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Student Number: 2011744
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Tutor: Paul Duerinckx

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Queer Art: Informed by the Past, Designating the Future

Independent Research Document Proposal

Queerness, Intimacy & Resistance

The context of this essay is to explore three chosen key words – *queerness*, *intimacy* & *resistance* – and how they can be linked through numerous lines of inquiry. In order to form a question for an independent research document, this writing shall analyse the works of authors and visual artists including José Esteban Muñoz and Kae Tempest (**QUEERNESS**), Nan Goldin and Jenna Gribbon (**INTIMACY**) in addition to Audre Lorde and Zanele Muholi (**RESISTANCE**).

NOTE: Creative liberties have been taken with both format and writing style as this is crucial to the content of the essay and the artist's personal practice.

All definitions of words have been taken from the Oxford English dictionaries.

queer(ness)

/kwɪə/

adjective

1. strange; odd: "she had a queer feeling that they were being watched"

synonyms odd, strange, unusual, funny, peculiar

antonyms ordinary, conventional, normal

2. (of a person) homosexual. offensive

noun

1. a gay man. offensive

verb

1. spoil or ruin (an agreement, event, or situation): informal "Reg didn't want someone meddling and queering the deal at the last minute"

Queerness is synonymous with otherness. It is to diverge from the usual, to deviate from the expected and reject the idea of "chrononormativity" (*E Freeman, 2010*). In her argument *Time Binds*, Freeman acknowledges that traditional life markers such as marriage and children become a nonlinear reality for those who identify as *queer*, thus resulting in a timeline that differs from the typical patterns found within heterosexuality. First kisses no longer happen as teenagers; sex is alien until adulthood; marriage (where it is legal*) is not a precursor to children.

Queer academic José Esteban Muñoz (1967-2013), in line with Freeman's idea of chrononormativity, calls this a rejection of "straight time". It is a renunciation of the "here and now" and an insistence on the "there and then". He rationalises that true queerness is not yet here, and it is instead an ideality that could become an eventuality. In his notable work *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, he writes:

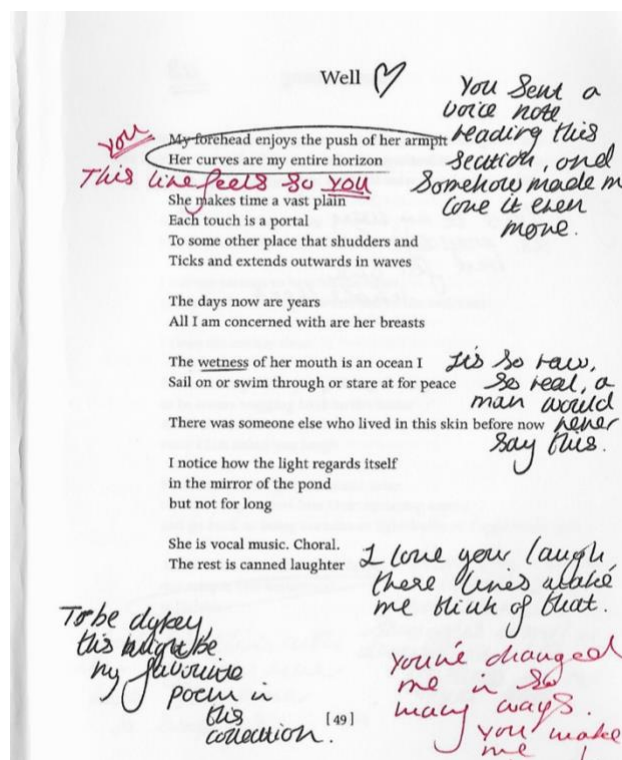
"We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future." (*JE Muñoz, 2009*).

Muñoz emphasises that it is the adumbrance and insistence of potentiality for another world that makes up queerness. He frames it as a horizon, a hope that exists in order to emerge from

*71 countries criminalise private consensual same-sex activity. 43 criminalise private consensual lesbian sex. 11 impose the death penalty for private consensual sex. 15 criminalise the gender identity and or expression of transgender individuals. (*Human Dignity Trust, 2021*)

the normative present - where queerness is still a distant dream and the now is a “prison house”. “We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” he states, before adding “the future is queerness’s domain.” (JE Muñoz, 2009).

