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Poethics of Queer Resurrection in Black South African Performance:

I Stand Corrected and *Somnyama Ngonyama*

Mamela Nyamza's long legs stick out from the dustbin, her torso inside. Her body is surrounded by black trash bags that are illuminated by light. Charlie, played by artist Mojisola Adebayo, spins the narrative that has led to this moment: she is due to be married that morning to her South African lover, Zodwa. While Adebayo's character waits for her, goes searching for her, and entreats the South African police to help her find her, Zodwa's body lies in the trash. Murdered, and discarded, like so many other women each year in this violent country.

I Stand Corrected (2012-2014) is a performance created collaboratively by British/Nigerian writer/performer Adebayo and South African dancer/choreographer Nyamza.[1] Adebayo is a well-known arts practitioner working internationally; and as a young person, Nyamza was taught ballet in a rare opportunity for people living in townships (Giovanni 2014). She is one of South Africa's leading Black female dance professionals (until recently also artistic director of the South African Dance Umbrella at the State Theatre).[2]

Starting from the sad and infuriating statistics of an estimated 500,000 rapes a year in South Africa (Action Aid 2009), the work plays on a gruesome phrase: there is a growing trend for men (often groups of men) to rape lesbians to "correct" their sexual orientation. Action Aid reports that:

> a culture of rape is already being passed down to younger generations of South African men. Last year a report by South Africa's Human Rights Commission expressed alarm at the "growing phenomenon of 'corrective' rape" in schools across the country, with young boys believing that lesbian girls need to be raped in order to "correct" their sexual orientation. (Action Aid 2009, 8)

The report goes on: while "44% of white lesbians from the Western Cape lived in fear of sexual assault, 86% of their black counterparts felt the same" (ibid.). It cites a research participant as saying: "They tell me that they will kill me, they will rape me and after raping me I will become a girl. I will become a straight girl" (5). Activist Emily Craven says, "there is a clear sense of entitlement to women's bodies which underlies the general rape pandemic, and no doubt the attack of [*sic*] lesbian women or women who read as gender non-conforming" (cited in Smith 2015). What is striking about this formulation, beyond the shock of the scale of this violent entitlement, is the notion that the act of rape forges a "becoming," foregrounding patriarchal dominance and insisting upon the performance of taxonomies of femininity. As such, the collaboration between Adebayo and Nyamza is an act of resistance that insists on playing out the violent ambiguity of gendered performance in the context of endemic homophobia and discrimination.

This resistance finds its form through Adebayo and Nyamza's decision that they would take as a premise the notion that "correction" *works* (Adebayo 2015 and 2019, Giovanni 2014, and Rademayer 2012). Instead of attempting to understand or explain the logic that underlies this act of violence by embodying its gruesome implications, they use performance to work through what would happen if "to be corrected" could work. The men have raped and murdered Zodwa and left her dead body in the bin. In Adebayo and Nyamza's queer imaginings, the body is then animated, and, having *been* corrected, begins to learn from a discarded magazine she finds what it must be like to be a "proper" woman (Adebayo 2015, 144). The tropes of normative gender presentation, the creators suggest, can only be performed by a zombie—a dead Black woman, stripped of agency and the capacity to live except as a mere receptacle or empty rehearsal of a living body. Under this logic, to be "correct" in gender presentation and sexuality, the zombie body adopts a series of drag acts using costume she finds in the trash (a high-heeled shoe, a yoghurt-pot hat). Suitably attired, she performs "femininity" in grotesque and unconvincing sequences that affirm heteronormative conventions. Phillip Rademayer observes that the zombie performs "overtly feminised movements (such as swaying her hips and arms, and pushing her breasts out) as she 'learns' femininity" (2012, 277).

> They start from the trash can/
> From the black bin bags/
> from the limbs articulating what words cannot in polite company:
> that in South Africa, Black lesbian lives
> do not
> matter.[3]

I perceive, in *I Stand Corrected*, an opportunity to think through Black agency as refusal in performance, via an aesthetic of ambiguity and complicity.[4] From the vantage point of the trash can, these two performers offer moments of what Adebayo calls "revolutionary hope" (2015), staging a beautiful, unlikely marriage between the zombie body and the surviving woman. The wedding positions queer love as a manifestation of possibility emerging out of hate. And yet, I don't think it is sufficient to position state-sanctioned love (gay marriage) as antidote to systemic violence against women, though I don't imagine that is the purpose

