

ELIZA STEINBOCK

Puncture Wounds: Sensing Stigmata in the Gender NonConforming Portrait

My current research prepares ethnographic portraits of visual activists who create portraits of local trans communities of Berlin, Johannesburg, and Toronto. This chapter reflects on how negative affects surrounding gender non-conformity in conjunction with race and age becomes worked through in drawn and photographic portraiture. The chapter outlines how the project is situated within trans and critical race studies, explains the starting points within portraiture theory, and, along the way, introduces a selection of images from participating artists such as Del LaGrace Volcano, Elisha Lim, and Zanele Muholi. The chapter will also analyze ways in which the artists' practices of collaborative portraiture negotiate the puncture wounds of stigmas, particularly around gender non-conformity in conjunction with racialization.

Transgender is an umbrella identity term for those who may wish to pursue a social and/or physical change of gender and, consequently, who may not fit within a society's strictures on how men and women should look or act. In short, because transgender individuals do not align with the standard expectations of the gender assigned to them at birth, they can become victims of gender-normative stigma and violence. Social stigma refers to modes of public exclusion, such as visual markers and negative traits attributed by the greater society (Goffman 1963). Hence, the visual field can become a battleground for legitimating or discriminating against gender expressions. Scholars such as Jay Prosser (1998), Benjamin Singer (2006), and Jamison Green (2004) have all explicated the importance of visual politics for trans bodies, ranging from the use of personal photography, to depictions in medicine, to recognition in everyday life respectively. By way of outlining the project "Vital Art: Transgender Portraiture as Visual Activism," this chapter will explore the question of how the representation of stigma in visual art can provide insight into the experiences of transgender discrimination and its negotiation through images.

First, to clarify specific terms: in *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker uses transgender to refer to "people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans*-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender" (2008, 1). *Trans* (or *trans**) is now commonly used as a general category for the multiplicity of these identities and practices. *Trans* avoids the direct use of medical terminology such as *transsexual*, which many find pathologizing of their gender difference. "Gender variant" and "gender nonconforming" are other community-developed terms for people who move away from the gender



they were assigned at birth. *Gender nonconforming* is preferred here, as it suggests that beyond diversity in expressions of gender identity, there are enforced and hierarchized gender norms, resulting in some forms of gender-expression stigmatization, also within trans communities. A person with an intersex diagnosis that categorizes their in-born reproductive or sexual anatomy as that which does not seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male may also be gender nonconforming, but not as a rule (see www.isna.org). As within trans communities, some intersex people identify along the binary of being a man or woman, and some also have histories of gender transitions. Cisgender denotes or relates to a person who is not trans, that is, someone whose gender identity corresponds to their assigned sex. You are cisgender if you never considered it a problem that the doctor first declared, “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!” Though class stigma also can attach to cisgender people’s bodies through visual “giveaways” or clues, due to the disparity in discrimination and violence, this project chooses to highlight how gender nonconformity on trans and intersex bodies becomes visually stigmatized, compounded by other exclusionary mechanisms related to racialization.

THE POLITICAL FIELD

In terms of political acumen, gender nonconforming people are said to be at a tipping point. In the political sphere, even state leaders like US Vice President Joe Biden are calling transgender rights the “issue of our time” (Bendery 2012), while accessibility in mass media has been achieved by actors and filmmakers such as Chaz Bono, Laverne Cox, and Lana Wachowski. However, key issues still remain largely invisible, such as how in twenty-one European countries transgender people are the only group currently forced by law to become sterilized in order to have access to a correct identity card (TGEU 2012). Slightly more visible in news media are reports of killings and brutality aimed at gender nonconforming people. In a US-based study from 2010, of 27 reported anti-LGBT murders, 70 percent of the victims were people of color, and 44 percent were transwomen (Lavers 2011). Between January 1, 2008 and December 31, 2014, TGEU’s Trans Murder Monitoring Project collated 1,731 cases of reported murders worldwide, with the absolute highest numbers in Brazil and Mexico (TGEU 2015). Despite increased attention to successful examples of trans lives, the discrimination and slaughter of gender nonconforming bodies occurs primarily under the radar.