It is the comparison to a horizon which here draws intrigue. It feels poetic, as if Muñoz’s goal when writing was to beautify the queer experience when it can be – and often is – laden with strife. Spoken word performance artist and poet Kae Tempest (1985-present) who identifies as both queer and non-binary (B Beamount-Thomas, 2020), has sought to do the same through their work. Tempest covers themes such as class, politics and the human connection, but it is their anthology titled *Running Upon the wires* (2018) – a three-part collection that depicts the end, the middle, and the beginnings of love – that this essay shall focus on. Namely, “well” (pp.49).



Tempest, K (2018) *Running Upon The Wires*, “Well” pp.49
(Annotated copy by J Star)

“Her curves are my entire horizon” writes Tempest, utilising their own relationships with women in order to create what we can safely assume is autoethnographic* work. They portray their lovers’ body in a similarly romantic and aureate way to Muñoz’s theory of queer futurity, both expanding on the word “horizon” and linking it to the passage of time. While Muñoz speaks to a broader queer reality, here Tempest has narrowed it to the world of sex with their partner through the use of metaphoric language. “She makes time a vast plain”, they explain, elaborating that “each touch is a portal”. They describe the days becoming years, only being concerned with their partners breasts and “the wetness of her mouth” that is an ocean of calm and tranquillity.

*Autoethnography is to use self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experience and connect this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. (C, Ellis, 2004)

This begs the question – when Tempest writes of their lovers’ body, are they seeing within it the potential for a wholly queer futurity? Do they knowingly and consciously portray queerness in itself as an act of defiance and proclaim ownership of the time that is yet to come in the same way that Muñoz argues that “*the future is queerness’s domain*”? (JE Muñoz, 2009). We can therefore ask, is there also an undeniable connection between queerness and time itself? Are Freeman’s ideas of chrononormativity and Muñoz’s queer horizons embedded in the way in which Tempest depicts **INTIMACY**?

intimacy

/ˈɪntɪməsi/

noun

1. close familiarity or friendship: “the intimacy between a husband and wife”

synonyms closeness, togetherness, affinity, rapport, attachment

■ a cosy and private or relaxed atmosphere: “the room had a peaceful sense of intimacy about it”

■ sexual intercourse.

synonyms sexual relations, sexual intercourse, sex, intercourse, lovemaking

■ an intimate remark: “here she was sitting swapping intimacies with a stranger”

■ closeness of observation or knowledge of a subject: “he acquired an intimacy with Swahili literature”

To be intimate is to be close. It is to share an understanding and a comfortability, be it physical, sexual, or emotional. Intimacy can be found in friendships and partnerships and in some cases strangers, but it is important – for the integrity and accuracy of this essay – that we discuss it in a queer context.

Nan Goldin (1953-present), a bisexual photographer from the US, focuses her work primarily on LGBT bodies and the intimacy between them. Known for her 1986 work *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, Goldin documents the post-Stonewall gay subculture, the HIV crisis, in addition to the opioid epidemic of New York City where she has long resided. (N Goldin, M Heiferman, M Holborn, S Fletcher, 2012). On the contents of the work, Goldin can be quoted saying that the book is a “*diary [she] lets people read*” (N Goldin, 2005). This insinuates that Goldin is sharing her most intimate encounters with her audience, ones that most people would choose to keep hidden and reserved for the private eye. Goldin goes against this trend however, lamenting that they exist in order for individuals to “*learn the stories and intimate details of those closest to her*” (S Bright, 2010). By the 1990’s, the majority of Goldin’s *Ballad* subjects had passed*, and thus the work now exists in memoriam of those featured.

*32.7 million people have died from AIDS-related illnesses since the start of the epidemic. 75.7 million people have been infected with HIV since the start of the epidemic. 38 million people globally were living with HIV in 2019. (UNAIDS, 2021)

Most notably, Goldin’s 1993 work – *Gilles and Gotscho* – explores this further. The series of photographs below follows the couple who were friends of Goldin’s, before Gilles’ diagnosis with AIDS and in the lead up to his death. They capture intimate touches in the form of shoulder nuzzles, and vulnerable forehead kisses from the confines of a hospital bed. Though the caresses are not sexual, they are glaringly affectionate and loving in a way that is overtly queer despite the stigma surrounding the illness at the time. On the matter, Goldin has stated:

“I'd never show my friends only when they're sick and dying. The pictures have to show their lives. That's why the Gilles and Gotscho series include photos of them before Gilles got sick”
(N Goldin, 2017)



Goldin, N (1993) “Gilles and Gotscho”