of this performance. Rather, in an uneasy, uncanny dance between the zombie lover and her bride, *I Stand Corrected* promotes a choreography that uses impossibility and utopian imaginings to push past what seems inevitable for Black queer bodies in the context of South Africa—violence, threat, and often death. For performance to tackle the violence and dispossession faced by black lesbian, queer, and trans South Africans is a radical thing. I am not suggesting that this kind of work, which stages same-sex desire, is revolutionary in itself. I am interested in what same-sex desire *does* in performance (Adebayo 2015). I consider that it dwells in the traces of optimism that are particular to the syncretic forms of South African performance that regularly straddle genres, mix forms, and celebrate confluences of music, dance, and poetic language (Mahali 2014 and 2016), as this performance does. In germinating the work, Adebayo mobilises the resources of the global North (including the British Council) to develop a collaborative response to the issue of violence against women that affects Southern women disproportionately (Giraldo 2014). In doing so, she knowingly deploys the principle of redress that attests to the unequal distribution of wealth, access, and platforms for stories that are produced on the peripheries.

In their introduction to a special issue on feminist theory and the global South, Celia Roberts and Raewyn Connell say: "theory is normally produced in the metropole and exported to the periphery, while the periphery normally produces data and exports this raw material to the metropole" (2016, 134-135). Although this perspective forms part of a move towards producing theory of the South, I posit that theorising with and alongside performance in particular enables us to destabilise some assumptions of meaningfulness and the knowledge economy. Within this epistemic split (often understood between theory and practice) it is not only the theorist—divorced from the body and, in my case, located outside of my home country (South Africa)—that produces knowledge outside embodied experience (being, doing, seeing). The contested, often ambiguous, nature of knowing can be foregrounded in and by performance in particular and distinctive ways. This article therefore seeks to mobilise performance analysis towards Southern epistemologies. The value for Southern feminism is in how knowledges of bodies and experiences speak beyond the local context to conceive of how "interlocking oppressions" (Roberts and Connell 2016, 167) trace links between artforms and theory. My task, then, is to work with Brazilian feminist ethicist Denise Ferreira da Silva's concept of a *poethics of Black refusal*, explained further in the following section, where I consider its contribution to the notion of Southern feminisms. Its significance beyond the specific context of South Africa is in its harnessing of optimism and the place of meaning-making on and through the body; and in particular in a concept of resurrection, as that which Harvey Young discusses as the unique place of theatre in that it routinely re-performs, revives, and stages the past in the present (2019).

Both examples I discuss have had global reception (Adebayo 2015, d'Aliesio 2018, Saner 2017, and Wren 2012). They are works that perform queer Black life within and beyond the context of South Africa itself, and thus resurrect questions of how experiences of and knowledge about bodies, desire, hope, and subjectivity may mobilise queer geographies. Yet, beyond trans-local portability of Black lesbian/queer figures, in my analysis of these works I will argue that the use of performance modes by the artists serves to destabilise the

predominant hegemonic rift between centre and periphery. Moreover, I suggest that performance and performance theorisation are ways of producing knowledge in and of the global South that may signify more than "mere" data. To this end, performance becomes significant; and the examples I consider are valuable in terms of building meanings, exploring trans-local solidarities, and highlighting women's bodies, violence against women, and the particularities of the Black lesbian and queer people in South Africa. I position the production of poethics as a way of viewing, relating to, and forging meaning from the performative encounter that might, as Denise Ferreira da Silva (2013) offers, be radical in its affirmation of the ethical dimension of epistemologies. On this basis, I take up the invitation to work with Southern feminist epistemologies as a need to move beyond Jill Dolan's challenge to "find hope" at the theatre (2005). Although I appreciate utopian performatives, the politics of queer and feminist spectatorship also includes an intersectional understanding of how race, class, and wider marginalisations play into how performance is made, and how it is received by its audiences, and within that, what a political reading inflects. I am being ambitious here, because I want to see what happens when performance gestures from the global South speak back to the—by now established—conventions of queer and feminist performance scholarship (for example Case 2009, Dolan 2005, Hart and Phelan 1993, Muñoz 2006, and Nyong'o 2018). In turn, the wider project of Southern feminism requires tracing the threads of ideas about race, Black feminist scholarship, and how intersectionality inflects this thinking (Anzaldúa 1999; Crenshaw 1993; Crémieux et al. 2013; and da Silva 2013, 2014a, 2017, and 2018). As such, I consider questions of knowledge production, access, and the role that performance might play in shifting epistemic dynamics. To unfold these arguments, in the first part of this essay I will explore how traces of violence, homophobic hate crime, systemic racism, and historical trauma are performed through the representations staged in *I Stand Corrected*. In the second part, I turn towards the self-portraits by artist/visual activist Zanele Muholi and how they perform Black resurrection beyond objecthood in *Somnyama Ngonyama*.