Trans scholarship today is largely committed to exposing and accounting for the many ways that transgender people experience the chilling effects of social stigma that has been absorbed into the administration of policing, incarceration, border control, housing, and so on (see Stanely and Smith 2011; Spade 2011; Haritaworn et al. 2014). To use Foucauldian language, policies on reproduction, sex identification, and access to gender transitioning procedures reflect a state’s social and political power over its people’s ability to survive, its *biopolitics* (1978). This form of controlling populations through what are life-permitting policies for some subjects has its counterpart in enforcing death on others. Achilles Mbembe’s (2003) analysis of the

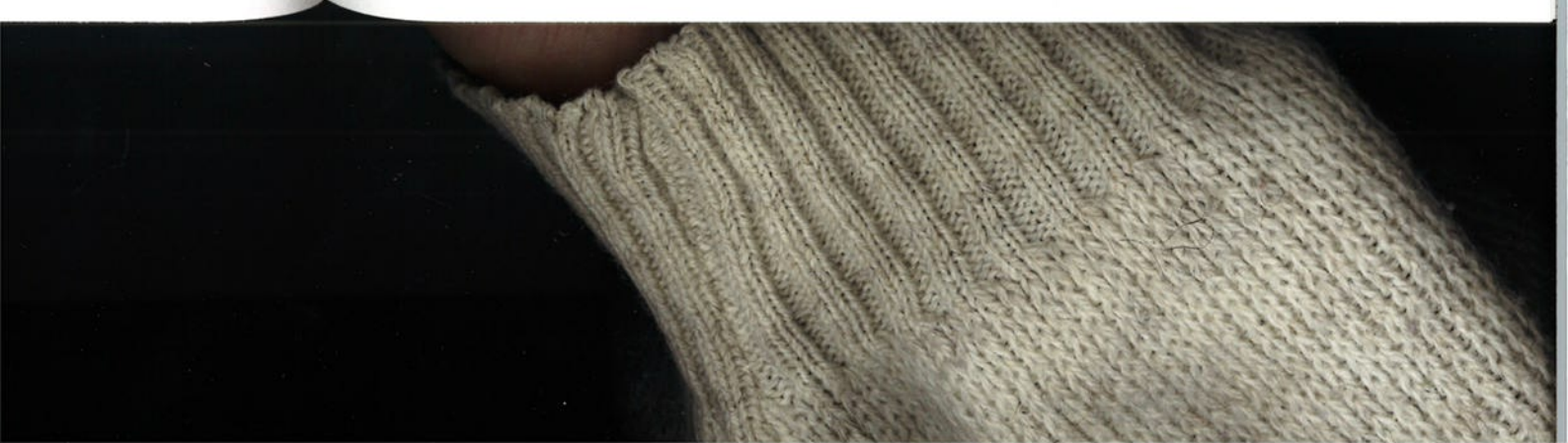
colony, the plantation, and the war zone shows how an integral counterpart to biopolitical management is the necropolitical regulations that mark certain populations for death. In what ways do media images assist in the management and regulation of the biopolitics of and the necropower over trans and intersex bodies? How might different kinds of artistic portrayals of gender nonconformity redress the present state of affairs?

VITAL ART

My “Vital Art: Transgender Portraiture as Visual Activism” project builds on research that surveys the widespread discrimination experienced by resilient gender nonconforming individuals. Further, I conduct longitudinal interviews with portraitists in order to ascertain life-sustaining practices that rely on the vitality of art or consider art as vital for living. In doing so, the project maps out the affective dimensions of the local dynamics of bio- and necropolitical regimes, through studying the representation in portraiture of “what it feels like” to live a gender nonconforming life. Raymond Williams’s (1958) cultural analysis concept, “structures of feeling” designates the feeling of an era captured and articulated by literature and the arts; this concept has been instrumental to the project’s formulation regarding the affective infrastructures that shape and pulse through trans lives and aesthetic forms. Vital art, in my meaning, seizes and (re)produces these impulses toward staking out a life worth living and, thereby, offers a form of counter-politics to necropolitical regimes.

This project’s focus is primarily on three artists, who create transgender portraiture through methods of collaboration and in the spirit of visual activism, who are: J. Jackie Baier (Berlin, Germany), Elisha Lim (Toronto, Canada), and Zanele Muholi (Johannesburg, South Africa). Selected work of the last two of these artists will be discussed in further detail below. In order to learn how each artist negotiates cultural stereotypes, a month will be spent observing their collaborative and creative practice. Written ethnographic portraits of how each person distinctively works as a visual activist will be created through interviews on their political and artistic views. The project thus involves systematizing a combination of humanities and social-science data collection and interpretive methods. A short research portrait on Yishay Garbasz (Israel/UK) and her solo show *Severed Connection: Do what I say or they will kill you* has already been produced, which focuses on her patient, labored practice of working with a large-format camera in sites of intense trauma, starting first with her own transitioning body (*Huffington Post* 2015).