Like Goldin, artist Jenna Gribbon works from photographs – but then she transforms them into paintings. Her work follows Goldin’s intentions; to document the mundane intimacies, the physical closeness, the *life* that can be conveyed through images. Born in 1978 and

currently living and working in Queens, NY, Gribbon chooses to paint those closest to her in order to “*capture instants of pure joie de vivre*” (J Gribbon, 2021). She immortalises her friends, son, and girlfriend in brushstrokes that seek to replicate how light interacts with one’s skin. Her 2020 piece entitled *Wholesome Sunday Fuck* succeeds in emulating this whilst also striking a rarely found balance between sexual and emotional intimacy.



Gribbon, J (2020) Wholesome Sunday Fuck, oil on linen

The piece depicts Gribbon’s girlfriend lazing between her thighs in what we can confirm via the title is a sexual act, painted in soft smatterings of golden neutrals, pinks, and hints of teal. While the work itself is not overly explicit, we are able to decipher from the context – Gribbon being a queer woman – that it is a work borne and created from queer intimacy. In commentary for her 2020 exhibition *GAY GAY GAY!*, Gribbon affirmed that “*They are intentionally not explicitly homoerotic; their gayness rests in the gaze of the beholder.*” (J Gribbon, 2020).

Gribbon is merely one of a cohort of new and emerging artists, not so much focused on being overt with their queerness but acknowledging that the conception of queer art is in fact an act of **RESISTANCE** in itself. There is power in simply existing in a space where your artwork has not been traditionally allowed or accepted; it leads us to question the place of intimate queer works within the art world, as well as the purpose it holds. Are queer works of intimacy more impactful than the ‘normal’ due to their historical context of repression and struggle? If so, are we able to link this back to both Freeman and Muñoz and the rejection of

chrononormativity? Are the intimate works of Goldin and Gribbon a glimpse at the horizon of a queer futurity?

resistance

/rɪˈzɪst(ə)ns/

noun

1. the refusal to accept or comply with something: "they displayed a narrow-minded resistance to change"
synonyms opposition to, hostility to, aversion to, refusal to accept, unwillingness to accept
antonyms acceptance, receptivity
 - the use of force or violence to oppose someone or something: "government forces were unable to crush guerrilla-style resistance"*synonyms* opposition, fight, battle, stand, struggle
antonyms submission, surrender
 - a secret organization resisting authority, especially in an occupied country: "he went underground and joined the resistance"*synonyms* underground, freedom fighters, partisans, guerrillas, historical: Maquis
 - the underground movement formed in France during the Second World War to fight the German occupying forces and the Vichy government.

In the mid 1970s, due to the Soweto uprising that centred around resisting apartheid, the term "resistance art" was coined. Formed to celebrate black excellence, strength and unity instead of diminishing it, much of the art was public. Brandishing staunch political messages on banners, murals and graffiti, its aim was to convey the realities of a segregated life in South Africa (Tate.org, 2021).

