



Zanele Muholi 13 Oct. 2012 in Firenze,
Italy © Zanele Muholi

An Interview with Zanele Muholi

Íde
Corley

Zanele Muholi is a photographer and visual activist, researcher, scholar-teacher and self-described 'insider' within South Africa's black lesbian community. She was born in 1972 and raised in Umlazi township in KwaZulu-Natal. During her youth, she had a number of occasional jobs as a hairstylist, factory labourer and receptionist. She began taking photographs informally at events and parties to challenge the notion within Zulu culture that the act of taking a photograph was the prerogative of men and also because she wanted to assert her right to record her own life (Muholi 14).

At the age of nineteen, Muholi attended a course at the Market Photo Workshop established in Johannesburg by famed photographer David Goldblatt to provide training and skills to young and economically marginalised photographers (*ibid*). She was already deeply involved in local LGBT activism and women's organisations and began transforming herself from a journalist and human rights activist into an artist and visual activist (*ibid*). She held her first solo exhibition, *Visual Sexuality*, at Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2004 and has since had numerous successful solo exhibitions in South Africa and around the world, including *Only Half the Picture* (2006), *Being* (2007), *Massah and Mina(h)* (2008), *Faces and Phases* (2009), *Indawo Yami* (2010) and *Of Love and Loss* (2014). Her best known work is *Faces and Phases*, a series of portraits which explores the ambiguities of sexual identity and the act of passing (see Thomas); it was exhibited at the twenty-ninth São Paulo Biennale in 2010, *Documenta 13* in 2012 and in the South African Pavilion at the fifty-fifth Venice Biennale in 2013. Her work has also been concerned with mourning and memorialising the victims of anti-homosexual violence and murder within the LGBT community in South Africa.

In 2002, Muholi co-founded the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW), an NGO dedicated to providing social space and services, including education and counselling, to black lesbians situated within marginalised communities, including many who had been targets of anti-homosexual violence and abuse. Since 2007,

she has also facilitated workshops to provide photographic training and skills to other black lesbians and queers. In 2009, her photographs became the focus of a national debate about homophobia, freedom of expression and same-sex rights when the South African Minister of Culture, Lulu Xingwana, notoriously walked out of an exhibition of women artists at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, declaiming them as 'immoral', 'offensive' and 'against nation-building' (see Van Wyck *np*). She has frequently been the target of disapprobation and various forms of censorship; in 2012, for example, a large amount of photographic data was stolen from her Cape Town flat during a robbery while other valuables were left behind. However, Muholi continues to work, travel, lecture and exhibit her art.

In 2009, she established *Inkanyiso*, a multi-media internet platform for disseminating visual histories, skills and training among LGBTI communities. The project was especially targeted towards aspiring artists who work with photography, film, visual arts and multi-media and now represents more than thirty individuals.

She is the recipient of numerous prestigious awards and honours including, in 2013, the Fine Prize for an emerging artist at the Carnegie International, the Prince Claus Award and the Index on Censorship/Freedom of Expression Award for Art. In 2013, she was made Honorary Professor at the University of the Arts/Hochschule für Kunst, Bremen and named as one of Foreign Policy's Global Thinkers of 2013.

This conversation took place over the course of two hours via Skype on 22 March 2014 when Muholi was visiting Berlin and Corley was in Dublin.

Íde Corley Zanele, a number of commentators have compared your work to that of W E B Du Bois, who commissioned photographs of African Americans for the Paris exhibition in 1900.

Zanele Muholi No, no! I have mentioned that; it's not the other way around. I have said it, because some individuals say, 'Have you seen August Sander's work?' I had to rectify that problem and say, 'No, no, no! It's not about August



Asanda Fanti. © Zanele Muholi, reproduced with her permission

Sander. Let's start a different tune.' When I was at Autograph – an exhibition space which a friend invited me to see in London in 2009 or 2010 – I discovered the work of Du Bois.¹ I'd already started working on *Faces and Phases* in 2006, this particular project dedicated to my friend, Busi.² And the person whose work almost connects, looking at the subject matter of race and gender, and marginalised people and exclusions, is Du Bois, a scholar who commissioned photographers to do a series, later known as *Paris Photo Album*, looking at Negroes in America. I am looking at black lesbians and transpeople in South Africa at the height of hate crimes whereas he was dealing with a space that was racist.