In 2013, the project’s research activities began experimenting with integrating ethnographic fieldwork and solidifying an approach to the question: “*In what ways do visual artists redress the violence of stigma inscribed in historical structures of recognition?*” A three-day observation and a series of interviews was conducted with Del LaGrace Volcano, an American-born artist based in Sweden who is world-renowned for documenting dyke sexual subcultures, drag king performers, and trans and inter* individuals. Volcano was interviewed ten years prior and this current interview was an effort to track his most recent evolution in portraying his own queer self in work





that embraces his gender nonconforming, intersex, and trans bodily histories. Volcano was in the midst of creating a new series of Polaroid 665 photographs called *INTER*me*, which involves self-portraits of his aging herm body (short for “hermaphrodite by design”), taken after significant weight gain and having become an older parent, both of which brought up issues around mortality. To make intersex a more inclusive, multivalent term, “inter*” seeks to displace the diagnostic category by borrowing from digital language, which uses an asterisk behind a search term to open up all possibilities. *INTER*me* invites the viewer to look deeply into the multidimensions of Volcano’s physical and affective self, even the dark corners (see Volcano, Prosser, and Steinbock 2016).

During the interview period, more information was revealed regarding his material practice of using outdated and fragile Polaroid 665 film as a technology for working through stigmatizing medical captures of hermaphroditic bodies, as well as his experience of being stigmatized for his age and body size. This preliminary study resulted in a publication on “Generative Negatives” (Steinbock 2014) that analyzed the productive power of affective negativity from stigma as technically doubled in the processing of the Polaroid film, in which the negative is the final “produced” print rather than the positive. It confirmed the strength of research that includes the artist’s insider knowledge about the social embeddedness of their artistic practices.

The “Vital Art” project’s investigative analysis is primarily concerned with understanding the image-maker by applying basic journalistic questions regarding who is the artist, when and where are they working, and how they make key decisions about their participants and materials. Second, it articulates a desire to understand the conditions of the artist’s political statement and the expressive force of their work; in other words, the *mediascape* (Appadurai 1990) that enables the work to be resonant with a contemporary audience. Finally, this research examines how the media of photography, painting, drawing, performance, and sculpture might be made to formally harbor at-risk subjectivities. This formal analysis includes paying attention to how the image’s appearance in wall calendars, on buttons, as graphic novels, and in different kinds of exhibition worlds may produce varying political effects. This three-part framework is developed for a fairly simple reason: cisgender image-makers mainly represent trans people. All too often in these images, trans bodies are sensationalized, sexualized, and medicalized as the exotic and erotic Other with the severe consequences of perpetuating histories of prejudice. In short, this chapter, as a part of the larger project, explores how visual activists seek to transform damaging heteronormative, racist, and ableist power relations that become inscribed in visual orders.

PUNCTURE WOUNDS

The sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) offers a helpful conceptualization of stigma that highlights its strongly visual and embodied operations, which produce and defend structural inequalities. He places the study of stigma within a long history of deviance scholarship, including sexology, race science, disability, as well as classifications of addiction, mental disorder,

ders, and other social misfits. His version of stigma theory is influenced by the etymology of the term, going back to the Greeks, who considered a stigma to be a visual aid for something bad: a bodily sign with moral consequence. These signs were cut or burnt into bodies to blemish them and exclude them from public spaces; however, later Christian doctrine took stigmata to be signs of holy grace appearing in the form of eruptive blossoms on the skin. At its root, *stig-ma* refers to the mark of a pointed instrument (stick): a tattoo mark, branding, or puncture.

Then, as now, stigma are means of categorizing people according to social identities that are normal and those that are stigmatized, or those people who are whole and usual versus those who are tainted and discounted. From his critical sociological perspective, survival depends on whether and when a person can conceal their “blemish,” in other words, how they “manage” their spoiled identity. In Goffman’s use of snippets from letters, interviews, films, and scientific studies, he points to the painful effects of perceptibility, or “evidentness” of managing a stigma, when most of society would prefer the stigmatized not to survive, or at least not to thrive.

Within queer theory, Heather Love (2007) engages the work of Goffman in her book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* to describe the representational strategies of modern authors who were, in various ways, marked with stigma: not only sexual and gender deviants, but also women, colonized people, the nonwhite, the disabled, the poor, and the criminalized. These are stereotyped people who do not have access to their full individuality, but become folded back into populations of the discredited or discreditable. Many people can relate to this experience of being seen not as a person but as a type. If so, then one knows the dehumanizing mark of stigma, of being blemished by, for example, the cissexist gaze, or spoiled by the racist gaze. This imposition from the beholder often jars with one’s claimed identity and sense of self. Goffman analyzes how the stigmatized individual manages a spoiled identity, noting the capacity to still develop individual subjectivity by being in spaces in which one’s stigma is the norm and, therefore, not notable. This chapter transposes Goffman’s insights on stigma management onto a consideration of how collaborative portraits are a type of artwork that vitally gathers together queer and/or trans communities in a series in which the stigmatizing feature is no longer exceptional.

