The Tyranny of Ethnography and Visual Legacies of Race, Gender and Sexuality
Desiree Lewis
Africa Speaks Lecture February 2016
(Note: This is work-in-progress and should not be cited as finalized work)

Introduction

We are reminded by scholars, scholar activists and activists that our current landscape of resistance and performance around gender and sexuality is considerable, especially relative to the moral and political repression before the mid 1990s. Among other sources, Deborah Posel’s much cited article, “Getting the nation talking about sex’: reflections on the discursive constitution of sexuality in South Africa since 1994”, much of the work of feminist academics like Pula Gqola and Gabeba Baderoon, artists such as Zanele Muholi, or activist sites such as Gender Dynamix attest to this liberated landscape. (Some of my work also insists on this, with studies of Muholi, Masondo and popular culture, for example, arguing that South African subjects have discovered inventive ways to perform and imagine gender and sexual freedoms beyond the scripts bequeathed by patriarchal and heterosexist colonialism and apartheid.)

Yet what are the limits of our imagining of gender diversity and sexual freedoms – even among those who seem to be discovering radical new freedoms? And a related question, if – as I will argue - there is evidence in seemingly progressive cultural, activist and scholarly work of ossified constructs of gender and sexuality, what is the source of this influence and why has it been so pernicious?

What I want to do in this lecture is meander in various ways to think through these questions. In the course of this meandering, I want to explore several subthemes: One is: how have gender and sexuality been linked to the codification of race? One of my growing research interests is thinking critically about race as a
language in relation to languages of gender and sexuality. For decades, feminists have been insisting that gender cannot be understood without attention to race and sexuality. It is disappointing that many critical race theorists have not acknowledged how central deconstructing sexuality and gender is to the deconstruction of race.

The second is: how have visual images, and especially the technology of photography, played such an instrumental role in how we imagine gender and sexuality and, therefore also how we think about and imagine race.

Since I’m meandering a bit, I want to flag the texts I’ll refer to....postcards from the early 1009s to the 1970s, which for me exemplify ethnophotography's construction of meanings - both semiotically and as objects that circulate in culturally constructed spaces amongst embodied subjects.

Then, shifting to the present, some of the photography of Zanele Muholi, an autobiography called *Black Bull Ancestors and Me*, published in 2008, and trends within lesbian and transgender activism.

In making these jumps, I consider how gender, race and sexuality discourses have been sedimented in the South African imaginary in ways that reveal deep connections between past codes and signifiers about black bodies and present, seemingly iconoclastic and alternative ones.

I also want to reflect on links between the meanings embedded in visuality and those in broader public discourses. In talking about the tyranny of ethnography, and I’ll return to this, I suggest that visual vocabularies play an enormous role, especially through photography – in shaping how we imagine race, gender and sexuality.

The talk is divided into 3 sections.
The Tyranny of Ethnography
Visual Vocabularies and Written Representations
Scripted sexualities
The Tyranny of Photography

I’ve been reflecting increasingly on how colonial and apartheid anthropology’s codes, tropes and meanings about black bodies have been disseminated through popular media including popular magazines, cartoons, postcards, films and the like. The academic discipline of anthropology has certainly caste black bodies in a very distinctive way. And as a discipline anthropology has created an air of scientific veracity to certain discursive constructions of black bodies. But this discipline should not be seen as the source of particular meanings attached to black bodies. In turning to anthropology, then, I’m concerned mainly with illustrating how a particular academic discipline exemplifies broader discursive matrixes for codifying black bodies’ gender and sexuality.

In explaining the meaning of my title, then, the tyranny of ethnography does not imply that I instrumentalize traditional ethnography as the definitive source of meaning-making about race, gender and sexuality. Rather, it implies that thinking about human bodies in ways beyond what traditional ethnography illustrates is extremely difficult. In other words, there is a sense in which ethnography illustrates a repertoire that functions in the Foucauldian sense of being a discursive regime.

Although the discipline played a central role in codifying bodies and identities throughout Africa, anthropology in South Africa worked especially closely with systems of colonial and apartheid surveillance and administration. Central to this were definitions of indigenous people’s social, political, cultural and erotic needs in ways that served the self-invention of white subjectivities. South African ethnography or volkekunde, generally codified black embodied subjects and societies with reference to “timeless and unchanging” customs.

