, no. 26 (1992): 49–63. *https://doi.org/10.2307/1483430.*
[2]David Rosand, "'*So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch*,'" *Studies in the History of Art* 45 (1993): 100–119. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/42621880.*

This intermingling of shame and confidence within female nudes stems from a male perspective.. While the male artist is still showing off the “perfect” beauty of the female figure, he is continually shadowing and smothering the muse with misogyny and fear of her own autonomy. *La Grande Odalisque,* (Fig. 2), painted in 1814 by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, exemplifies this exploitation.[3] An “odalisque” is a female concubine, typically referring to a woman who engages in sexual relations with a man in a position of power. The neoclassical movement from which this painting originates was heavily influenced by ideas of exoticism, and an ever-worsening European fascination with women of color, particularly the ones that were enslaved for the pleasure of men in power. *La Grande Odalisque* shows a woman reclining on lavish furs, chiffons, and silks. She is completely nude, but only the back of her body is visible to the audience. She looks over her shoulder, perfectly smoothed and posed. She is not emotionally engaging with the audience in a natural way. Rather, she is positioned so particularly, that she becomes more of an object than a human being. Her indifferent interaction with the viewer harkens back to this idea of modesty and freedom; it is in overt stylization of the “odalisque” that the artist forces his personal fantasies upon the scene. The woman is designed to have the allure and exoticism of someone that is not white, but her features and complexion are glaringly European. She becomes none other than a hollow shell of patriarchal and colonial desire. Depictions of “odalisques" were rampant throughout the nineteenth century, until eventually colliding with the new world of photography at the turn of the twentieth century.

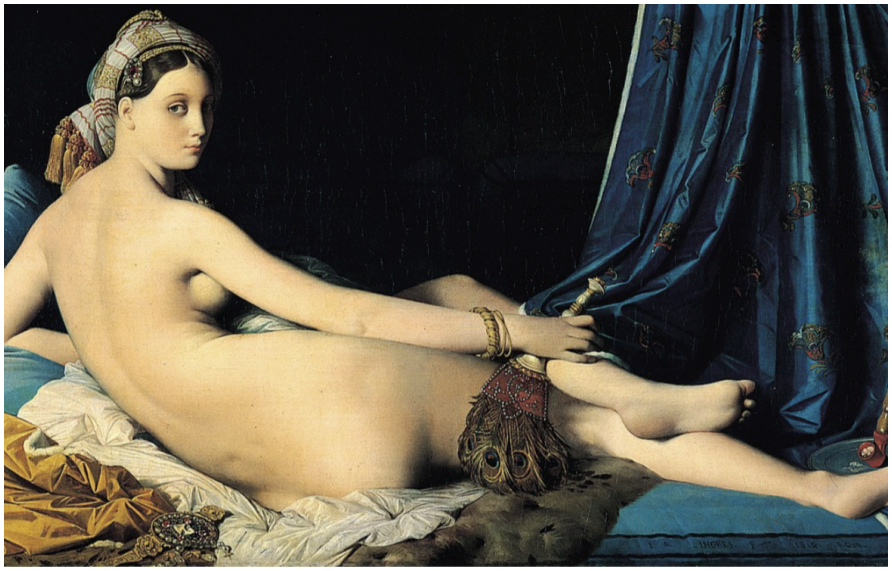

Figure 2. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingrez, *La Grande Odalisque,* 1814, oil on canvas, 36’’ x 63’’, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

[3]Heather Madar, “*Before the Odalisque: Renaissance Representations of Elite Ottoman Women*,” *Early Modern Women* 6 (2011): 1–41. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/23617325.*

This idea of the female form as a moldable object to forcefully apply heteronormative and hyper-sexual expectations onto is further evidenced by the ways that multiple female bodies interact with one another in paintings or photography. In 1814, Antonio Canova's *The Three Graces* (Fig. 3) demonstrates how male artists depict female companionship. Female companionship is often inextricably linked to naive eroticism.[4] Regardless of the women's relationship with each other, which, in this case, is familial, the male artist presents their intimacy as inherently sexual. The three semi-nude women stand closely to one another, touching each other's breasts and embracing. This marble sculpture was intended as a representation of Zeus' daughters: Euphrosyne, Aglaia, and Thalia. *The Three Graces* are also typically shown alongside the goddess Venus, which, in turn, associates them with idealized beauty and sexuality. The bodies of these mythological figures are practically indistinguishable from one another.

Innumerable male-curated female nudes exist in art history. Even when the artistic style differs, the muse remains frozen in time. Francisco de Goya's *La Maja Desnuda* (1797) depicts a naked woman with a smoldering gaze towards the viewer. She is displayed for consumption. Her body is designed to replicate the gentle folds of the soft fabric underneath her. Other examples include Max Klinger's *Female Nude* (1910), a perfectly stylized female body with symmetrical and uplifted breasts, a thin waist, and a hairless vagina. Marcel Duchamp's *Given 1: Waterfall*, (Fig. 4), features a wooden door with a hole just large enough to peer through. Looking through this peephole reveals a naked woman, modeled after artist Maria Martins, as well as his second wife Alexina Duchamp. Her body is, once again, on display for the viewer. Her legs are parted and her face is hidden. This image shows not only the male gaze, but the sexual partner's gaze. Separating the face from the body supports anonymity and a lack of responsibility for the viewer to humanize the figure in question. It is far easier to be complicit in objectification if the image itself is already dehumanizing the subject. All of these artworks have the same fantasy in mind: a woman who is naked, and therefore sexualized, by and for the male gaze.