GENDER NONCONFORMING PORTRAITURE

The aesthetic portrait is a highly relevant artistic form for considering how private people are represented publicly and, for this article’s purposes, in relation to particular social groups. Within art history, the genre of portraiture is distinguished by its tension in conveying a *specific person* and a *general type* (Brilliant 1991; West 2004). Every portrait must render the person in a unique physical and expressive likeness, and establish the sitter in connection to a known, social milieu. In all aesthetic portraits, different understandings of individual subjectivity, and their representativeness, are signaled by composition, color, and medium.



Trans representations, particularly portraits, are key sites to study this constant tension between the construction and representation of an individual trans subject and collective trans subjectivities. Reading stigma in portraiture permits an account of why partially “whole” social groups, like white trans subjects or normative masculine trans subjects, appear less vulnerable to de-subjectification in images than, for instance, compounded “blemished” identities like trans feminine people of color do. At stake is the composition of enough subjectivity to counter the de-subjectifying effects of stigmas that are brought about through being reduced to a population. Examples of such dehumanizing portraits include drawings made for eugenic studies of races and photographic documentation of sexual deviants.

Aesthetic portraits within trans cultural production have a special relevance. They nearly always accompany the self-constructing narratives of autobiography and memoir. This literature combines visual representation to either stake claims in the before and after effects of a transition or, at times, to make a claim of having “always” been there, for instance with childhood photographs (Prosser 1998). Portraits are, in this sense, the visual equivalent to autobiography. Their persistence signals an invested history in portraiture that promises a true document, a sign of presence, and a correct mimetic representation of self. Many trans artists working today grapple with this aspect of their aesthetic archive, particularly when it is assumed that they will include their own bodies, or other trans bodies, in any visual work in order for it to be considered “trans.” However, must representations of trans or intersex gender nonconformity necessarily be the same thing as displaying a spectacular, marked, and stigmatized trans body?

As a result, portraits can be seen to offer a firm foundation in individualism, as well as a risky association to stigmatized populations. A necropolitical approach permits an analysis of this splitting effect in the visual genre of portraits. In particular, Jasbir Puar’s work on queer necropolitics calls attention to the “differences between queer subjects who are being folded (back) into life and the racialized queernesses that emerge through the naming of populations” often those marked for death (2007: 36). In the double projection of an individual subject and collective membership, portraiture walks a fine line between folding trans subjects into life and discrediting them as a despoiled population. Each artist grapples with the responsibility of potentially participating in necropolitical production. Trans portraiture, at its best, embarks upon a high-stakes rescue mission to archive the diversity of trans lives, stigmatizing punctures and all and, moreover, invents a means of collective living in the midst of dead zones.

ELISHA LIM: QTPOC WORLD-MAKING

Elisha Lim is a non-binary identified artist, who was born in Toronto and lived in Singapore during their teens, after which they moved back to Canada. Lim’s combination of portraits and anecdotes is partly situated within the trans tradition of including realist portraits alongside textual narration. Working from photographs or memory, Lim creates pen and ink illustrations, which are included in animation films or comics or stand alone as single panels; these images represent significant people they’ve encoun-

FIG. 2
sze-yang, calendar page
from *Sissies and the
Femmes That Inspire Us*
by Elisha Lim, 2012