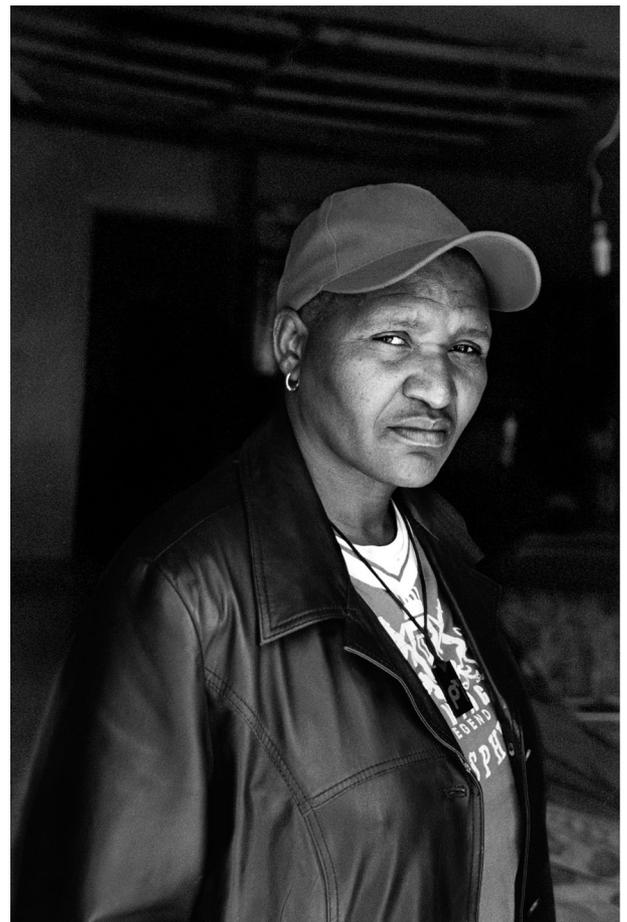
ÍC A key issue for Du Bois was the collaboration, or self-presentation, of the subjects of the photographs. Can you tell me how you go about forming relationships with people so that they will allow you to photograph them and participate in generating the image?

ZM Yes. Well, I don't feel comfortable with 'the subject'. In my world and my work, I call each and every individual a participant. It means that people stop what they are doing and agree to stand in front of me. That is participation. You have taken an effort to be there because you feel that you need to be seen.

Also nobody in the photographs is in the closet. I'm clear that I'm photographing people who identify as black

and as lesbians, if not, as transpeople. And it happens that they are my friends or my friend's friends, or my girlfriends, or my ex-girlfriend's former, or some of my ex-girlfriends ... so we are a family. Every person knows the next person and we are connected as human beings before our sexuality. So, to access the spaces and the people, you need to rely on the next person. I have to persuade people and convince them, so they understand my intentions. The whole point is for us to be marked in South African history and beyond. And also to give hope to those who might think that they are alone ... to know that actually there are many of us.

We are talking about South Africa celebrating queer lives. And we are talking about South Africa moving towards twenty years of democracy. How do you do this so that whoever comes twenty years after us – remember, people will still be coming out in 2040, in 2050 – also gets the picture? And people will still be coming out in 2060, but differently, you know. Maybe, for instance, the technology used by those individuals will be different. So we use the materials that we have now to inform the next generation, so they will know about us in the same way as we now read *The History of Sexuality* and reference Foucault or talk about the individuals who have had an impact on our lives — Audre Lorde, Pat Parker or June Jordan, for instance. We need icons from the African continent. Who are we referencing from Africa? You'll find there are a lot of



Funeka Soldaat. © Zanele Muholi, reproduced with her permission

theorists, a lot of philosophers, but there are few visual activists who speak from this standpoint.

IC And is visual activism important because it speaks back to the communities you are representing? Or is it because a photograph provides information more directly than a text?