[4]"*The Three Graces by Antonio Canova*," Victoria and Albert Museum. *https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-three-graces.*

Figure 3. Antonio Canova, The Three Graces, 1814, marble, 68’’ x 38’’ x 29.5’’, Scottish National Gallery, Scotland.

Figure 4. Marcel Duchamp, Given 1: The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas, 1946-1966, mixed media, 7 ft. 11½" × 70" × 49", Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania.

Objectifying gazes and sexually-available bodies invoke heights of sensuality in historical representations of female bodies. The bodies are not quite inanimate objects, but something that is still capable of enticing the viewer without any personal perspective, desire, or control. Sensuality is the combined experience of bodily senses, for example, touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing. Sexuality refers to one's individual sexual feelings, inclinations, identities, and connections. Sensuality can, of course, be sexual, but it does not have to be. The entire reason for this distinction is to highlight the exploitation of nude non-male bodies regardless of context. Not unlike the Venus and Odalisque, the ways these forms are represented in fine art, is intended to enhance the desirability of particular feminine attributes and their associations with increased (male) sexual pleasure. Studying the ways that the *Venus*, *Odalisque*, and *The Three Graces* are portrayed is largely connected to the ways that the audience perceives what is most desirable and what can surpass the two-dimensional experience, and transform into a complete, sensorial experience. These characters are hollow forms that any female nude can be inserted into. They are a social construct, and not a reality.

III. Nude Photography and Exotic Fantasy

With the spread of industrialization at the turn of the twentieth century, the art world was greeted with new opportunities to profit off of female nudes. The invention of photography transformed the accessibility of artwork, making it much easier and cheaper to distribute images and the marketability of female nudes was undeniable. In many European countries throughout the late nineteenth century, erotic postcards soared in popularity. These postcards typically contained images of nude women posed stiffly in front of the camera and most often depicted women of color, typically styled in their respective native clothing or jewelry. The goal was not to depict the cultures of these women accurately, but instead to objectify and sexualize their cultural identities. The postcards that specifically contain more than one woman are early examples of curating lesbian intimacy in a way that appeals to a broader audience, mainly men. The not-so-subtle pornographic undertones in the postcards speak to a larger interest in colonizing and spreading the nude bodies of foreign women across the globe. Since a postcard is designed to be collected and/or sent from place to place, the women's nudity was not simply designed to exist in one place, but to contribute to global, societal ideals of how women, especially women of color, were supposed to look.

Félix-Jacques Moulin (1802-1875) is most well-known for his photographic prints of young women and girls. Taken in 1851-1852, *La Deux Amies*, (Fig. 5) depicts two young women standing, hand in hand, posing for the camera. Their hair is braided and pinned up out of their faces; their expressions are soft and simplistic. The women are naked and exposed to the camera; the two stand stiffly side-by-side. The ages of these

women are unknown, and the only information the viewer is given is within the title, translated to English as “the two friends.” Fantasies of exotic bodies played out beforehand in the fine art world gives permission for the Western male gaze to look, collect, and distribute this new-found soft porn as an “artful” image. While not necessarily a postcard, this daguerreotype evidences the foundations of nude photography that allow for mass production of images and would eventually expand out into pornography in the twentieth century, and far beyond.

(Left) Figure 5. Felix-Jacques Moulin, *La Deux Amies*, 1851-52, stereoscopic daguerreotype, location and dimensions unknown.

(Right) Figure 6, Lenhert and Landrock Postcard, date unknown, location and dimensions unknown.

Around 1900, a photographic studio run by Rudolf Franz Lehnert (1878-1948) and Ernst Heinrich Landrock (1878-1966), known as Lehnert and Landrock, created a series of photographic postcards that specifically depicted nude images of women of color across eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia. These postcards, like the earlier works of Félix-Jacques Moulin, were highly sexualized and fetishized in their positioning and stylization. One example of this is in a postcard entitled *Fillettes Bedouines* (Fig. 6), which translates to “Bedouin Little Girls" or “Bedouin Girls” in English. The Bedouin are Arabic tribes that live throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

This specific postcard uses the culture of these girls as a means of dressing up and differentiating their sexuality from that of the photographic nudes of English or French women. One girl stands topless behind the other, adjusting the other's headdress. Neither girl faces the camera. Their nudity and proximity to one another is incredibly suggestive of an off-camera sexualization. The nudity of the women is not accidental or implied as non-sexual, instead, there is a distinct vision that is being projected by the photographer onto the women. Rather than an ethnographic portrayal of the intricate customs of their culture, this scenario projects a white, colonial gaze onto foreign women. Their daily lives and activities are presented in such a way that simplifies their identities in order to appeal to a European fantasy of "exotic" women.

The Lenhert and Landrock postcards express the ways white people can control, consume, and profit off of queer and non-white bodies, especially when they are entertaining the colonial fantasies of the "exotic." Photography was the perfect medium for the occasion, as it was intended to depict a more truthful and authentic portrayal of the "foreign" world. The image was not simply painted, but captured in a specific moment of time, implying that it was a more accurate, cultural representation, rather than just the creative expression of an artist.