FIG. 1
100 Crushes by Elisha
Lim, 2014, front cover

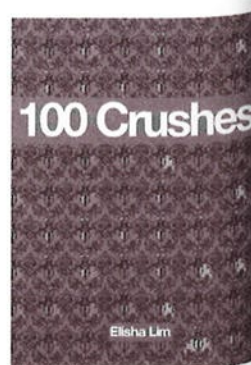


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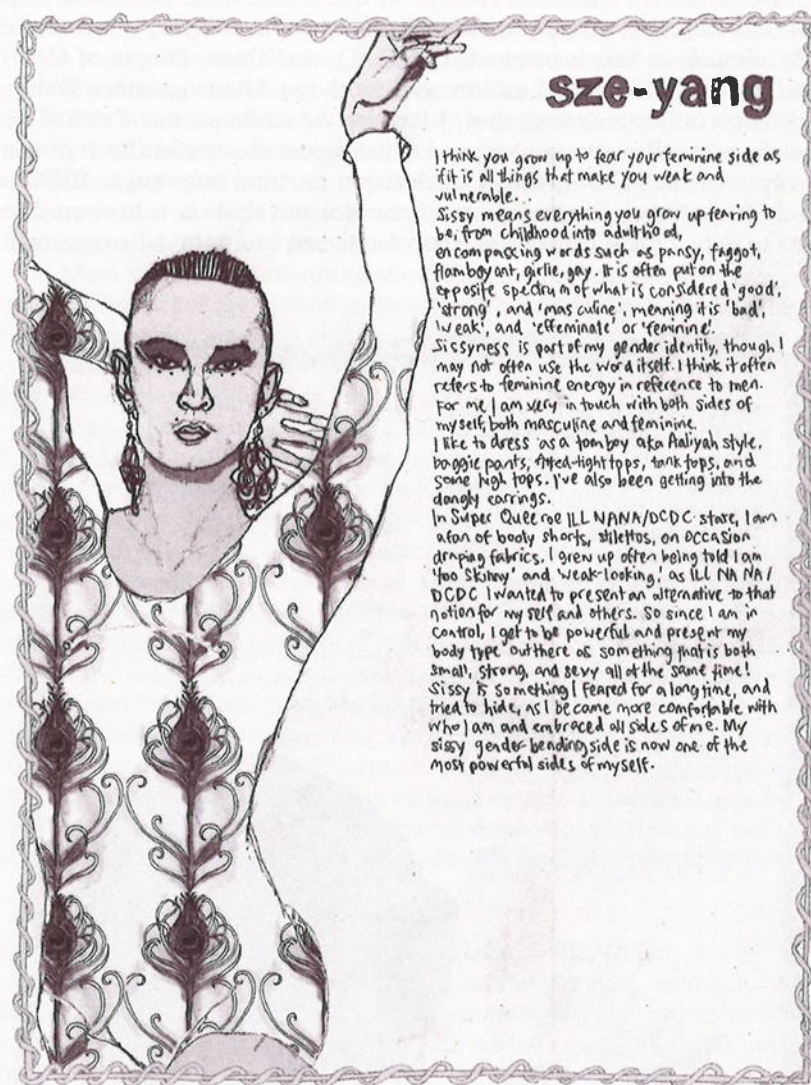
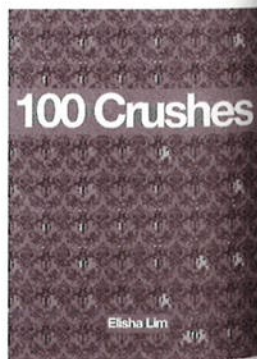


FIG. 1
100 Crushes by Elisha
Lim, 2014, front cover



tered. Neither fully subjective nor fictional, their hand-written anecdotes document their personal relationship to the drawn subject. We learn what is remarkable about this person not in general, but specifically from Lim's emphatic, intimate perspective. This reflective mode of memoir has been developed since 2008 through the creation of: the *100 Butches (I've Loved)* series for lesbian magazines; the *Sweetest Taboo: Memoirs of a Queer Child in the Eighties* that depicts queer people and moments in pop culture; *The Illustrated Gentleman*, a fantasy butch/transmasculine fashion magazine; the portraiture and accounting of heartbreaking personal growth in the calendar projects *Sissies and the Femmes That Inspire Us* and *They*, all compiled in the award-winning book, *100 Crushes* (2014).

These stories and observations on queer and other non-binary systems (of race, class, geography) are all about people of color, yet reviewers rarely remark on this insistent QTPOC (Queer, Trans, People of Color) world-making. Lim says in an interview with the Asian American Writers' Workshop's online magazine that "I feel like the audience that I've had has been afraid to talk about race-related issues; queer identity has been [made] my central issue" (2014, np). The decision to draw only queer BIPOCs (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) movers and shakers is because Lim wants to depict these robust histories of activism and political engagement

