

Zanele Muholi is a renowned South African visual artist and photographer who creates powerful and thought-provoking work that has gained international attention.

Their work challenges societal norms and explores themes of gender, sexuality, race and representation. This essay will investigate Muholi's art and their practices and focus on one piece of work, "Faces and Phases", and will examine how critical theories help their approach when advocating for marginalised communities.

Unfortunately, South Africa can be a very dangerous place for LGBTQ individuals, despite being one of the most progressive places in terms of LGBTQ rights, there are still high levels of violence, discrimination and hate crimes that target this community. Many individuals are pushed away and verbally and physically abused and even murdered just for their existence. This reality really highlights the importance of Muholi's work in bringing visibility and awareness to these massive issues.

A feminist theory provides a good understanding for Muholi's exploration of gender, race and sexuality. Their series "Faces and Phases" contains portraits of Black LGBTQ individuals. It aims to capture their resilience and challenges of their identity. Muholi's photographs celebrate the strength of these marginalised communities. Through their photography Muholi brings these individuals to the forefront and gives them the strength to show empowerment and to challenge the notions about gender and sexuality. Furthermore, Muholi's work critiques the way in which society often defines femininity and how a lot of society seems narrow-minded. One of the many aims of Muholi's work is to celebrate the diverse range of femininity we have today and to highlight the importance of self-expressions and self-acceptance.

One specific image that highlights Muholi's feminist approach is "Xana" from the "Faces and Phases" series. This portrait, Xana poses confidently with her gaze directly at the camera. The choice to focus on Xana's face gives the opportunity for the viewer to fully connect with her experience. The lighting setup enhances the textures and depth of her skin. The image

celebrates her race whilst also challenging the beauty standards society has put in place.



Xana Nyilenda, Newtown, Johannesburg, 2011
From the Series Faces and Phases.

The queer theory is particularly relevant in analysing Muholi's work as with their project "faces and phases" she amplifies the lived experiences of queer individuals. They give a diverse representation of the love, desire and intimacy in the LGBTQ community. The photographers' challenges stereotypes and creates a sense of community and belonging in these marginalised areas. The work invites viewers to question what they may believe and the preconceptions they may have and give them a chance to expand their understanding of different queer identities there are today.

Postcolonial theory helps look at the impact of colonialism on racial and cultural identities within Muholi's work. The photographer was born and raised in South Africa. Their work gives light to the complexities of Black experiences and raises awareness for the dangers of being part of the LGBTQ community.

Muholi's series called "faces and phases" is about reclaiming identity and challenging representation

It consists of intimate portraits of black lgbt women in south Africa. The aim of this project is to provide visibility to a community that is marginalised and faces persecution. By using critical theories we can look into this photographers work on a deeper level.

Representation – Muholi's work creates a space for individuals in south Africa that are part of the lgbt community to be represented in a safe space. The aim of their work is to give a voice to those individuals that have historically very under represented. The work this photographer produces also challenges the ideas and beliefs of the viewer and makes them think about their preconceptions of this community on a deeper level. Muholi remains steadfast in her commitment to representation and visibility. Her work serves as a form of resistance, challenging the status quo and demanding space for marginalized voices and experiences. Through her art and activism, Muholi confronts the forces of erasure and discrimination, asserting the presence and dignity of LGBTQ+ individuals in South Africa and beyond.

Visual activism – Muholi's work is very aesthetically pleasing, but beyond this their work is a catalyst for change within society by capturing these stories and challenging the way society as a whole thinks. The act of visual activism gives the viewer a chance to challenge what they may think and create a dialogue that leads to better awareness and understanding of this community and the challenges they face.

Resistance and empowerment through imagery – Muholi's practices have become an act of resistance and empowerment. They expose realities and the experiences of the lgbtq community. Symbolism, composition and lighting choices all contribute to the message they're trying to convey and the way they challenge societal narratives that have been created. Through their art Muholi invites viewers to examine their own misconceptions. Their work sparks conversation surrounding the ideas of acceptance, representation and equality, with the aim of societal transformation. By this photographer providing a space for visibility for these marginalised communities Muholi has helped individuals assert their identities and confidently reclaim their space in society. It is important to acknowledge the challenges that Muholi has faced in her pursuit of representation in her work. As a Black lesbian artist working

within a predominantly heteronormative and patriarchal society, Muholi has encountered resistance and hostility from individuals and institutions that seek to silence or undermine her work. She has faced censorship, threats, and acts of violence as a result of her activism and visibility, highlighting the risks that LGBTQ+ activists and artists often face in their pursuit of representation and social justice.

Intersectionality and Global Impact

Muholi's work is deeply informed by intersectionality, the understanding that individuals hold multiple, intersecting identities that shape their experiences and perspectives. As a Black, lesbian, South African artist, Muholi navigates the complexities of race, gender, and sexuality in her work, offering a nuanced portrayal of the intersections of identity. Her photographs capture the ways in which these intersecting identities shape the lived experiences of her subjects, highlighting the importance of considering multiple axes of identity in discussions of representation and visibility.

Furthermore, Muholi's impact extends beyond the borders of South Africa, resonating with LGBTQ+ communities and allies around the world. Her work has been exhibited internationally, allowing her to connect with diverse audiences and engage in global conversations about representation and human rights. Through her international presence, Muholi amplifies the voices and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in South Africa, contributing to a broader understanding of the challenges and triumphs faced by marginalized communities globally.

Activism and Advocacy

In addition to her artistic practice, Muholi is deeply engaged in activism and advocacy work. She co-founded the Forum for the Empowerment of Women in 2002, an organization that provides support and resources for Black lesbian and transgender individuals in South Africa. Through her involvement in FEW and other activist initiatives, Muholi has been instrumental in raising awareness about the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in South Africa and advocating for their rights and visibility. Muholi's commitment to activism is reflected in her approach to photography. Her work is not solely about capturing images; it is about

creating a platform for dialogue, resistance, and social change. Muholi's photographs serve as a form of documentation and preservation of LGBTQ+ histories, challenging the erasure and silencing of these communities. By exhibiting her work in both art spaces and community settings, Muholi ensures that her photographs reach diverse audiences and contribute to broader conversations about representation, identity, and human rights.

In conclusion, Zanele Muholi's photographic work demonstrates how critical theories can be applied to challenge and redefine societies norms. By examining their work through the feminist theory, we have seen empowerment of these marginalised individuals, we have also seen celebration of diverse representations of femininity. Similarly, queer theory shows Muholi's commitment to exploring in depth the intricate details identity and not being defined by society's understanding of gender and sexuality.

Through analysing their work, I have observed how Muholi's art acts as a powerful tool for questioning these narratives and amplifying voices of these marginalised communities. Their work is an important reminder on the significance of representation and encourages views to think on a deeper level with issues surrounding race, gender and sexuality. They dismantle oppressive ideas through their visual activism. Muholi continues to inspire and provoke necessary conversations surrounding the complexities of human existence.