The fetishization of so-called "exotic" women relates to colonial views of non-white cultures, specifically in the ways sexuality is expressed. Looking at the 1920s specifically, different cultural forces connected the lure of sexual promiscuity with the exploitation of Black art and culture. As erotic postcards grew in popularity throughout Europe, the rise of the Harlem Renaissance revealed a new interest in Black bodies in popular culture, which was only worsened by the spread of fetishized images of Black women from "exotic" locations. The art world's interest in Black art reaffirmed how they wanted African-Americans to express their identities. The Harlem Renaissance revealed a new way for white people to profit off of the work of Black Americans, as well as further fetishize and fantasize how women of color across the world experience sexuality differently depending on their culture.

Lesbian representation across art history and within popular culture reflects the same patriarchal oppression that non-male bodies have suffered. The commodification of nude, non-male bodies started long before the Renaissance, however its pace increased over the past five centuries. The marketability of these "female nudes" has, in turn, further isolated lesbian identity through the interlinked hyper-sexualization and fetishization of non-male nudity and sensuality.

IV. Self-Portraiture as Queer Revolution

Against this history of nude and exotic non-male representation, the photographs of Cahun and Muholi stand apart for the ways in which they revolutionize how under-represented identities are expressed within the art world.[5] Understanding photography as a primary medium for queer representation, and the performative

[5]Vince Aletti, Richard Meyer, and Catherine Opie, "*Queer Photography?*" *Aperture*, no. 218 (2015): 25–31. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/24475133*.

histories associated with self-portraiture, allows us to engage with these artworks in a far more meaningful way.[6] Scholar Anthony W. Lee's *American Histories of Photography*, discusses how the art world grappled with the gradual expansion of photography.

> ...[T]he myriad of tensions between a history of photography as one of scientific and technological ingenuity and one of aesthetic awareness; and the underlying belief that a written history was inseparable from the promotion of photographs as objects worthy of serious contemplation. Paintings were assumed to be worthwhile materials for study, but photographs were not—at least not among a wider American audience until the 1930s.[7]

Photography existed as an outlier within the art world at the beginning of its journey into the mainstream. Not only was the technology expensive and generally inaccessible to the public, but it was also not associated with the same sophisticated reputation of drawn or painted portraiture. Thus, photography existed within an uncomfortable middle ground, at least at the beginning of the twentieth century.[8] The popularity of nude postcards further detached photography from the fine art world, even if the postcards were remarkably similar to certain painted female nudes. The inclusion of multiple non-male bodies in these postcards and daguerreotypes illustrates the ways that lesbian intimacy was constructed and thus, perceived as a heightened sexual image, surpassing the portrayal of a singular female body. Additionally, the specification of these non-male bodies as non-white further objectifies their bodies as fantasy-based, colonized consumer goods. These figures are defined and marketed by the traits that separate them from the Western, Christian ideal, therefore they become the unattainable, yet desirable, "exotic" fantasy.

Photography as art was an already complex, contested, and controversial topic. Engaging with lesbian identity within the context of photography is, in many ways, the perfect storm. Joan E. Biren (American, b.1944), known as JEB, is a highly influential scholar who specializes in lesbian portraiture. JEB's research is featured by scholar Sophie Hackett as a jumping off point for engaging with and recognizing historical queer portraiture.

> She detailed what she calls the 'triangle' of interactions between the photographer, the muse (subject), and the viewer... 'There's a look here that's passing between a lesbian muse...and a lesbian photographer,

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[6]Amelia Jones, "*The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment*," *Signs* 27, no. 4 (2002): 947–78. *https://doi.org/10.1086/339641.*

[7]Anthony W. Lee, "*American Histories of Photography*," *American Art* 21, no. 3 (2007): 2–9. *https://doi.org/10.1086/526474.*

[8]Cynthia Freeland, "*Portraits in Painting and Photography*," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 135, no. 1 (2007): 95–109. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/40208798.*

> something direct about it, without being confrontative, it's open in a certain kind of way, there's a present there behind the eyes...'[9]

Using JEB's 'lesbian semiotics,' we can better understand the relationship that both Cahun and Muholi have with their own self-portraiture. Before entering into an analysis of Cahun's and Muholi's photographs, I would first like to clarify my use of the term, "lesbian."

V. Forgotten Lesbianisms

Discourse surrounding a primary definition of the term "lesbian" has been far from unified.[10] As society has evolved and opinions on gender and sexual identity have become more inclusive, there are more opportunities than ever for constructing a new understanding of the word lesbian. The definition that I will employ for my research and analysis of these artists and their works is as follows: a person in a romantic relationship between two non-binary or female-identifying individuals. This definition allows for non-binary people and others on the gender-non-conforming spectrum to be included.[11] Additionally, this definition prioritizes the inclusion of transgender women who have been wrongfully excluded from the lesbian community by TERFS (trans-exclusionary radical feminists).[12] Defining "who" is a lesbian, Lillian Faderman, an American queer studies scholar, explains: "You are only one if you consider yourself one."[13] The idea that queerness is self-determined and individually defined is further supported by scholar Samantha Rosenthal. Rosenthall explains that there are ways in which we can abandon the cis-gender, white expectations that have isolated trans women and women of color, and instead create our own fluid definitions of what it means to be a lesbian. Scholar Mairead Sullivan-further expands on the creation of a new, inclusive definition:

> Rather than mark this time as a forgetting of lesbian feminist pasts, we can read these events as calling forth the social and political commitments

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[9]Sophie Hackett, "*Queer Looking*," *Aperture*, no. 218 (2015): 40–45. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/24475135.*

[10]Valerie Traub, "*The Sign of the Lesbian*," In *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, 265–93. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16rpr8c.12.*

[11]Karen Tongson, *"Lesbian Aesthetics, Aestheticizing Lesbianism*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 60, no. 3 (2005): 281–90. *https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2005.60.3.281.*

[12]Samantha Rosenthal, "*Resurrecting Lesbian Herstory in a Nonbinary World*," In *Living Queer History: Remembrance and Belonging in a Southern City*, 93–120. University of North Carolina Press, 2021. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469665825_rosenthal.6.*

[13]Ibid.