Within this imagining, Africans “had cultures” as static gendered customs and traditions such as labola or bridewealth, circumcision for men, initiation ceremonies, virginity testing and so on. Culture was therefore defined as tradition, a series of static rituals and rites radically at odds with the dynamism associated with the white Western subject of modernity.
“Customary law” a law deemed to be rooted in tradition but actually a colonial construct, grew out of this creation of timeless gendered customs and traditions. Jacqui Alexander, a postcolonial feminists who has also focused on sexuality and gender in unpacking race, comments on the adventures of anthropology by distinguishing between the way in which the west is imagined as “here and now” and “tradition as “there and then”.

As I’ve already said, even though the discipline of anthropology obviously created knowledge in this way, knowledge about black bodies that permeated popular culture from the early 1900s echoed these assumptions.

The image, and especially the photographic image, was an excellent medium for fixing this sense of static cultures. Ann McClintock argues that photography was pivotal in sedimenting ideas about race and difference from the start of the 19th century. She writes “For racial science, photography promised to provide mechanical and therefore objectively sound “factual” knowledge about racial "types,” and then goes on to discuss the various disciplines and professions that also used this technology, as well as its prominence in popularised media.

Because photography is a technology for visual display, it has worked powerfully and in very man different contexts to codify race as a language that inscribes understanding or categorizing human bodies.

And central to this language for understanding human bodies were markers of gender and sexual difference. Among other stereotypes, the image of virile South African masculinity and of black female hypersexuality surfaced time and again to mark black bodies as racially different. We see this clearly in these two postcards created as part of a thriving visual tradition in popular culture, postcards that echo photoethnography’s imaging of heterosexist black hypermasculinity and female hypersexuality.

In this postcard from the early 1900s, nothing is conveyed about the black body’s situation within urbanization under violent colonial rule. Instead, the image references a timelines stereotype of gladiatorial The warrior pose of this “Zulu
man” is reminiscent of popular imaging of Shaka, and this hegemonic trope of virile black masculinity continues, as we know, to feed into patriarchal nationalist ideas about African authenticity. Most importantly, and as signaled by the bit of written script below, the postcard travelled; it functioned as an object within an exchange between embodied subjects situated within constructed spaces. Visitors or certain residents of South Africa communicated to others this mass produced “exotic” stereotype of the black male body as a signifier of “essential South Africa”.

The second image from the 1970s exemplifies the coding of the black body in ways that began with the explosion of the postcard company production industry from the turn of the century. The black “Zulu maiden”, wholly abstracted from the socio-political turmoil of South Africa in the early 1970s, confounds western-centric patriarchal notions of virginity’s association with purity in being both “a maiden” yet also being highly eroticized - in terms of the glimpsed naked breasts and her knowing and far from innocent gaze.

It might seem that she resists objectification by returning the viewer’s gaze, but returning the gaze doesn’t meet encountering someone else’s humanity. Our gaze fixes on the surface of this face and we encounter a flat two-dimensional expression - something between sullenness and recalcitrance. Certainly not the depth one associated with a portrait, a depth that involves ambivalence, complexity and often something that eludes the photographer and the viewer. She is knowable, and we are persuaded that we know this typical Zulu maiden. There she is: infinitely knowable and infinitely known, with the receiver of the postcard being reassured by the confirmation of a stereotype. This image well exemplifies the role of fetishism. the figure displaces the fantasies and anxieties about female sexuality yet is also caste as a figure that is known and fully understood.

What is therefore striking about both photographs is the way meanings attached to gender and sexuality serve as dominant markers of racial difference, this confirming Anne Mcintock’s discussion of the need to connect gender, sexuality
and race. Criticizing postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Mclintock argues that to privilege one category above another means failing to understand imperialism and the language of race. As mentioned before, it is for me disturbing that feminists have made this argument in their efforts to understand gender. What Mcclintock stresses, and here I’m building on her argument, is that understanding race necessarily means understanding discourses of gender and sexuality.

I believe we can extend the more familiar analysis of racial discourses and the colonial gaze not only by fully integrating analysis of race, gender and sexuality, but also by looking at what exactly photographs do as well as what they mean. In a very suggestive article published in *Visual Studies*, Elizabeth Edwards insists that the photograph does much more than merely convey represented meanings. Its material forms are enhanced by its presentational forms, with the formats and presentations of the images helping to determine its meaning.

These postcards evidence particular presentational forms. The postcards are inscribed. They have been sent from one embodied subject to another to confirm the “difference” of gender and sexuality among black South African bodies. Located in circuits of exchange and meaning-making, they focus on gender and sexuality and function powerfully to construct the exotic, the pre-modern and the spectacular - the great variance and curiosity of “other cultures”, in other words, racial difference.