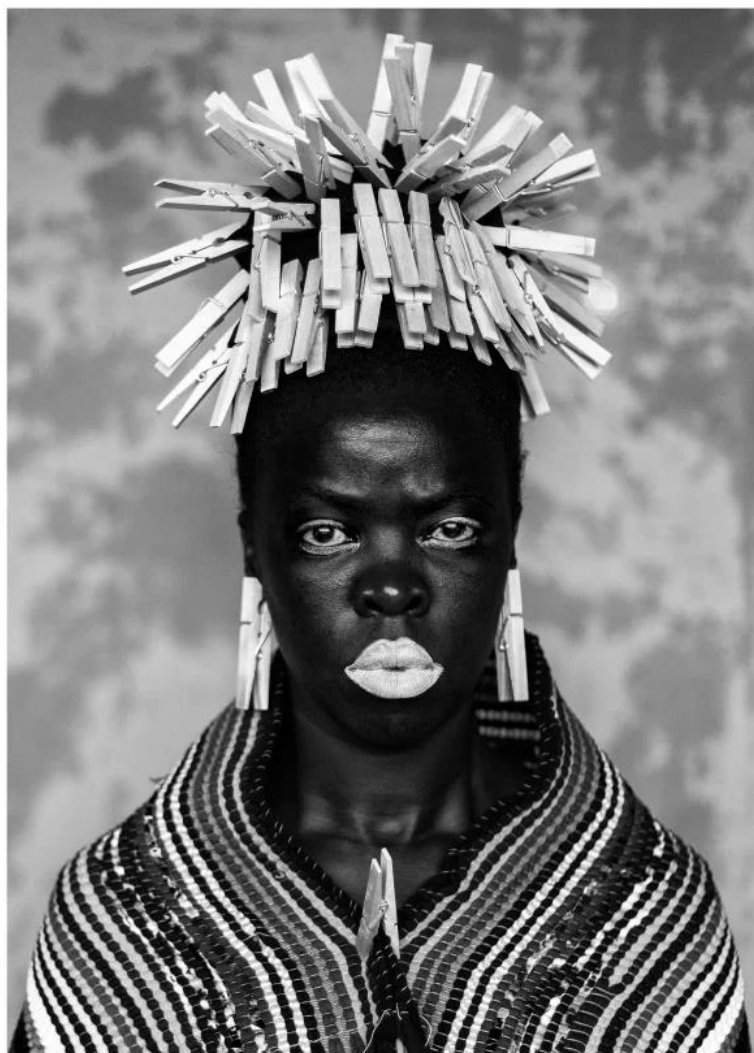
Zanele Muholi – a visual activist also from South Africa – echoes this conviction in their work. Through the means of photography, they have documented the lives of black lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex communities since the early 2000s. Curator and scholar Oluremi C. Onabanjo – writer of Muholi's cover piece *Repertoires of Resistance* for *The Tate* – states that Muholi "*fiercely challenge(s) dominant ideologies, offering powerful and reflective 'accounts of expression and existence'*" (OC Onabanjo, 2020). By producing work mainly in black and white, they are able to expose light and depth in both image and context. The photographs are aesthetically alluring, striking and stunning, but are emblazoned with an irrefutable queer history that Muholi is intent on unmasking. They choose to show their subject communities as they are – proudly black and queer – in order to portray "*lived experiences that have long been marginalized, and even erased.*" (S Haynes, 2020). Muholi can also be quoted stating:

"I have the choice to portray my community in a manner that will turn us once again into a commodity to be consumed by the outside world, or to create a body of meaning that is welcomed by us as a [queer] community. I choose the latter path." (Z Muholi, 2020).

See below two of Muholi's works – *ID crisis* (2003) and *Bester I, Mayotte* (2015). Between both of them, we are able to acknowledge an indisputable stylistic growth. It is as if Muholi – in the twelve years between both photographs – became increasingly comfortable with the turbulence, the *hardness* of their community's histories. It is evident in the unwavering stares of the subjects of their most recent work, compared to the soft, almost ethereal natures of works such as *ID crisis*. Is this Muholi consciously deciding not to obscure the realities of such times? "*The present is so much informed by the past*" (Z Muholi, 2020) they say, agreeing with Muñoz's notion that queerness is to be distilled from yesterday.