> of multiple lesbian feminist pasts while also allowing these commitments to be changed and reworked toward the needs of the present.[14]

The medium of self-portraiture stresses the importance of self-direction and expression, separating it from the ever looming expectation of male involvement in art-making. Decentering and challenging the male gaze through portraiture unveils the extent to which historic lesbian representation has been filtered and controlled by patriarchal oppression. It is in these misinterpretations that modern day fetishization of lesbian identity persists. Hyper-sexualization of non-male bodies in intimate partnerships has persisted, partly due to these historical representations that set the standard for how these lesbian relationships should look. This overt objectification is evidenced by the excess of lesbian pornographic content online and in films or television shows. The heterosexual pornographic world has been undeniably shaped by the historical fetishizations of non-male bodies, as well as a desire to imply that such lesbian relationships exist for the sole purpose of male pleasure. Author and professor Renee C. Hoogland states:

> The very frequency with which lesbian sexuality consistently reappears in the popular press and on the Hollywood screen, only to be immediately denied existence in 'the real,' intimates that the male subject's fear of emasculation cannot be eradicated by the killing off of individual lesbians: such terror is deeply entrenched within the masculine psycho-system. Underscored by a collective imagination in which lesbian sexuality is at once 'impossible–' by rendering the concept of heterosexual gender irrelevant–and paradoxically, the condition upon which the myth of masculinity depends, it is precisely on account of its fantastic nature, as a product of male angst, that the lesbian Phoenix always threats to rise again. The stereotypical image of the devouring lesbian vampire hence continues to be reborn, sustaining itself on the lifeblood of those who envisage themselves her prospective victims.[15]

These forgotten lesbian pasts have new possibilities within modern day queer theory. Through understanding Claude Cahun as a pioneer of queer representation, a new web of connections is unveiled between their artwork and the evolution of lesbian photography as a whole. This web links us then to Zanele Muholi, and the ever-evolving opportunities for queer artmaking to reclaim and recreate its lost histories.

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[14]Mairead Sullivan, "*Conclusion: We Are Not Post-Lesbian*," In *Lesbian Death: Desire and Danger between Feminist and Queer*, 139–46. University of Minnesota Press, 2022. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctv2ckjqh6.10.*

[15]Renee Hoogland, "*Hard to Swallow: Indigestible Narratives of Lesbian Sexuality*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 41, no. 3/4 (1995): 467–81. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/26285751*.

VI. Claude Cahun and *Don't Kiss Me, I'm In Training*

Cahun was born in Nantes, France in 1894. Engaging with the Surrealist movement of the 1920s and beyond, Cahun is known for their rebellious creativity and expression of gender non-conformity through photography.[16] Their works varied from photo collages, to self-portraits, to drawings and writings on paper. In the context of the works and inspirations of some of the most influential Surrealists at the time, including but not limited to, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and André Breton, Cahun opposes the ways these artists treat women as nothing more than models or muses. Cahun's artistic process was heavily influenced by their partnership with Marcel Moore (1892-1972), and the two of them often created collaborative artworks reflecting their intimacy without influence from the male gaze. Cahun's book, *Disavowals*, published in Paris in 1930, included collaborative collages between Moore and Cahun. The text can be read partly as a response to the popular psychoanalytic and surrealistic texts created within a similar time-frame, but also as a self-portrait, or collage, of Cahun's personal philosophies. Cahun opens the book with a similarly apt comparison: "The lens tracks the eyes, the mouth, the wrinkles skin deep…the expression on the face is fierce, sometimes tragic. And then calm - a knowing calm, worked on, flashy. A professional smile - and voilá!"[17] To disavow is to deny support, or reject an idea. Cahun's *Disavowals* quite literally rejects the misogyny of the Surrealist art movement, as well as the sexual and gender identities that are forced upon them. Likewise, Cahun pushed back on psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud's *On Narcissism*, published in 1914, argues that narcissism and homosexuality are inextricably linked together. Cahun states confidently in *Disavowals*: "Individualism? Narcissism? Certainly. My best characteristic, the one and only intentional infidelity I am capable of. You don't care? I'm lying anyway: I scatter myself too widely for that."[18] Cahun's awareness of the current state of both the scientific and artistic worlds at the turn of the twentieth century can serve to further emphasize their relevance in the context of queer rebellion and revolution against popular culture.

[16] I will be using they/them pronouns when referring to Claude Cahun. Scholarly discourse typically refers to Cahun as she/her, as gender-non-conforming language was not used in the early twentieth century.
[17]Claude Cahun, "*Disavowals*," Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008, p. 1.
[18]Claude Cahun, "*Disavowals*," Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008, p. 9.

Figure 7, Claude Cahun, I am In Training, Don't Kiss Me, 1927, silver gelatin print, location and dimensions unknown.