ZM I like visual content very much, even though it has its own disadvantages because people who are visually impaired can't have access to the materials. But I'm talking about what you see. A right to see. A visual right. Visuals are important because you see. And it doesn't matter whether you speak English and I speak Zulu, or I speak Xhosa and another person speaks Portuguese, black lesbians exist everywhere. Can we have visuals that speak to lesbian realities, regardless of the fact that black lesbians in Senegal speak French or black lesbians in Mozambique speak Portuguese? We are speaking of spaces that were previously colonised, but homophobia is now a new form of colonising people's minds and depressing them — of affecting their spaces. We are talking about the emotional pain of not seeing people like you and thinking you are alone. And the physical pain that some of us, as you know, have witnessed. And the murder of black lesbians.

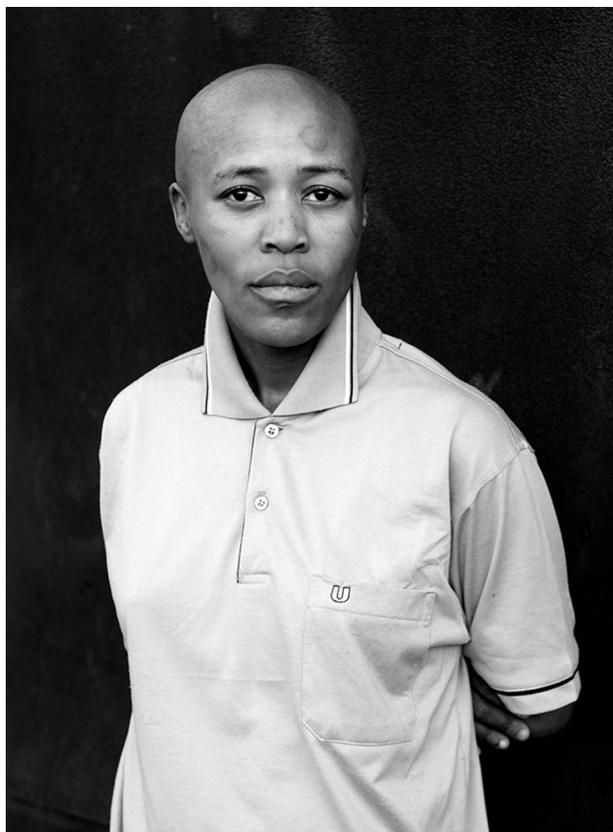
You can speak of visuals as historical documents or as activist documents, and of visuals used by health workers — if a person is raped or you need to talk about reproductive rights — and of visuals which say, 'This is



Kebarileng Sebetoane. © Zanele Muholi, reproduced with her permission

Africa. These are the people of Africa.' Visuals that speak to Africans. You can speak of these documents beyond human rights platforms but also as human rights, in a personal sense, as the right to express or see yourself or your likeness as a part of you or your community. So you have no language, but the visual is so universal — it speaks volumes. Without your being in Africa now, we are discussing these visuals. That's imagination! The imaginative imagery of a people currently existing in South Africa!

IC I noticed that, in the images you sent me showing the wedding of Ayanda Magoloza and Nhlanhla Moremi,³ the whole community was in the picture, whereas in much of your earlier work, you focus on lesbians or transmen exclusively and there seemed to be exclusions to the extent that there weren't any men in the pictures, or white transmen, for instance. So you were arguably creating similarities as you were populating the visual realm with images of marginalised individuals. But Michel Foucault claimed that, by assuming a sexual identity and a particular style of embodiment, a person could be easily recognised. And while identity allows us to identify and differentiate people, he claimed it could also be used to segregate or discriminate against them. Is it possible that, by creating communities or by making them recognisable, you might also be rendering them vulnerable to regulation or



Millicent Gaika. © Zanele Muholi, reproduced with her permission



Refiloe Fifi Pitso. © Zanele Muholi, reproduced with her permission

discrimination? Is there a relationship between the visual emergence, or new visibility, of LGBT communities in South Africa and the backlash against those same communities, do you think?