Poethics: Zombie South African Performance

Before I proceed to a detailed reading of the article's case studies, I wish to both tease out in more detail the concept of poethics and its bearing on my work, as well as to consider in more depth the specificity of the South African context and indeed my own positionality in relation to it. Regarding representations of Black lesbians and queers in the context of South Africa, I am inclined to return to the (im)possibility of what Fred Moten (2008a) calls "Black optimism" and, in response, to explore how performance might intervene in a project of optimism at the "end of the world," to cite da Silva (2014a), that she names a poethics. Poethics are, for da Silva (2018), forged in dwelling with the matter of work (material and decompositional), as opposed to emphasising the "critical" project. Her extended development of poethics as a methodology of radical Black study "considers artistic practice as a generative locus for engaging in radical reflection on modalities of racial (symbolic) and colonial (juridic) subjugation" (2018, 1). Putting it more forcefully, da Silva shows that a poethics tears at epistemic assumptions; categorisations of Blackness as "referent of commodity, an object, and the other, as fact, as evidence" (2014a, 84). As such, a poethics offers a means of resisting the disciplinary silos that can mean

performances or artforms are understood merely as aesthetic pastimes, and forges a value in the bodily, gestural, and ultimately political presence. As I proceed, I see this as being located in the space of witnessing in which the performing (Black, queer) subject demands space, insists on the terms of engagement, and loops themself on critical encounters.

What would it mean to generate a poethics that recognises the violence of critique and acknowledges my (Southern, lesbian) whiteness as a limitation, at best, granting me an audience to experiences of Black meanings that are fugitive? To this end, I would like to highlight the hubris of Southern feminisms if only understood as being produced *in* the margins/at the periphery. This is to conflate epistemologies with place-based standpoints. Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) refers to the delights of existing in the borderlands of knowledge, between languages, modes, and ontologies. I would argue for a Southern feminism that attends to the interconnectedness of the worlds of knowledge production as well as the commodification of culture. Thus, though I am a white South African producing work in the global North, my sensibility, theoretical lens, and interests are hybrid and focused here on South African examples. Nonetheless, as Roberts and Connell (2016) point out, I am always already privileged by virtue of both my ethnicity (preceded by violence of my colonial ancestors) and proximity to the resources and influence of the global North (maintained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy; see hooks 1992 and 1994).

Writing from the (contingent) privilege of a tenured position in the global North, I struggle to approach the context of my homeland, South Africa; fraught, troubled by spectres of institutionalised racism in the form of apartheid laws that justified the ongoing marginalisation, impoverishment, systematic erasure, and violent separation of peoples from their lands. These legacies are aligned with slavery and colonialism of both British and Dutch settlers since the early 1800s. But in the context of post-1994 South Africa, the myth of the Rainbow Nation served to uphold a peaceful transition process, led by Nelson Mandela. This foundational myth in what became known as the "new" South Africa engendered a falsely "colour-blind" sense of sociality (Coombes 2003, Hutchinson 2013, and Mahali 2014), suggesting that, somehow, the rainbow magic of Madiba (Mandela's clan name) would enable white people to withstand and "tolerate" Black leadership under the majority rule of the African National Congress. It was deployed to quell revolutionary sentiments of Black people that sought justice for years of systematic dispossession; but, more damagingly for the country's ongoing development, it perpetuated a sense that redress and reparations would not be necessary for the millions of Black South Africans that had been oppressed under the apartheid state and continue to be affected by its structural legacies. That instead, the optimism and hope of the rainbow would convincingly index freedom.[5]

Over twenty-five years since the transition to democracy, South Africa is now in a terrible limbo, akin to Nyamza's zombie in the trash can: it is politically corrupt, and socially, people are coming to question the rainbow in the rainbow nation. It seems like a timely moment to be thinking with performance to conceive of a move from a politics of afropessimism—in which everything is defined as against lack, coloniality, and the West (Olaloku-Teriba 2018)—and towards something else. This is also the project of Black and

feminist studies that seek to reinvent how we approach critique, albeit from the context of the Americas (Aranke and Sparks 2017; Campt 2015; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Nyong'o 2014; da Silva 2013, 2014a, and 2014b; Weheliye 2014b).