Cahun's *I am in Training Don't Kiss Me* (1927) (Fig. 7) is a prime example of the artist's ability to interact with the audience and engage in the Surrealist discourse of the time. The image is a silver gelatin print, meaning that the negative image was treated in a series of chemical baths to eventually reveal its distinct smooth, black-and-white coloring. This photograph is an overt combination of hyper-feminized and masculine characteristics.[19] Cahun's body is covered in a white full-body leotard, outfitted with black shorts, boots, and wrist covers. Their neck is covered with a white bandana; their hands and face are the only exposed skin. The fabric nipples sewn into the leotard are black, and they appear to sit higher on Cahun's chest than expected, giving the appearance of a flatter, more masculine shape. The use of the leotard is a subversion in itself, denying the viewer the sensuality of the skin. Cahun's leotard is not seamless, there is fabric gathering around the knees and under the arms. The effect is less natural. Cahun is altering the way the audience is expecting the skin to look. The

[19]Christy Wampole, "*The Impudence of Claude Cahun*," *L'Esprit Créateur* 53, no. 1 (2013): 101–13. *https://www.jstor.org/stable/26378827.*

implications of nudity as sexual is then transformed through the use of costume. Across the chest of the leotard is the title of the photograph: *I Am in Training Don't Kiss Me.* A pair of lips and a large heart also are drawn onto the leotard, mimicking the appearance of a tattoo. Cahun is wearing dramatic, exaggerated makeup, with hearts on their cheeks, dark lipstick, long, drawn-on, under-eyelashes, and thin, arching eyebrows. This makeup style seems to reference a Pierrot, or clown-like character. The Pierrot is a traditionally male character, first appearing around the seventeenth century, and is typically seen as a forlorn character dressed in all white.[20] Pierrot represents a masquerade, or hiding of individual identity beneath the caricatured "sad clown." Cahun's makeup is mask-like, as the face appears painted or powdered to be whiter against the dramatic eyeliner and lipstick.

Cahun's hair is short and slicked back with two curly bangs swirled across their forehead. Lips pursed and gaze facing the camera, they sit with their shoulders down and back. Cahun's legs are crossed and their arms are positioned carefully beside them; their palms rest on the ends of a dumbbell upon their lap. References to dumbbells, boxing, and other classically "masculine" activities contrast against the extremely feminine makeup and costuming. Images of the sportsman, or "strongman" were particularly popular in the 1920s, and depicted the ideal masculine body, which Cahun references alongside stereotypical feminine stylization. The dumbbells are painted messily with hearts and swirls, but the words "Totor et Popol" and "Castor and Pollux" can be made out on each respective dumbbell. "Totor et Popol" are the names of two cartoon characters created by Hergé, a Belgian writer and illustrator. Originally published in 1926, Totor et Popol serves as a precursor to the author's more well-known comic characters, Tintin and Snowy. Hergé is a known anti-semite, and a majority of his comics often include racist characterizations and stereotypes, which, by no means, was an anomaly at the time. Furthermore, Tintin and Snowy's adventures are almost entirely devoid of women, leading to long-contested theories that Tintin himself is gay. Marcel Wilmet, the spokesperson of Studio Hergé, explained that Tintin is, in fact, not gay, but rather "very macho."[21] He declares that just because there is a lack of women in the stories, doesn't mean that Tintin is queer. "Castor and Pollux" on the other hand, are half- brothers in Greek mythology, often associated with boxing and horsemanship. Also referred to as "Dioskouroi," the image of the twins was frequently represented on Etruscan mirrors, created around the 3rd century BC.[22] Etruscan mythology is often connected to themes of gender fluidity and twinship. Scholar Nancy Grummond explains:

> Thus the reflection or twin of the lady in the mirror was also to be understood as her soul. When she looked into the mirror, she could perceive a phenomenon

[20]Judy Sund, "*Why So Sad? Watteau's Pierrots*," *The Art Bulletin* 98, no. 3 (2016): 321–47. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/43947931.*
[21]Felicity Baker, "*Tintin 'outing' Enrages Fans Who Insist He Is so Macho*," PinkNews, April 28, 2021. *https://www.thepinknews.com/2009/01/12/tintin-outing-enrages-fans-who-insist-he-is-so-macho/.*
[22]Nancy Grummond, "*Etruscan Twins and Mirror Images: The Dioskouroi at the Door*," *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, 1991, 10–31. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/40514336.*

according to which she, like the Dioskouroi, was double, with one twin as mortal (herself) and the other as immortal (her reflection, or soul).

Furthermore, Grummond argues that Castor and Pollux are also heavily connected to the underworld, based on their associations with fertility and immortality. In Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, Castor and Pollux are referred to several times as guarding the gates to the underworld. The twins' associations with the underworld connect us further to the ideas of homosexuality, narcissism, and reflection. Cahun's inclusion of Castor and Pollux highlights the duality of their own identity. The medium of self-portraiture behaves in a similar way to a mirror, reflecting one's mortal and immortal self, or as a portal into the underworld. The "underworld" can then be easily conflated with non-conformity and sin.[23]