ZM You know, you are talking about a community that was previously disadvantaged in so many ways and that is still disadvantaged; a community that was racialised and put at the margins by past regimes. And even though there were many other visual activists who came before me, who were fighting the apartheid system in South Africa specifically and who happened to be men, they looked at specifics, either at the workplace and how the workers were treated, at the landscape in general or at how the police treated black people. And you are speaking of a South Africa where you have white lesbians, Indian lesbians, coloured lesbians and black lesbians. I have access to the black lesbian community and to the black transcommunity. But if you look at South African history, you will definitely get access to images of white lesbians and white homosexuals, who lived way before me; you are speaking of groups who had access to photography way before us. And, because black people may have their own beliefs, how their images are treated is important. So I keep on saying, I'm one of us, not one of them; I'm not speaking from the outside in. I'm speaking from the inside out.

We need to re-think humanisation; humanisation is personal. This is me trying to confront issues of invisibility in every true sense. You can't just encapsulate everything and lump everything together. You need to start from one point. This is work that has been done over a period of time – painfully – where I am questioning and have also been questioned. And where it's even difficult to embark on a project without thinking about working hard for it. Before even asking, 'Should I photograph this?', I needed to have a proper camera. And I needed to have the space to have the work produced or processed. And I had to go to school and learn how to produce photos and process images — all this starting from self-taught! Does that respond to your question?

IC Yes, it does. It makes a lot of sense.

You've been thinking ahead about the work your photographs might do in ten, twenty, fifty years from now. If you have a sense that there is a need for a history, is it because you are not able to find one? Have you looked at oral histories? Or looked for records of historical same-sex practices among black women in South Africa?

ZM There are lots of texts that speak about sexualities in Africa, but there isn't much visual history. If there is a visual history of African women or of sexualities in Africa, you find



Sinenhlanhla Lunga. © Zanele Muholi, reproduced with her permission

a lot of masks. And when you think of the visual activists – Ernest Cole, David Goldblatt, Peter Magubane and Alf Kumalo – these men made it possible for us to articulate a South African landscape in a gendered way. Because I'm talking about men accessing spaces, holding cameras, documenting South African history, putting their lives on the line, going out there to document the history of South Africa under apartheid. How do you connect their work with what I'm doing? Maybe because my work is about sexuality, people think it is not connected to what these guys did. But it's about politics. We bring in visual politics as a means of articulation.

I have not been able to find work done by women. There's a book which I dearly like called *Women By Women: 50 Years of Women's Photography in South Africa* [ed. Comley et al] — and the rest is contemporary. So I use a lot of American or African American texts and visuals. A friend of mine who lives in New York told me about a book called *View Finder* [by William Fox]. It's an amazing book! It is relevant to me today. And when I travel, I get introduced to work by different people. Some of it is not lesbian-related or lesbian-based; I also learn from mainstream work and then I change the situation and tell it the other way around and say, 'If it was like this' ... and move into lesbian lives.

Sindiwe Magona is an amazing poet. She's my reference point. A woman in her late sixties, if not seventies, she's a



Thalefo 'Zeal' Ntseane. © Zanele Muholi, reproduced with her permission



Tumi Mkhuma. © Zanele Muholi, reproduced with her permission

straight South African woman who denounces all forms of phobias. I love that. So, sometimes it doesn't need to be visual. Just a text. People's words. You know Bishop Tutu? If we are talking oral histories, *all* that Bishop Tutu says makes sense to me. And if we talk about people's voices in different spaces, the poet Audre Lorde becomes a major person in our history. She spoke from pain and on racism and told black women to wake up and start recommencing their history. That's a point of view that people might not have of me. Which point are you speaking from? It's not a limited space and it won't ever be the case that, because there's no lesbian doing this or that, I'm destitute. No. I can reference anything at any time if it makes sense to me.

IC Yes. So with Audre Lorde, it's the personal, situated and embodied experience, the fact that she speaks of pain and of finding ways to address it, that she's fighting racism and homophobia — these kinds of things resonate with you. Is there a similar struggle going on then? I mean, is there a pan-African element to the connection you find in her work?

ZM On a personal note, yes. Maybe also the sharing of Ps – poetry and photography – and the need to connect the two. If she was still alive, I would beg her to collaborate with me. And I would be saying, 'Please can we do something. Please start having that intergenerational conversation with me.'