Models of optimism are easily co-opted and conflated with neoliberalism and capitalism. In the global South, the imaginary of "development" or "progress" in terms of the global market is often narrated in terms of the nation and is, in that sense, not divorced from a capitalist becoming critiqued by Jasbir Puar (2013). Similarly, and drawing from the thinking on *homonationalism* (ibid.), homophobia has also been discussed in these terms. How can feminist theory disentangle the obviously sclerotic positioning of homophobia as "backward/uncivilised," within a so-called traditional African outlook that maintains opposition to the liberal Western mindset in which capitalist progress can prevail, and in which anyone is free to love, as long as their money is the same colour? How, in other words, does this notion of impossible marriage, or ambivalent survival, enliven understandings of the un-ease of Black subjectivity within a contested nation-state under white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 1992)? These questions that are raised by performance engage in a critique of post-apartheid homonationalism (Puar 2007 and 2013). What I would like to put forward is what the performance examples help to draw out about South Africa's ongoing relationship with endemic homophobia, hate crime, systemic violence against women, and a culture of misogyny. I gesture towards what that might mean for a trans-local understanding of poethics as a relational, ethical formulation.[6]

Beyond Optimism: Towards Poethics as Analysis for Performance

In interviews about the making of *I Stand Corrected*, Nyamza and Adebayo both attend to the desire to generate physical performance that can promote resonances via ambiguity (Giovanni 2014). The chronology of the work circulates around loss, death, and violence while being refracted through beauty, exemplified in the scenography by Rajha Shakiry (Adebayo 2015). The grotesque choreographies of the zombie bride insist on the audience "buying" the premise that gender, and the zombie's performative gestures of femininity (sunglasses, one high heel, and a dance with the trash can), are recognisable. The mode of light-heartedness signaled by the zombie's exaggerated embodiment, reminds spectators how tropes and behaviours are regimented, but in demanding recognition of the absurdity of this dance with gender, the performance requires the discomfort of ambiguity. Staging the binaries life/death, hate/love, the two performers occupy half of the stage, always directly addressing the audience, in a style that invites complicity and an intimate sense of having been invited to the wedding (Wren 2012). However, the second half moves away from a tentative, querulous tone and shifts towards recognition and the need to face up to violence facing lesbian women and trans people. By the queering of time, and the refusal of death, the performance insists audiences attend to how regimes and structures of daily existence relate to and inform Zodwa's brutal demise.

Staging the impossible wedding as a rejection of the foreclosure of Black lesbian life, Adebayo and Nyamza work through the radical possibilities outlined by da Silva when she is thinking about the limits of critique—or what she calls "the end of the world" (2014a). *I*

Stand Corrected imagines a world in which love can prevail over violence, hate, and death. Adebayo (2015) dwells on how form and epistemologies relate in her discussion of performing *I Stand Corrected* in Soweto, Johannesburg, where liveness and experience of performance always enacts a more fluid exchange between stage and auditorium, performer and audience, than in the more codified spaces of metropolitan arts reception. In suggesting this distinguishing form of relation between performance and audience, I am not looking to replicate a binary understanding of formal and informal, but to explore how context and locality form specific vectors for experience of performance. Different theatres in Johannesburg would be more likely to reflect the formal, metropolitan affects of theatre-going in terms of audience behaviours and conventions. Adebayo recalls how audiences answered back, engaging themselves in a moral imperative to find Zodwa, and interacted (Giovanni 2014). In her reflection on beauty and aesthetics, she discusses how spectators make significant connection with mourning, loss, and their own experiences of how death and love dance together (Adebayo 2015, 151). In the "ancestral wedding" (138), Adebayo describes how the "women embrace, they kiss and taste and caress each other. Zodwa eventually pulls away and returns to her grave as Charlie breaks down in tears […]. It is beautiful because it is sensual and romantic though there is a danger that this glosses over the tragedy" (139). Adebayo highlights the ambiguity in aesthetics of beauty here. In this context, Black feminist poethics becomes a necessity. Da Silva aims for a "world imagined as endless Poethics: that is, existence toward the beyond of Space-time, where the Thing resists dissolving any attempt to reduce what exists—anyone and everything—to the register of the object, the other, the commodity" (2014a, 91). The performance demonstrates how artistic production can address a range of political dimensions—challenging the invisibility of Black death and especially the erasure of homophobic hate crime. In da Silva's view, the call to recognition as more-than-object forges a necessity of making meanings matter (2017). Obviously, performance or visibility by itself does not account for transformation of the status quo in the public sphere; and yet, the intervention made by Black visibility in hitherto white dominance is a shift towards recognition. Significantly, both works I discuss attempt to provoke this shift in the terms of Blackness, and not only in and through mediated whiteness. Black feminist cultural theorist Alexander Weheliye says, "Blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot" (2014a, 3). This conjecture is perhaps of critical significance for Southern feminisms; a critical turn that must seek to articulate beyond differences of nationhood the importance of queer women's claim to recognition as human.