**Part 2: Visual Vocabularies and Written Representation**

I now want to turn to a written text, and also shift away from the ethos associated with the postcards. In so doing I suggest that photography’s vocabularies, codes and significations in some senses bleed into imagining
through writing, that writing - through point of view, register and style echo the meanings and affective tone associated with the photographic image.

The text I want to turn to here is *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma, an autobiography written by* Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde and published in 2008. On one hand, the book is in many ways a totally different rendering of black bodies, and black female bodies especially from what the postcards reveal. It is a self-representation that seeks to counter others’ misrepresentations with an “inside view” of the writer’s subjectivity and the subjectivities of other one black female subjects. It conveys complex indigenous corporeal, healing and spiritual practices, and also focuses on the imbrication of urban and traditional practices, and how these occur in the context of massive social transformations. The narrator-author navigates her sexual orientation in a complex context of unexpected tolerance as well as hate crimes, poverty and racialised political struggles. The story being told is therefore hugely complex.

On the other hand, what is also fascinating is how the text repeats many of the meanings conveyed by the visual images I’ve dealt with. These could be explored in terms of

1. the circumstances of its production
2. its highlighting of particular narrative events in the narrative
3. its use of certain terms, concepts and analytical frames.

First, the writing process... The book emerges out of the collaborative writing of Nkabinde as a sangoma, a ghost writer, and the woman she describes as her second mother, Ruth Morgan, an anthropologist and former director of the gay and lesbian archives based in Johannesburg. The question this raises is “what collaborative text has been produced out of the interaction between the author, her ghost writer and her “second mother” mentor in the context of a particular market for representations of black bodies – as revealed in the postcards? The
collective authorship of this text gives us a clue about the way that the “author's” life story is framed by certain expectations about what story should be told.

It speaks volumes about how the book is produced and consumed in a public realm where certain scripts about “black female sexualities” and about “South African tradition determine what story is told and how that story is told. It is worth quoting Greg Thomas here: “The really nasty fact that sexual personas and practices are ritually constructed as well as theorized in the service of colonial imperial structures of “race”, or white supremacy, has not been the subject of academic commerce under Occidentalism.”. Thomas astutely observes the way that, despite the eruption of new voices and a new open-ness in the range of contemporary sexuality discourses, there remains a startling same-ness about them; rarely are their underpinnings in occidental prescriptions interrogated. The collaboration involved in this autobiography’s writing is an overt indication of the gaze at what is ostensibly an inside view.

What Thomas describes as “occidental prescriptions” are evident in one of the dominant themes in the book, the theme of the writer’s inbetween location. The narrator situates herself as someone inbetween modernity and tradition, and constantly delivers on the promise of giving the reader a glimpse, from the inside, of a foreign and strange world. While there are many possible “insider views” that we could imagine the writer selecting, what is noteworthy is the compulsive emphasis on graphic descriptions of healing practices and rituals.

We frequently read very sensationalist accounts of, for example, the throwing of bones, the drinking of goat’s blood, the eruption of voices of ancestors as these are experienced by both the author and by the other lesbian sangomas she knows. These are punctuated by the narrator's repeated insistence on her unique authenticity as a sangoma and the contrasting inadequacies of many of the other sangomas that she knows. It is as though there’d been a writerly decision, however unconscious or implicit, to focus mainly on stereotyped customs and ritual as the ingredients for making the book interesting and marketable. It is significant that these descriptions are typical of the accounts of
“tribal practices” associated with the popular fiction of writers like Rider Haggard. Generally, the story is replete with elaborate detail that testifies consistently to the strange “barbarism” of the customs being described.

This sense of otherness is reinforced by the codification of the narrator's “gender” and “sexuality”. Even though the narrator seems to want to invoke a world beyond the categories of heterosexist normalcy, she consistently defines herself in terms of naturalized and conventionally hierarchized binaries – often congratulating herself for always having been man-like and refusing femininity in childhood, for example. What is noteworthy here is not simply that she testifies to having challenged gender socialization, but that her account valorizes conventional hegemonic masculinity.

This impression of being impressively manlike as a lesbian is developed in her laudatory account of her main ancestor, her uncle. Thus, she described her own sexual and romantic relationships with women in terms of her ancestor's heterosexist masculine desires. The tantalizing question of whether the author is in fact lesbian, or the living incarnation of her heterosexual uncle is never made clear, but she suggests that she is in fact really a man, that there are real men and real women, and that she is in fact an incarnation of a man. Other extremely blunt binaries and essentialisms abound, and it is often these that confound and undermine any philosophical or political efforts to convey a world, identities, desires and beliefs that are actually different from those bequeathed by Western centric binaries of male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, and sexual identity as being bound to “identity”.