You know, I have fantasies of writing letters to Audre Lorde on a personal level and as human beings before any sophistication. I always wonder what she would say about the spate of hate crimes in South Africa today.

IC In the *New York Times* about two days ago, T O Molefe reported that the South African government ‘has decided to use diplomatic channels to “seek clarification” from Uganda and Nigeria in response to their new anti-homosexual legislation rather than imposing sanctions and divesting from those countries’ (Molefe np). Is that an adequate response? Or would you prefer the South African government to have taken a much more forceful approach?

ZM I haven’t checked. Please forward me that article and I’ll read it. But when we talk about social politics, in general – how South Africans are responding to Uganda and so on – I don’t know what that guy said or if it’s true, but has he looked at and responded to what is happening right here in his own back yard? There are a number of outstanding hate crime cases that are ongoing or pending in South Africa. In December [2013], the same week Mandela was buried, on 14 December, a lesbian [named Emely Radebe Maleshwane] was buried in Ratanda township. She was dead; she had been killed. Nobody said a thing. That case didn’t even make the mainstream media. Inkanyiso reported on the case because one of our collective members documented it.⁴

Well, Uganda is far away from South Africa and South Africa is where we all live. And in May, we’ll be queuing, voting for the next president. Yeah, I’m saying nobody said anything because everybody’s focus was on the former president’s funeral. I’m talking about things that don’t even make it to the mainstream media here. It pains me to the core because I don’t know what to make of these situations.

IC Neville Hoard has claimed that homophobia in Africa has been generated at the level of politics — that it is a discourse of African authenticity used to deflect attention from the failures of elites to address pressing social problems (Hoard 68–70). He argues that it’s easy if you have a visible, and a visibly different, LGBT community who are in a minority and who are already marginalised, to turn them into scapegoats. Mugabe, it seems, was the first post-independence African leader to use homophobia as a way to deflect attention from his own economic and political failings. And he was exploiting Zimbabwe terribly. In 1995, he was the first African president to say that homosexuality was ‘unAfrican’ and he started using grossly homophobic language (Hoard xi, 68). And now if you look at Museveni in Uganda or Jonathan in Nigeria, it seems that homophobia has become a political tactic. Wole Soyinka has pointed out, for instance, that Jonathan announced the so-called ‘jail the gays’ bills at the same time as he removed the petrol subsidy so that the price of petrol shot up (Soyinka np). So the bill was a way of deflecting the public’s attention from the increase in petrol costs.

ZM Okay. To rectify some things: nobody knew of any other statement before Mugabe’s one was published, but

I’m sure these things had been ongoing under the table. And to say that Museveni and other leaders in Africa learned from Mugabe would be wrong. They said whatever they said because they wanted to. Also, who votes for them? Who votes? And if you want to talk about Mugabe, please put [Canaan] Banana in the picture.⁵ Who was Banana? How did Zimbabwe become what it is? Before Mugabe said what he said, what were his connections with Banana? Think through these things deeply.

And to come back to South Africa, what Zuma said makes us feel.⁶ But, at the same time, we have leaders like Bishop Tutu who have decided to take a personal stance, to denounce homophobia in Africa — to denounce it! So try to come up with juxtapositions as you talk about all of this. Let’s not come up with a one-sided text because that might be dangerous. You know, I sometimes have not entertained these guys because it delays me. It’s a distraction for me to even respond to what Mugabe is saying before coming up with new strategies to denounce what he is doing. You give me this Molefe guy and he is saying something — with all due respect, I appreciate that you shared it with me. But where is this information? It is in the *New York Times*. How many people have access to the *New York Times*? Let’s talk about accessibility and why is this kind of information in the *New York Times* and not published at home in the eleven official languages we have in South Africa? If we want to denounce, let’s denounce in all of the languages of the African people in our country.

IC You mention juxtapositions — is that why you’re doing the weddings now? To show South African communities embracing lesbian couples? Do you think there is something extreme about the reaction in the West to homophobia that arises in Africa?