Although, as I have already demonstrated, optimism is at the core of South African nation-building, when it comes to South African arts and culture, it is nothing more than a cipher for upholding hegemonic whiteness or bland culturally conservative nationalism. To imagine a politics of optimism in such a context would be to suppose there is not still considerable inequality, that racism is no longer entrenched, and that gender and sexuality as protected classes are no longer the basis of discrimination. It would also demand that Black queers (in particular) were not living in situations characterised by poverty, violence, and discrimination. There is little to be optimistic about. For queer Black artists in South Africa, there is further an issue of lack of opportunities, little recourse to funding, and

institutional blindness. Nyamza's activist protest at the Fleur du Cap professional theatre awards in 2017 drew attention to these issues when she, along with three other Black female artists, staged a red carpet intervention in striking outfits made from tin cans and trash and walked up and down a red carpet parallel to the award nominees as they arrived at the venue to protest against the systemic racism of the awards (Moncho-Maripane 2018). Although welcome visibility, this kind of artistic/activist intervention does little to change the imminent problem for Black female artists whose contributions are routinely overlooked, undervalued, and erased in the public discussions of "Black excellence" (McKaiser 2015). There is an ongoing attempt in the wider public sphere to generate awareness of the contributions of Black South Africans across professions, fields, and spheres of influence; and yet, routinely, as Nyamza's performance protests suggest, the violence of erasing Black women's labour is another means of subsuming their value (Mahali 2016). In such circumstances, then, what is the purpose of attempting to argue for queer Black optimism? For me, this tension between anger and optimism, joy and militancy, is not irreconcilable with activist positions (Montgomery and bergman 2017). Given the necessity for cultural activism and visibility of queer artists in South Africa, thinking *with* these works enables a potential for epistemologies informed by Southern feminism. To this end I turn to a further artist, Zanele Muholi, to consider self-portraiture as representations of the queer body and the limits of the human.[7]

Resistance, Visual Activism, and Zanele Muholi[8]

Muholi is a non-binary visual activist working in the field of photography, whose childhood under apartheid has resulted in an emphasis on documenting queer marginalities in South Africa (Skidmore 2019). Their contribution to Black, marginalised identities has been staged in exhibitions across the world including at the Tate (London), the Carnegie Museum (Pittsburgh), as well as in Johannesburg.[9]

Da Silva demonstrates that there is a fecund opportunity in theorising beyond the particularities of locations. She says: "Descriptors of virtuality—namely transubstantiality, transversality, and traversality—[…] signal the kind of imaging of the World announcing a Black Feminist Poethics" (da Silva 2014a, 93). She reminds us that deployments of zombie-theories of the West do not always suffice in making sense of Black lived experience. For instance, it is not possible for South Africans to make a direct comparison to African American experiences of slavery, or the haunting of the Black Atlantic middle passage. South Africa's legacies of colonial empire-building included indentured Indian labourers, while the conditions for the Malay slaves and Black people under apartheid included enforced labour, surveillance, confinement, and sexual and developmental dominance by white land-owning settlers (on stolen lands). This legacy is much more recent than that of the Black Atlantic for those affected by slavery in the US and is perhaps more in line with legacies of settler colonialism in Canada and Australia. What that means for performance is that Black sociality is inflected by this violence in a corporeal way. There has only been one generation (colloquially termed the "born frees") that have not directly experienced apartheid. This sense of proximity to history is significant in Southern feminisms: for thinkers, artists, and creators in the global South, to attend to lived experience of women

is to be thinking with dispossession, marginalisation, and multiple intersecting oppressions that might include discrimination due to sexuality, religion, and ethnicity. Added to this are the questions of land expropriation, slow redress for past violent dispossession, and the significance of culture and tradition inflected through experiences of gender. These complex intersections of cultures, traditions, and languages require thinking about place as specific. Yet they return to da Silva's considerations of poethics as virtuality (2014a, 93).[10] This suggests a turn to something other than the real and modes of representation that exceed, moving to a "beyond" of space-time. Da Silva considers this a means of refusal to submit to the register of the "object, the other, the commodity" (91). For da Silva, this is a critical necessity because it decouples the taken-for-granted inevitability of Black death in the face of state oppression. It requires conscious consideration of where the body's signs are objectified and fetishised. By stepping outside of the logic and pace of space-time, the impossible, unlikely, and hitherto only imagined performances can prevail.