I Am in Training Don't Kiss Me is chock-full of ironies, extremes, and juxtapositions. Cahun challenges both sexual and gender binaries. Cahun is looking directly at the camera and the camera is looking back at them. The portrait becomes an illusion of a mirror in some way. I am arguing that this is not an accidental choice, and that the recurring use of masks, mirrors, reflection, and photography in general, was directly speaking to a forgotten queer audience. Cahun is engaging with the past, present, and future at the same time. The extremely feminine makeup contrasting with the masculinized boxer's body comments on the viewers' expectation of feminine vs. masculine portraiture. Contrasting femininity and masculinity, in turn, connects to this idea of androgyny, and existing in a gender non-conforming way. Cahun is seen balancing a dumbbell upon their lap, mimicking a scale of justice, or a symbol of balance. Balance is a key component of Cahun's artworks throughout their career; they are repeatedly shown existing between two worlds: the masculine and the feminine, or expectation and reality. In other words, Cahun is using their nonconformity to highlight all facets of their identity, without expecting to adhere to one vision.[24] Cahun is a pioneer in queer representation within the art world and far beyond it. The lesbian art world post-Cahun is, undoubtedly, inspired by their exploration of androgynous identity in a lesbian partnership. Lesbian photography over the twentieth-century and into present day can interact in some form with Cahun's turn-of-the-century photography.[25]

VII. Zanele Muholi and *Bona III*

[23]Charlotte Spivack, "*The Journey to Hell: Satan, The Shadow, and The Self*," *The Centennial Review* 9, no. 4 (1965): 420–37. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/23737939.*

[24]Sharla Hutchinson, "*Convulsive Beauty: Images of Hysteria and Transgressive Sexuality Claude Cahun and Djuna Barnes*," *Symplokē* 11, no. 1/2 (2003): 212–26. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/40536944*.
[25]See JEB's *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians* and Catherine Opie's *Portraits* (1993-97).

Zanele Muholi is a South African artist, most well known for their explorations of the Black, queer body in photography.[26] Their artwork is often characterized by this reclamation of sensuality over sexuality, and the act of subverting societal expectations on what it means to be both sensual and/or sexual. Muholi's photography is centered around self-portraiture and depictions of everyday life in the Queer community. More specifically, Muholi's works seek to tend to storylines typically neglected within the fine art canon. Muholi focuses on portraying the beauty within Black Queer community, and not just trauma.[27] Representation of Black queer bodies within the mainstream art world is little to none, and often reduced to stereotypes or colonial fetishizations of the sexual, "exotic" woman. Gabeba Baderoon is a South African scholar and poet, who explains Muholi's ability to foster respect within their photography:

> They are identity documents not created by the state, and we feel the push and pull of their dueling impulses toward solidity and process, being and becoming. Some of the photographs are limpid to the point of transparency. We become absorbed within them, rather than acting upon them. Despite their intimacy, we also learn a certain comportment and discretion in looking at them. They show us a careful construction of the codes of the body and where we can and cannot look.

Muholi's collection of photographs, known as *Somnyama Ngonyama*, is translated from isiZulu to English as "*Hail the Dark Lioness*."[28] This collection is composed of over eighty self-portraits taken over several years, beginning in 2012 and concluding in 2020. The photographs are all taken in black-and-white, and Muholi uses themself as the model for portraying ideas of masking identity, self-expression, and the subversion of societal expectations on both Blackness and queerness. Muholi's *Bona III* (Fig. 8) is one photograph out of the collection that illustrates Muholi's strength as an artist and storyteller, as well as connects us to a larger theme of bodily autonomy within queer photography.

[26]Gabeba Baderoon, "'*Gender within Gender': Zanele Muholi's Images of Trans Being and Becoming*," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 390–416. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/23069910.*
[27]Ibid.
[28]"*Art21*." PBS, September 21, 2018. *https://www.pbs.org/video/johannesburg-fjplbz/.*

Figure 8, Zanele Muholi, Bona III from Somnyama Ngonyama, 2019, silver gelatin print, 31’’ x 27’’, location unknown.

Bona III depicts Muholi lying across a mattress covered in a white sheet. The sheet is wrinkled and covered in stains, almost as if it had been water-colored. The stains, however, resemble the movement of the fabric, as if someone had slept on the bed covered in paint. Muholi lays horizontally—their hair is in locks, sprawled out elegantly over the bare sheets. Their body is naked, but their breasts are mostly covered by their hair, and a hand-held mirror covers their pelvis. The mirror itself appears to be a ring light, contrasting against their body and connecting back to the starkness of the sheets. The reflection of the mirror shows Muholi’s face, which appears stoic and peaceful. Looking down at the mirror, it becomes difficult to tell if their reflection in the mirror is an optical illusion. Muholi is entirely in control of what is being expressed and exposed, even though, at first glance, the figure is completely exposed on the blank canvas of the mattress. Their legs are crossed, and their right arm is stretched out, resting upon their forehead with their palm facing outwards. Surrounding the mattress are mostly gray walls, with sharp dark shadows overlapping both the top and bottom of the image. There are defined edges throughout the photograph; their knees and elbows are bent, the top corners of the mattress create angles, and the dark shadows across the wall contrast sharply with the highlights of the

composition. Though the image is in black and white, the different tones of gray all draw attention to the different textures Muholi uses. The wrinkled sheets contrast their smooth skin, and the circle mirror contrasts the angled shapes of their body and the environment.

Muholi holds, literally and metaphorically, the reflection of their identity. They are lounging in a naturalistic position, rather than laying out their body in a way that highlights the expected features of a nude portrait of a Venus or Odalisque motif. Furthermore, Muholi does not make their form any more digestible or obvious for the viewer and instead uses black-and-white to subvert the expectations of a nude portrait. The stark white background of the sheets is in direct opposition to Muholi's complexion. When looking closely at the sheets, however, it almost seems as if their complexion is being absorbed into the bed. There are puddles of oil-like splotches surrounding their body, as if the mattress itself is a mirror reflecting their body. Muholi's hair is sprawled out towards the viewer, almost mimicking the way their hand is reaching out and resting upon the top of their head. They are simultaneously within reach and completely untouchable.