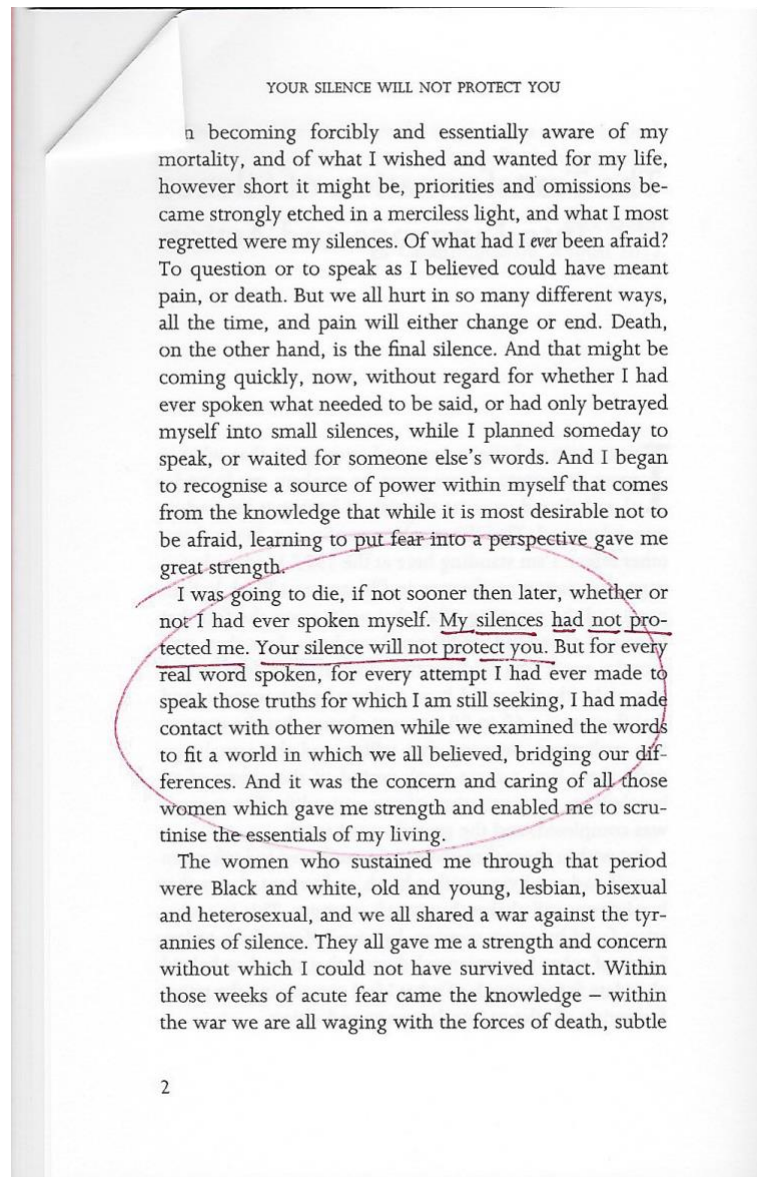


Muholi, Z (2003) ID crisis, Gelatin silver print on paper



Muholi, Z (2015) Bester I, Mayotte

While queer resistance is largely informed by the past, it is also heavily reliant on the personal. Writer Cassie Peterson argues in her manifesto on queer art that “*the queer body, in all of its connotations, is a critical site of resistance*” (C Peterson, 2012), recognising that when one’s existence is queer, one’s existence is also defined by political, social and personal resistance. To be born queer is to build on a historical foundation of defiance; voices must be used and amplified in order to protect and normalise.



Lorde, A (2017) *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, pp.2 (Annotated copy by J Star)

Self-described "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet" Audre Lorde (1934-1992) committed her work and personal life to confronting and addressing issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia and classism (poetryfoundation.org, 2019). In her essay *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* (see above), Lorde writes “*My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you*” (A Lorde, 2017). Though written in the context of

feminism, it can be sustained that this could be said of queerness due to Lorde's multi-layered identity. Lorde encourages being vocal in order to incite change, to unite the disparaged and ensure a future of strength within which every individual can exist. She supports disregarding repercussions and addressing privilege, because without said things, queer futurity will remain as the far-off horizon that Muñoz speaks of, queer histories will not be documented in the manners that the likes of Goldin and Muholi desire, and the beautified mundane works of Tempest and Gribbon will not be *normal*.



Queerness is messy.

It is not linear. It is not definite. It is not limited.

It is resistance, it is a challenge to the normative configurations of intimacy, and it is *messy*. It is other in its approach, offensive in its definition, and moreover it is a disruption. Queerness goes against chrononormativity and reimagines what the future could look like as a result of defying codified normalcy. It is continuously evolving and changing with both societal and political progressions and regressions, morphing into unknowns that are none the less *queer* in their formations.



Queerness is the reason for not following structure.



Queer intimacy is the reason for including personal, annotated material.



Queer resistance is understanding that this is not the usual – but it should be.



“[Queer] projects are structured by keeping processes messy, personal and liquid precisely to resist the normative impulse for cleanliness” (A Campbell, S Farrier, 2015).



See the following page for proposed questions and sub genres that have arisen from this enquiry.

What makes queer
art? The artist? The
identity? The content or
the context?

does queer art claim
ownership of the time
that is yet to come?

"Your Silence will not protect you":
queer voices and their
impacts

RESISTANCE

Queer art, is in itself, an
act of resistance.

why queer art
can never be
impersonal. towards the

"Her curves are my entire horizon"
The body of queer
futurity

intimacy?

Queer Art: informed by the
past, designating the
future.

Looking towards the
horizon: How
queer art can
be a hope for the
future.

Chrononormativity

The purpose of
queer art.

SEX

QUEERNESS

How autoethnographic art
can defy a chrononormative
world.

Autoethnography.

The link between
time itself and
queerness

Will queerness ever
be clean?

The importance of showing queer
intimacy within art as
something mundane.

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