Equally importantly, it is mainly through marking gender and sexuality in particular ways that the book defines the writer’s racial difference in very stereotypical ways. We can therefore see this book appealing to an audience by reproducing familiar categories. Ultimately the author represents herself as a spectacle, and her strange and different life is seen through the lens of concepts, language which reinscribe her peculiarity.
The autobiography has been very well received internationally. And it is not hard to understand why. In ways not similar from the postcards in the early 1900s and the 1970s, it repeats a familiar images of black female bodies. It reassures certain readers by conjuring up gendered and sexualized bodies and the spaces that those bodies inhabit – as premodern, exotic and spectacular. And it draws on a scopic regime and visual vocabularies that have clearly been manifested in ethnophotographic postcards I’ve dealt with.

Part 3: Scriped Sexualities and the Racialzing Imagination

I now want to turn to texts – both visual and activist – that currently seem to be driving much of the activist and imaginative thinking about gender diversity and sexual freedoms in South Africa.

I’ve been especially interested in how sexualities are scripted, with scripted being a more useful term than constructed, performed or represented because it draws attention to the regimes, institutions and technologies that shape our understanding of sexuality. Thinking about scripting also encourages us to scrutinize the archive that has led to our thinking about sexualities, including homosexualities in fairly conventional ways – as Nkabindle’s autobiography indicates.

I start with this discussion of regressive imagining in relation to some of Zanele Muholi’s photos.

I single this artist out not because I want to condemn her work wholesale. I admire much of it, and have elsewhere written about its aesthetic and conceptual innovativeness. At the same time I have become interested in its contradictions, and have been asking myself increasingly what it is about Muholi’s photos that have drawn such large audiences and launched her international reputation. And also why it is that many of them, especially her more recent work, unsettle me – not productively and by challenging me- but in seeming to echo images that I find conservative.
Zanele Muholi has been one of South Africa’s most controversial photographers, having started her photography career as a photojournalist for a gay and lesbian website and a lesbian organization.

The celebration of black women’s bodies, sexual agency and choice all clearly flag the radicalism of Muholi’s photographs, and confirm a view expressed by black feminist critics such as Pumla Gqola, Gail Smith, Gabeba Baderoon and myself. Her images often speak directly to taboos about sexuality, about which bodies are beautiful, about what bodies should legitimately do, about which bodies matter. In so doing, they define new possibilities for certain “deviant” or marginal bodies’ (for example lesbians, large naked black women) inclusion within the nation, an inclusion which, as a former Arts and Culture Minister so dramatically declared, violates the heterosexist and patriarchal imagining of the South African nation.

In much of her work, the positioning, performance and representation of bodies, metaphors that suggest bodies, or the taboosed parts or substances of bodies make reference to a circuit of meanings about bodies in ways that connote freedom, excess, transgression.

Muholi is an astute and attentive image-maker, alert to the repercussions of positioning, performing and representing bodies, especially black female bodies, including her own, in certain ways. Consequently, the performative dimensions of her work are central to her photos’ meanings, with her photos allowing viewers to see or imagine unknown freedoms, freedoms that lie beyond not only the obviously repressive regulation of race, sexuality and gender, but also beyond those that limit how aesthetic, sexual and political freedoms should legitimately be defined. It is these illicit freedoms that become so threatening in imagining a “new South Africa”. It is also these illicit freedoms that find resonance among a global audience that looks idealistically to South Africa as the contemporary source of political transformation.

At the same time that many photos clearly challenges the homophobic, patriarchal depictions, many do not entirely overturn or transcend black female
bodies in conservative imagining. To me, there is evidence of this in many of her “Faces and Phases” series, which represent the black lesbians and transmen she has met as an activist. These portraits are meant to function as political statements and as an archive: they portray the dignity and courage of certain lesbians and transmen and also constitute a record of a marginalized community which is made visible in a heterosexist and patriarchal and racist public sphere. Muholi writes:

In the face of all the challenges our community encounters daily, I embarked on a journey of visual activism to ensure that there is black queer visibility. *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.

This photograph is from the faces and phases series.

The largeness of the subject – relative to standards of naked femininity generally deemed acceptable for public display – conjures up echoes of the surfeit of flesh that so horrified and fascinating audiences of Sara Baartman’s display centuries ago, and that also, it would seem, outraged and continues to outrage several generations of African nationalists. As one Artthrob reviewer puts it, photographs such as these carry the “risk of hearing, seeing and crossing to this…unfamiliar territory” (Gabi Ngcobo, 2006). The ‘unfamiliar territory’ that the viewer risks entering is the “discursively inscribed” darkness, lewdness, sexual aberration historically signified by the black female body.