One of the most notable features of *Bona III* is Muholi's ability to create complexity through simplicity. The mattress does not contain any blankets, just the sheets, almost as if Muholi themself is the decoration/bedding. The angles of the body appear much sharper in black-and-white, especially against the plain background. The existence of the circular mirror directly in the center of the photograph enhances these contrasting ideas of softness and roughness; circularity and squareness; femininity and masculinity. Nude portraiture is typically sexualized, either through the posing of the body or the environment. In Muholi's case, they are purposefully taking full advantage of how the viewer is expected to view a nude portrait. This is a subversion of the viewer's gaze. The mirror is held up to the most vulnerable part of their body, or the part that is expected to be exposed and emphasized. Their breasts are purposefully uncovered, yet they are not exposed in a way that compromises their cultivation of modesty within the portrait. The body is shown, but it is not presented to the viewer as something that can be indulged in. Instead, it exists without interest in appealing to the viewer–it only considers the camera, and the creation of shapes as dictated by Muholi.[29]

This self-portrait accomplishes several different feats of subversion through Muholi's careful positioning. The features of the body that are accentuated seem to blend into one complete form; different body parts are not isolated for easier viewing, rather, Muholi's body exists as one shape, one shadow. It is the mirror that disrupts this sense of oneness within their body, and floats within the center of the image. When looking closely at their reflection, the body, the mattress, and the walls all become the background for their reflection. Everything fades away, and the viewer is drawn in to look more thoughtfully at exactly what Muholi wants the viewer to absorb. The viewer can do nothing but witness the reflection; there is no space left in the mirror for

[29]Desiree Lewis, "*Against the Grain: Black Women and Sexuality*," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 63 (2005): 11–24. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/4066624.*

anything else or for any other space to be taken up. The space of reflection has been entirely filled by Muholi.

In an interview with Muholi in 2018 regarding *Somnyama Ngonyama*, they explain:

> I wanted to use my own face so that people will always remember just how important our black faces are when confronted by them—for this black face to be recognized as belonging to a sensible, thinking being in their own right. And as much as I would like a person to see themselves in Somnyama, I needed it to be my own portraiture. I didn't want to expose another person to this pain. I was also thinking about how acts of violence are intimately connected to our faces. Remember that when a person is violated, it frequently starts with the face: it's the face that disturbs the perpetrator, which then leads to something else. Hence the face is the focal point in the series: facing myself and facing the viewer, the camera, directly. Coming from South Africa, I doubt that it would have been possible to execute this project as a black person prior to 1994, for instance, because of the apartheid system and laws that were in place.[30]

Muholi's use of their own face across all of the portraits throughout *Somnyama Ngonyama* connects to the titles and locations of the individual photographs, as well. For instance, *Bona III,* references a portrait Muholi took in 2015, entitled *Bona, Charlottesville* (Fig. 9). This initial photograph features Muholi reclining on a hotel bed, looking at their reflection in a hand-held mirror. In the Aperture 2018 interview, Muholi explains the harassment they feel when checking into a hotel, whether in Africa, Europe, or North America. *Bona* can be translated from IsiZulu to English as "I see." *Bona III* and *Bona, Charlottesville* both feature Muholi studying their reflection in a mirror, and "seeing" themselves through their own perspective.

[30] Renée Mussai, "*Zanele Muholi on Resistance*," *Aperture*, September 2, 2020. *https://aperture.org/editorial/muholi-interview/.*

Figure 9, Zanele Muholi, *Bona, Charlottesville*, 2015, silver gelatin print, 31'' x 20'', location unknown.

VIII. Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore

Exploring artworks depicting specifically lesbian relationships reveals a treasure trove of artists subverting stereotypes and expectations. Since the art world is closely connected to popular culture and our understanding of history, it allows us to look at personal experiences and apply them to our understanding of larger past events. Therefore, the artworks of lesbian artists that have long since been undercut or underrepresented in favor of a more heteronormative, pornographic approach, now allow us to better understand why there was such a lack of representation to begin

with. The struggles of these artists to portray their sexualities have had lasting impacts on our modern understanding of queer representation in art.

Figure 9, Claude Cahun, Self Portraits (Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore), 1920, silver gelatin print, 7'' x 9.3'', location unknown.

Within the extensive portfolios of Muholi and Cahun, both artists depict lesbian partnerships in naturalistic and raw ways. Contrasting the orientalist postcards of Lehnhert and Landrock, as well as the awkwardly posed photographs of *La Deux Amies*, to both Muholi and Cahun presents a partnership unobstructed and uninterrupted by the male gaze. Cahun's portrait of Marcel Moore and themself (Fig. 10), taken in 1920, features the two of them interacting with their own reflections. They both stand in a room with striped walls and framed portraits behind them. They are visible only from the chest up and the two of them stare intently at their reflections. Moore furrows her brows, while Cahun purses their lips. The focus of the image is drawn to their faces, specifically their eyes, and in typical Cahun fashion, the two make piercing eye contact with the audience. The image is relatively casual in comparison to the extensive production of *Don't Kiss Me, I'm in Training*. In this informal scene, a profound collaborative effort is revealed. Suddenly, the posed portraits of Cahun themself become something increasingly complex. Cahun and Moore stand side-by-side, looking back at themselves, speaks of defiance and autonomy.The couple is not being directed or posed by a male photographer or artist, nor are their bodies exposed just for the pleasure of the viewer. Rather, this self-assured pose reflects Cahun's rebellions and reclaims how lesbian partnerships are portrayed. Take, for instance, *La Deux Amies*, and the looming fetishization that is ingrained within the very act of two women standing beside each other. Their naked bodies, while not inherently sexual, are sexualized through the lens. Looking again at the portrait of Cahun and

Moore, their intimacy is not in how they are exposed to the viewer, but rather how they are protected by each other.