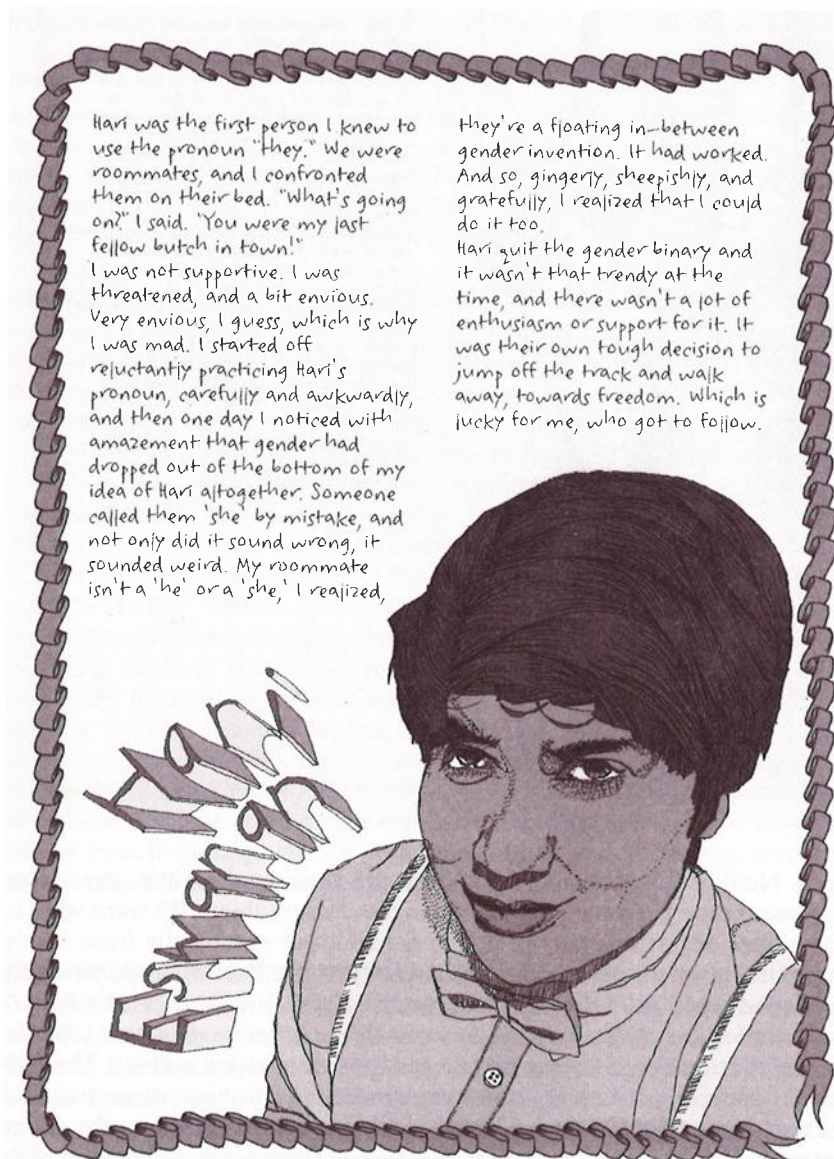


FIG. 3
Hari Eswaran, page from
Elisha Lim's calendar
project *They*, 2012

that are largely invisible in North America. As Riley C. Snorton and Jin Haritaworn analyze in "Trans Necropolitics" (2013), QTPOC representation is most often included in queer media as stories of victimhood. Most glaringly during the Transgender Day of Remembrance memorial events, QTPOCs become politically valuable only in their death, or monetarily valued by LGB non-profits organizing around hate crimes. Lim's motivated use of interpersonal intimacy bypasses memorialization in order to counter narrow forms of victim representation and, instead, to hold people alive, forever, in their memory and as part of their growth.

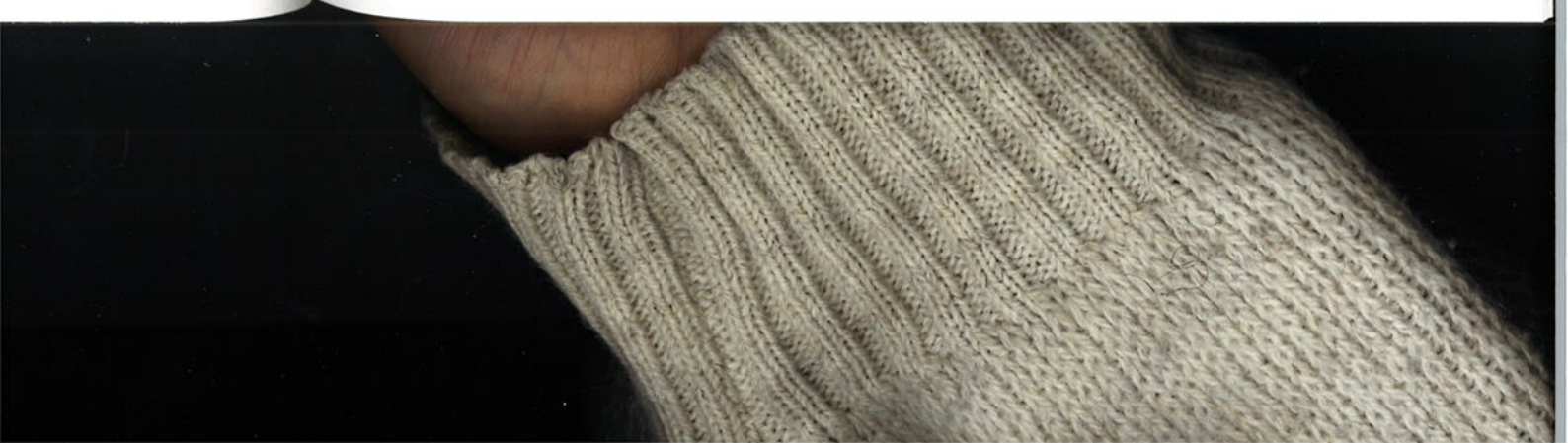
Most stories say something about Lim's moment of learning, growing, and coming to see themselves differently. We identify with them narratively (such as in having crushes) and try out their way of seeing beauty. This story concerns Hari, who is portrayed in the drawing, but the mini-story tells Elisha's relationship to "they" as a pronoun.