What does it mean, then, for visual artist Muholi's subjects in *Somnyama Ngonyama: Hail, the Dark Lioness* to resist the objecthood and foreclosure of death in representing Black life? The figures (all self-portraits) are close-ups, shot with attention to the Black subject, sometimes dressed up in elaborately gendered ensembles and other times deliberately obscuring gender markers. In a traditional seated pose, a figure is costumed with rubber blouse and bonnet; in another, Muholi's face is framed by a shaggy fur rug as a lion's mane; another wears a traditional grey blanket that Xhosa boys wear during circumcision rituals. Each figure is named and archived with a site of documentation. Muholi's descriptions of their work reflects the "performance" of Blackness in a number of ways: the use of hypersaturation and contrast, as well as tight focus on the adorned figure, and positioning of the human as something to be defined and understood by the viewer (cited in d'Aliesio 2018). Muholi uses self-portraiture to undermine and reimagine the possibilities offered by photography of Blackness, citing the politics of race and pigment in early anthropological "capture" of Black life by white archives as inspirations (ibid.), which I discuss shortly in relation to "regimes of visibility" (Salley 2012, 60-61). This turn to portraiture is a site of performance where Black resurrections are rehearsed and put to radically queer ends.[11]

Muholi, as the figure in the images, uses domestic objects and materials as adornments across space and time—costuming across class and across eras to speak to the persistence of Black death, and Black resurrection.[12] Some of the works reference the lustre of European old masters, shifting the range of racialised representations beyond how race was captured and performed by early pseudo-scientific colonial archival projects. In *Somnyama Ngonyama*'s sequence of 365 black-and-white photographs, self-styled "visual activist" Muholi chooses to position the viewer in a returning reflection of looks, in dialogue with the subject as they attempt to make sense of the human figure, the DIY objects, and the construction of meanings. The works are often ambiguous: in one, for instance, their doleful face is crowned by a headdress of clothes pegs, with exaggerated white lips. The resonance of representations of racialised subjects in photography and performance in exaggerated blackface is confronting, and forces consideration of whose gaze is presumed to be consuming these images. Other self-portraits deliberately reference political struggle for recognition: one with a miner's hat signals the Marikana massacre of workers in 2012;

another with tyres around their neck references the apartheid-era method of killing Black informants (Saner 2017).

Muholi's drive is an activist one. In interviews, Muholi speaks of being compelled to document how Black South Africans, and in particular queers, are "scrutinised, and violated and undermined" (cited in Saner 2017). What I consider complex and compelling in the work is how the work deploys the gaze of the Black queer/non-binary creator who is also the images' central figure. This autobiographical doubleness forms a loop of relationality with its viewer that relates to the liveness of relations of performance. Muholi's figures emerge from weights of fabrics, textures, or goods, burdened by, and becoming, objects. But with the looks—simple and arresting—Muholi demands to be seen as human, even while they are weighed down by items of domestic servitude, or global trade. Thinking with Muholi's work, visual cultures theorist Raél Jero Salley, as cited above, refers to "regimes of visibility" informed by imperialism, whiteness, patriarchy, heteronormativity (to which we might add the global North). These forge scopic fields that are foundational to a normative-assumed viewer or visual arts audience. He pushes a consideration of how images within such regimes "react to the undesirable visibility of Black lesbians in the form of 'curative' rapes, expulsions from families, and murderous attacks" (Salley 2012, 59-60). In *Faces/ Phases*, Muholi's previous most well-known work that has now been shown all over the world, the artist shot portraits of Black lesbians and queers—mostly alone but sometimes in couples. It is a project that documents the often-painful embodied histories carried by LGBTQIA people, in which, "Muholi's work shows how [they] and other queer South Africans are engaged with their lives and loves in the face of this violence" (Lloyd cited in Mirzoeff 2016, 290). Muholi's practice of visual activistivism uses the strategy of looking to engender a sense of mutuality, complicity, and compassion. This work envisions joy, thriving and desire for change (without relying only on Black pain) despite the conditions of oppression faced by those reflected in these representations.[13]

Conclusion: Challenging "Regimes of Visibility"—a Queer Citation of Looking Back

Adebayo, Nyamza, and Muholi have created a poethics of refusal that I read as particular to a Black queer subjectivity that is not unique to, but is grounded in, the South African context. In both examples, this is to be seen in how the performing bodies look back. They do so by resisting death, by aestheticising difference, and by refusing to be only in the present (Moten 2008a, 1746-1747): Adebayo's bride who persists with an impossible wedding; Nyamza's zombie in being resurrected from her grave; and in Muholi's 365 self-portraits, by refusing objecthood. In her theorisation of Black feminist poethics, da Silva (2013) resurrects the Hegelian referent of *Thing* in the master/slave discourse. Articulating the Black lesbian or queer body at the limits of the human, da Silva says we need to consider the "ethical-political bases for projects of racial emancipation, which attend to both the protection of our lives and an untethered horizon for our dreams" (2014b, 8). Taking this directive, how could a Black queer South African artist not stay with the Thing that defines their being-in-the-world? The artists I have chosen to consider deliberately invite the viewer to contemplate the violence of being spectated. Yet, in doing so, each deploys a contingent staging of ambiguity—Nyamza's zombie and Muholi's self-portraiture