IX. Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta

Zanele Muholi's portraits of Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta, taken in 2007, (Fig.11), are a refreshing, non-sexualized reimagining of Black lesbian identity and partnership. The photographs of Mashiloane and Lavuta in a relaxed, home environment evoke feelings of comfort and acceptance. The two of them are standing naked next to one another, and it implies that the two of them are bathing and preparing to get dressed. Neither of them are looking at the camera as they are far more preoccupied with one another. Despite their vulnerability, they do not appear uncomfortable or out of place. Their nudity is not constructed or controlled, nor is it sexualized. The dynamic appears to be far more concerned with sensuality and comfortability, and the power of partnership. Furthermore, their sensuality is naturally occurring, not posed. The European ideal of sensuality is often rooted in a feeling of excess and wealth, as evidenced by the *La Grande Odalisque*'s lux fabrics and feathers, and the *Venus of Urbino*'s perfectly executed interior complete with servants or maids in the background.

Figure 10, Zanele Muholi, *Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta, Ext. 2, Lakeside Johannesburg* from *Being*, 2007, lambda print, 30'' x 30'', Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, North Carolina, United States.

Muholi engages with sensuality in a way that emphasizes cultivating trust, respect, and sensitivity. Indeed, the sensuality is heightened through mutual understanding and connection. The appeal of lesbian representation, at a time when the representation was largely done for the male viewer, is rooted in this desire to experience a double amount of female sensuality and sexuality. One nude woman may be sensual and romantic, but two nude women are *more* sensual, and more erotic. The actuality of the partnership or connection between the women is not of importance–all that matters is how much sensuality and sexuality can be contained in one photograph. Muholi, however, is capable of creating sensuality without the implication of sexuality, and without the assumption that the women are performing. Their image depicts Mashiloane and Lavuta engaging in mundane, daily activities with one another. It is within the simplicity that sensuality becomes implied within a deeper emotional connection, rather than a surface-level exploration of the senses. Their nakedness is not used as a means of arousal, but as an example of their gentleness and vulnerability with one another.

Muholi's portraits of Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta are a part of a larger collection of works by Muholi, entitled *Being*, which was created in 2007. Muholi states:

> Being is an exploration of both our existence and our resistance as lesbians/women loving women, as black women living our intersecting identities in a country that claims equality for all within the LGBTI community, and beyond. The work is aimed at erasing the very stigmatization 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. Moreover, the images we see rely on binaries that were long prescribed for us (hetero/homo, male/female, African/unAfrican). From birth on, we are taught to internalize their existences, sometimes forgetting that if bodies are connected, connecting, the sensuousness goes beyond simplistic understandings of gender and sexuality.[31]

Muholi creates deeper sensuality through their rebellion against strict gender and sexual binaries. Photography that represents both African and queer identities has

[31]"*Zanele Muholi: Being.*" Michael Stevenson. *https://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/being.htm.*

never been allowed to exist, nor has it been treated as something worth understanding. Muholi represents what is hidden—through their photography, they have created new opportunities for Black and queer individiauls to reveal themselves in the environments where they feel most comfortable. The portraits of Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta perfectly illustrate Muholi's cultivation of natural "sensuousness" and connectivity.

X. Conclusion

This idea of "impossible" lesbian sexuality existing simultaneously within this obsessive desire to represent lesbian sex illustrates the contradictory nature of sensuality vs. sexuality. Cahun and Muholi reject, or disavow, the expectation that their sensuality is sexual. The fabric of the leotard covering Cahun's body subverts the idealized sensuality of a non-male body. The mirror Muholi holds upon their pelvis reflects back their face denies the viewer of the option to sexualize their body. The senses are stimulated through texture, but not necessarily their caressability. Both artists mask sensuality through subversions of touch and sight.

The medium of photography has revolutionized the ways we experience and remember queerness. More specifically, self-portraiture has played a crucial role in remembering lesbian identity. Done without any unwanted direction from men, photography has allowed for an intimate and personalized reflection of lesbian experiences and partnerships. The accessibility and freedom of self-portraiture offers the artist full control of their appearance, or reflection. The lens is transformative. Through this transformation, the artist can become anything they want to be, without being confined to the identities that have been forced upon them. Self-portraiture can reclaim the body's individuality and sensuality, without the insistence that either one must revolve around its ability to cater to a male gaze.

A great absence of queer connectivity and analysis exists in art history and its discourses. Constructing a new timeline of queer artmaking, and weaving connections through the use of recurring themes, mediums, and styles, unveils a rich history of queer symbolism and sensuality that spans generations. Cahun's photography marked a turning point in historical representation of lesbian identity, and particularly their portraiture represents something far more impactful than the inspirations of the surrealist movement: Cahun opened a new portal into the realms of queer representation. Today, Zanele Muholi is once again revolutionizing self-portraiture, and creating work that inspires far more than just the art world. Just as Cahun and Muholi reflect themselves individually, they reflect a far more expansive experience of lesbian identity.

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