The nakedness of black subjects, and of women in particular continues to resound in signifying the antithesis of modernity, civility, or the dignity of the collective.
While all this can be seen as powerfully subversive, I am also troubled by patterns that seem neither ironic nor critical of stereotypes about black female sexuality.

As in the case of the second postcard image, the viewer’s gaze is directed at the provocatively tilted head, the nakedness of the body beneath the stole or cloak, and the flambouyant stole, itself a fetishized object. All this marks the sexuality of the subject in very predictable ways. And it becomes possible to read and appreciate this image without any critical insight into a racist legacy of imagining black women’s bodies. What is it that audiences see, value and recognize in Muholi’s work, therefore? Is it always her ironic or critical reappraisal of raced and sexed bodies, or could it also be that what she shows them is in fact very familiar, very predictable and very known?

So as with the postcard image, where the fetishized “Zulu maiden” enacts a racist and patriarchal fantasy, so does this photograph also fetishize the black female body even as it also critically talks back to stereotypes and taboos.

Many photos in the faces and phases seris are of transmen.

And this image is one of them.

As is the case with the previous photograph, I find this one contradictory. On one hand, Muholi affirms the right of her subject to a personal choice of gender performance. Yet the “personal choice” is, of course, not free from a history of socialization about which gender performances matter and which are powerful. Nor are these choices made in the absence of the individual’s investment in power and authority deriving from certain choices.
In the case of the performance conveyed by this posture, facial expression and dress, the gender being confirmed and rehearsed is that of a recognizably streetwise, aggressive hegemonic South African masculinity, the kind of masculinity associated with power and heteropatriarchal dominance in many South African contexts.

While it is important – as Judith Halberstam argues – that butch performance and female masculinities should be seen in nuanced ways, it is noteworthy that the performance associated with this image has been linked to hegemonic masculine behaviour that includes violence, aggression and the overt exercise of power over women and certain men. It is hard, then, to celebrate performances such as these as female masculine alternatives to male masculinity.

I have a similar difficulty with dominant patterns of lesbian self-styling. An increasingrly influential form of self-definition for many black lesbians is the image of the hyper-butch lesbian, soccer-playing, boxing and performing an aggressive streetwise masculinity in terms of dress and gestures. This has often involved the kinds of dynamics associated with violent heterosexual relationships – high rates of domestic violence and spousal abuse, for example, with the evidence and action by organizations like Triangle testifying to these forms of heterosexist violence in lesbian relationships. The reasons for this are of course complex. Hegemonic militarised masculinities and violence in South Africa have a long history under apartheid. On one level, then, the naturalising of aggressive masculinities in South Africa’s violent history has helped to shape butch identities as violent hypermasculine ones. But to re-invoke my previous comments on the
power of the image, I also believe that the ubiquitous visual images of South African hypermasculinity continues to offer an influential resource for this form of lesbian self-identification.

It is noteworthy that a popular form of self-styling among black lesbians is the dress style associated with young men who have recently undergone circumcision and, after the rite, wear a style of dress associated with men in the fifties. As an elaborate and very secretive rite of passage into manhood, a rite of passage that has been much mythologised and exoticised in ethnographic studies, the popularity of this dress testifies to the extent to which black lesbians may be turning to an archive provided by anthropology and its images in their performances of identity. This performance might of course also be considered ironic, defiant and subversive. What remains noteworthy, however, is the meticulous emulation of the bodies of circumcised men.

The glorification of hypermasculinity -- not as butch performance and subversion but as aspirational to hegemonic masculinity-- is also evident in certain current trends around transgender politics. This is especially evident in the transgender organisation, GenderDynamiX. Because this is the only transgender organisation on the African continent, it is playing a very influential role regionally at present. In a recent issue of a South African feminist journal, Jean Prinsloo writes about how transmen negotiate their sexed and gendered identities on the organisation’s online site, “Boy Talk”. Prinsloo argues that their exchanges are “indicative of attitudes and behaviours
associated with hegemonic masculinity” and cites among their jokes one stating that the new t-shirts he always wears are “what I’ve got my wife for”.

I have ended with this glimpse at lesbian and transgender identities because it seems to me crucial to reflect on how popularized knowledge drives behavior and action associated with marginal and subversive groups, yet replicates remarkably “mainstream” norms. While we have reason to celebrate the innovativeness and radicalism of representations and performances of gender and sexuality in the present, we also need to pay ongoing attention to how race, gender and sexuality continue to function as organizing scripts in imagining who we are and who we could be.