of human Things. Each of these stagings reflects the significance of self-identification, autonomy, and the limitations of State recognition of oppression. Neither takes the flux between centre/periphery for granted. Like Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981), they seek to produce the status of meanings as in process, and in translation. To confess: none of these artists has claimed feminism in intent, form, or affinity—but what I would like to consider from an initial reading of the artists' work, is how feminism's epistemologies can produce fugitive understandings of performance. For that matter, what I contend is that performance can enliven what we understand as Black resistance.

Such resistance demands a reconceptualisation, or breaking, of worldviews that privilege Northern modes, ways of seeing, and modes of interpretation. I am reminded here of the radical power of breaking and remaking as a fundamental tenet of the postcolonial condition (Bhabha 1994 and 2003). The artists' use of DIY aesthetics mimics the relative poverty of the South African artworld that often has little in terms of financial support for design and costume. But it is also a conscious decision to use garments of recycled goods and trash; the decision to repurpose that which is otherwise discarded for the purposes of remaking the world. In different ways, the artists are working through *direct action* to gain recognition for their political activist protests. Connell might call this a "solidarity-based epistemology" (2015, 61). This forges a profound capacity to connect the specific form of resurrection I consider in these works with the popular struggles and everyday life of lesbians elsewhere. They make use of their aesthetics to do so, which has led me to turn this intention/attention back to their artistic work.

I propose that there is an importance for a politicised sense of prefiguration that has to do with revisiting the politics of visibility. Xavier Livermon considers that in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, "Queer visibility, then, is not only about finding acceptance for difference within Black communities but also about a defiance and a subversion of blackness in ways that are potentially transformative, thus creating the very liberation promised by the constitution and giving freedom its substantive meaning" (2012, 301). What *I Stand Corrected* and *Somnyama Ngonyama* promote is a stage world in which re-uniting with desire, hopes, and the potential recognition as human via the returned gaze is possible. Using the body, and not always the problematic signifiers of language, these artists prefigure a world of recognition and poetic justice. This may be what da Silva imagines as the end of the world (as we know it). Livermon, writing about South African reception of Muholi's work, says "the cultural labor of visibility occurs when Black queers bring dissident sexualities and gender nonconformity into the public arena" (2012, 300). He claims that a South African politician "walked out of a recent exhibit featuring work by the Black queer photographer Zanele Muholi, remarking that [their] photographs were not only 'pornographic' but a threat to the project of nation building" (301). This reported refusal to witness Black queer bodies through photography draws attention to the conflation of nationhood with normative positioning that centres mainstream identity positions (hegemonic whiteness, heterosexuality, adherence to gender binaries). Nonetheless, both examples queer any easy assumptions about identities and nationhood through playful, hybrid forms.

What becomes significant is a representation of *self-determination*. In both examples, we can see the desire for a queer subjectivity emerges in ways that move beyond the formal, state-sanctioned narratives of the rainbow nation—in which the progressive constitution post democracy was lauded across the world, and in which gay marriage has been legal since 2005. Beyond this, the works move towards understanding how self-determination in an everyday context could be radical. This attention to representations, aesthetics, and the public sphere correlates with Saidiya Hartman's formulation about much art produced in the global North:

> The effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible. Yet, if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration. (Hartman 1997, 19)

On the contrary, in the examples of Black resistance I offer, the figures do not pander to this tendency towards obliteration. This is what makes the poethics of resurrection a valuable analytic tool for Southern feminisms. Thus, there is both implicit and explicit struggle between women's (and queer) representations, culture, and the State. The examples I discuss maintain a tight focus on the individual bodies and do not venture into discursivity about the social in a didactic way. But the engagement with individuals enlivens the proximity of the viewer to the subject matter—this is one human experiencing another, bringing to the fore questions of subject/object relations. The works do so by using irreverent objects to amplify the reach of the human body. When Nyamza stands on top of the dustbin to make her zombie bride a ten-foot-tall apparition; when Adebayo struggles to arrange her mic stand and asks the audience "am I straight?"; or when Muholi makes a headdress out of clothes pegs but their looks are mournful; these contradictions between pain and pleasure, fun and seriousness, human and non-human, life and death become apparent.