Who is this actually a portrait of? "My roommate isn't a 'he' or a 'she,' I realized, they're a floating in-between gender invention," writes Lim. In this story, the viewer is not only investing in a visual education of people who identify as they, but also in the emotional education of Lim coming to realize themselves that this new self-definition might also personally apply, as they follow Hari off the track of binary identities. In the midst of this process, Lim has epiphanies, desires, and feels admiration, while experiencing the blooming of a new friendship. Not only does Lim portray Hari, but the artist also creates a space for self-portraiture by writing themselves into the narrative of how we perceive Hari. The potentially "objective" forms of photography and character profiling are challenged as the sole generators of information by including self-narration and the highly interpretive form of drawn portraiture. The conceivable stigma marks of racialized, gender non-conformity on both the author and the portrayed become blossoms of beauty resting on and nestling within each individualized, cherished portrait.

ZANELE MUHOLI: INVESTIGATING PUBLIC PRIVACY

Like Elisha Lim, Zanele Muholi also foregrounds intimacy, but she does so in the context of medium close-up photographic portraits. Muholi, who was born in Umlazi, Durban, South Africa and now lives in Johannesburg, has used the term "visual activist" since the late 1990s to describe her image-making practice; this term has become a common descriptor for South African artists who are invested in social justice. Her work documents queers both across sub-Saharan Africa and in diaspora, so as to resist violent colonial and postcolonial regimes of non-heterosexual invisibility or hypervisibility; through either perception, queer bodies are made undesirable. Although she is most known for photographs of intimate black lesbian lives, since 2003 her oeuvre has also explicitly included trans-identified people. Her most recent work is showcased in the monograph *Faces and Phases 2006–2014* (2014), published after exhibiting the images in Documenta 13 and in the South African Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, among many other venues. The project consists of around 250 portraits of black lesbians and trans men and women; it is the first ever documentation on this scale by a queer black African of queer black Africans. Muholi's

FIG. 3
Hari Eswaran, page from
Elisha Lim's calendar
project *They*, 2012



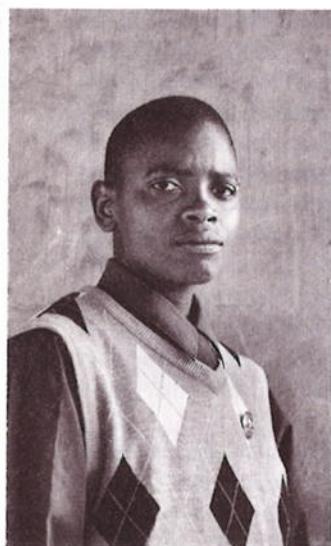


FIG. 4
**Zanele Muholi, Skipper
Mogapi, District Six,
Cape Town, 2008**

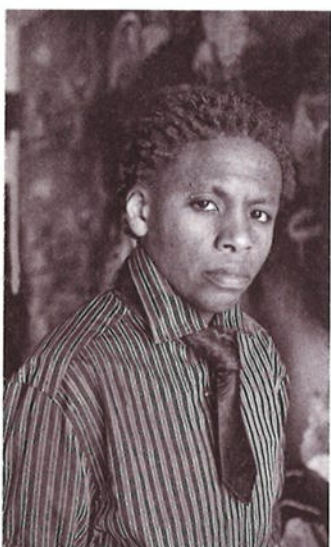


FIG. 5
**Zanele Muholi, Silva,
2011, portraits from
*Faces and Phases***

stipulations for taking a picture are that she or a friend must know the subject, and the person has to be over 18, out, and give their consent. She started shooting in South Africa, then travelled through Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Uganda as well, and visited people in diaspora in the Netherlands, the UK, Sweden, Canada, and so on. In Muholi's words:

***Faces and Phases* is about our histories and the struggles that we face. *Faces* express the person, and *Phases* signify the transition from one stage of sexuality or gender expression and experience to another. *Faces* is also about the face-to-face confrontation between myself as the photographer/activist and the many lesbians, women, and transmen I have interacted with from different places.**

2010: NP

In Muholi's context, the stigmatizing of queer sexuality is entwined with the common assumption in South Africa that people who are lesbian or gay are actually anatomically distinct or simultaneously female- and male-bodied (intersex) (Baderoon 2011, 393). This conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality also leads to transphobic violence when trans people are perceived to be gender nonconforming homosexuals (namely, "too" masculine or feminine for their perceived assigned sex). Hence trans men also suffer from the hate crime of "curative" or "corrective rape" (being sexually assaulted in an attempt to cure them of the "homosexual disease"), a violation directed foremost at those who are perceived to be lesbians. The series accelerated in the midst of a wave of hate crime; accordingly, the installation of images leaves open memory spaces for those who were wantonly killed, died from complications of HIV, poverty, or suicide. If you look closely, no one pictured gives a pleasing smile.

These portraits are all of self-identified trans people, a minority within the project that mainly focuses on Muholi's home community of black lesbians. Some of the participants transitioned during the process, but Muholi also came to learn about the conflicts and shared concerns between trans people and queer women while seeking to document the breadth of queer women's community. (In the coming years, she resolved to make more trans portraits. This resulted in the project "Brave Beauties" that I have been fortunate enough to observe when it first opened in Cape Town in August 2017.) Unity comes through the resulting images uniform production: They

are all silver gelatin prints, have the same slight quality, and all look directly toward into the camera, all keeping a relaxed yet strict posture one of "public presence," force, "I'm here," while maintaining a certain intimacy, perhaps a welcoming look, but let you know that they are not meant to vent a viewer's capacity to relate, "we become abstract," in other words, our evaluation of the framing of their bodies is not the body and where we are, but other people who are not, and a shoulder toward the camera.

Muholi conceives of her work among people who "[share] the role as a visual activist, but unrecorded, but to ask if artistic practice responds to envision a spectrum of bodies is through redressing the code the "evidentness" of the body.

In closing, I hope that gender nonconformity is not just a trait simultaneously depicting and existing as a self-creation. The artist takes advantage of the self and, eventually, the tradition within aesthetic

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are all silver gelatin prints of the same size (76.5 × 50.5 cm). Most subjects have the same slight quarter turn, with a flat gaze pointed directly or downward into the camera, and into Zanele's eye behind the lens, their bodies keeping a relaxed yet strong pose. The art critic Gabeba Baderoon calls this posture one of "public privacy" (2011, 400). They say with an undeniable force, "I'm here," while the close cropping creates a charged sense of proximity, perhaps a welcome affective intimacy. The hard gazes allow you to look, but let you know they know you are looking; their piercing eyes prevent a viewer's capacity to gaze inconsiderately upon their bodies. Baderoon relates, "we become absorbed within them, rather than acting on them," in other words, our evaluation becomes suspended (2011, 412). Muholi's framing of their bodies "shows us the careful construction of the codes of the body and where we can and cannot look"; for example, trans men and other people who are not comfortable with their chest size hide it by turning a shoulder toward the camera (ibid).

Muholi conceives of these collaborations as a roundtable conversation among people who "[share] the same struggle" (Baderoon 2011, 415). Her role as a visual activist is not only to make visible those who are usually unrecorded, but to ask questions about the nature of visibility itself. Her artistic practice responds to the politically potent question, "How does one envision a spectrum of gender expression when visual language is so constricted?" One mode for perceiving expressions of gender nonconforming bodies is through redressing the language of stigma that can act to overcode the "evidentness" of deviance.

In closing, I hope to have shared in this chapter a few different ways that gender nonconforming portraiture animates the political field by cherishing trans and inter* lives and honoring their perishing in death. A portrait simultaneously depicts a single subject and a collective identity, and exists as a self-creation and a testament to stigmatized populations. Each artist takes advantage of the poetics of portraiture, both as a form for reinventing the self and, equally, as a means for challenging an exclusionary tradition within aesthetics.

This chapter is an edited version of the talk delivered on the occasion of the *Perverse Assemblages* symposium held in Oldenburg University, Germany on January 30, 2015. Special thanks are given to Josch Hoenes for the invitation to participate and for the ongoing dialogue.

FIG. 6

Zanele Muholi, *Teekay Khumalo, BB Section, Umlazi, Durban, 2012*



FIG. 7

Zanele Muholi, *Ricki Kgositau, Melville, Johannesburg, 2013, portraits from Faces and Phases*



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Figs. 4–7: Source: Zanele Muholi (artist) and Stevenson Gallery