A theory of poethics operates through *resistance* and *refusal*: the bodies we encounter in these works are resistant and replete with refusal. The cultural significance of the zombie as site of both desire and terror, life and death, is of value here. The bodies enact Moten's (2008a) and Campt's (2012 and 2015) notion of fugitivity. They escape fixity and do not easily submit to being read. From Moten's perspective, this is significant for Black Studies and is fundamental to how we might maintain Black optimism in the face of systemic erasure and violence (2008a and 2008b). He refers to an ambiguous embrace of "the underprivilege of being sentenced to the gift of constant escape […] that strains against this interplay of itinerancy and identity" (2008a, 1745). The radical potential of resistance and refusal is to be witnessed in how both artists stretch the limits of the possible—manifesting flight or resisting singular understandings.

Southern feminism requires the resurrection or recuperation of the radical. If we think alongside the Afro-pessimist consideration of the inevitability of social death as circumlocuting Black lives, then an optimistic rejoinder would require a refusal of such inevitability (Campt 2015 and Hartman 1997). It is where both the performance and portraiture I have discussed insist on a politics of visibility and aesthetic presence of Black queer subjectivity. This is also where I see a strong connection with other queer performance strategies that have deliberately resisted social death, deploying queer time, joy, optimism, trash culture, and fun. Optimism is not necessarily at work in the content**.** It requires a methodology of mimetic reparations in which Black artistic works form the Black feminist project articulated by da Silva (2009, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, and 2018). Poethics requires the *unsettling* of the subject from singularity—in terms of gender and sexuality—a use of performance and the body to play out the limits of representation of Black queers as human. As such, poethics can only prevail in the right to refuse and to resist the grave.

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Notes

1. The performance is documented in extracts alongside interviews with the collaborator in Giovanni (2014); the text is published in *Mojisola Adebayo: Plays Two* (Adebayo 2019); and images of the performance are available online via https://www.rajhashakiry.co.uk/projects/i-stand-corrected/.

2. Nyamza's dismissal from the role of deputy director of the State Theatre signals the "trouble" of a politically conscious Black woman to mainstream state institutions. See Patience Bambalele, 2019, https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/entertainment/2019-11-28-arts-industry-in-shock-after-the-dismissal-of-sa-state-theatre-deputy-director-nyamza/.

3. Unpublished poem written by me in 2018 in response to the performance.

4. I retain the use of a capitalised *Black* to reflect the work of Black Consciousness thinker Steve Biko, who, at the heart of anti-apartheid struggle in the late 1960s called for strategic definition of political Blackness (2002). Nicholas Mirzoeff claims this move as significant in recent work on Black Lives Matter. I am aware this formulation is a politicised and strategic usage of Black that may not be shared by all global South feminists. However, rather than use differences of "race" to divide between what in South Africa was legitimized as hierarchical distinctions of ethnicity, I prefer to deploy this specific term. Mirzoeff proffers he is aware that it is "against convention [but] in keeping with the practice of Black Lives Matter and [the] conviction that a distinction between Black people, blackness, and black is structural under regimes of white supremacy" (2017, 17).

5. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process was one such process that staged accountability for this violent legacy (see Coombes 2003 and Hutchison 2013).

6. This is also discussed by Minai and Schroff (2019).

7. Adebayo refers to the significance of Muholi's work in documenting lesbian life in South Africa and discusses their contribution to the collaboration of making *I Stand Corrected* (in Giovanni 2014).

8. Muholi is non-binary and uses they/their pronouns. Where critics have used she/her in work published prior to 2019, I have changed them to reflect and respect Muholi's pronouns.

9. The artist's statement: https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440.

10. Minai and Schroff point out that such virtuality can be considered a modality of care, relationality, and solidarity that they term *yaariyan* (2019, 34).

11. I am indebted to the reviewer who pointed this out. In addition, Muholi insists that photography is a performative contribution to their visual activism: "because we cannot be denied existence. This is about our lives, and if queer history, trans history, if politics of blackness and self-representation are so key in our lives, we just cannot sit down and not document and bring it forth" (in Saner 2017). In addition, Raél Jero Salley writes that photographs by Muholi evidence "spatial negotiations—at once, they revision archives, challenge expectations about black lesbian women, and review a supposedly familiar visual reality" (2012, 60).

12. Images available online via https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/works/; https://wepresent.wetransfer.com/story/yes-but-why-zanele-muholi/; and https://www.bjp-online.com/2018/04/show-zanele-muholis-somnyama-ngonyama-hail-the-dark-lioness/.

13. South African visual cultures theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (2016) proposes:

> [Their] work makes visible the tension between the freedoms offered by the South African constitution and the realities of homophobic violence encountered by LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning and intersex) people every day. Legal protection for people of all sexual orientations exists in theory but it is ineffective day-to-day in the townships. (290)

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