ZM I can’t talk about the West right now because it is far away from me, but it is very important to bring binaries into this discussion. Give people two options to choose from. Let them view the other side. Don’t project only one thing, that’s all I’m saying. And regarding my work *Of Love and Loss*, the current show, I brought in those pictures to say, this is what I’ve done, I’ve attended both the funerals and the weddings. This is just a little bit. This is what I’m able to do. But I know there are many other people who are doing projects in South Africa. That’s why I’m saying I don’t want to talk about something that is broader than me. I won’t even mention ‘the West’ or ‘Africa’.

IC You were saying earlier that scholarly research has not been useful to the communities who are under fire in South Africa. What would you like the researchers to be doing now?

ZM It’s fine, honestly. I have no right to criticise what other people are doing. I have to do it my way, you know. But we are talking about how we can do things better. I have really learned from scholars abroad. I won’t treat that as ‘the West’ because I don’t like ‘the West’ part. I just say

'scholars from overseas'. 'Overseas' means Europe and America and I don't regard that as 'the West' because then we have to bring in 'the Third World' and 'Africa' — as if 'Africa' is other and beyond repair, you know. So I say 'scholars in Europe and America'.

I have just come from Michigan, which is maybe an hour away from Detroit, and what is happening in Detroit is so painful. Check the documentary called *Detropia*.⁷ Also, I was in San Francisco last week and when we arrived, we were greeted by homeless people. What is happening in Dublin? Not every woman has access to [reproductive] healthcare in your country. I read about it in the media. So juxtaposition and oppositions are very, very important. You know, I don't know how I feel really ... like, I have to respond to these questions but it's just another diversion. Yet I am learning something. And, I would like to say as a mark of appreciation, you become that class that I never had. I'm at university now. You are inviting me into your space. And actually, conservatives exist everywhere. So how do we deal with a situation where a woman is raped and stuck with a foetus that she doesn't want to keep? Those are the things. How do her struggles [in Ireland] parallel with our realities [in South Africa]? It's very, very important for us to engage along those lines.

IC On the topic of recognising parallels — because we are all affected by globalisation, because our lives are shaped by travel and migrations in some way or another — how can we encourage people to think in broader terms about how globalisation is shaping their lives?

ZM I have two major exhibitions that will happen next year [they were held in 2015]. I'll be showing at Brooklyn Museum and at Kunstpluss in Oslo, Norway. And when I travel, I travel with some of the individuals who feature in my work, so that they will get the opportunity to see and learn from the other side. And I encourage young women to read and write. If we could help them to publish their work, that would be a contribution of a lifetime. The idea I have is to have each and every member of Inkanyiso produce her own text and we will have volumes, which will become a dissertation on the people who have existed and have done something. So we can have that conversation of 'How do we speak on the margins and to the marginalised, the people we write about in our texts' — do you understand? What are we speaking about? Where are we speaking from? And who becomes the beneficiaries of what we all do?

I forgot to mention anthologies when you asked me earlier how I get people involved. When Inkanyiso started, I wanted to make sure that the people who are in my photographs get to write their own life stories and, at the same time, learn to write. Because these are big projects that one cannot do alone. And it's painful sometimes for people to even approach and face the realities of who they are. But we are doing it anyway, you know. We are working. So I had the people who are in my stories come on board, introduce me to others, and we keep on and on. Most of them are in South Africa and are people I've known for a long time. Some I've just met

and others are people I've really adored through the hard work they've put in. So I would say my work is based on collectivism.

I have founded a collective which is called Inkanyiso. And then I collaborate with a number of individuals outside the organisation also. And in order to finance projects, I do university work, because Inkanyiso is a non-funded organisation. Right now, we are working on the next edition of *Faces and Phases*. The people who are in the stories in *Faces and Phases* are paid to interview others, so I am creating jobs within the organisation. We then get someone to transcribe the interviews and if that interview is done in Sotho or Zulu or something, somebody else within the project speaks that language and it gets translated, transcribed and so on.

There are two approaches. There is Zanele Muholi, the person who is doing her own projects. And in order to ensure that at least some of the people featuring in those stories becomes beneficiaries, I started the collective and invited some of those in my projects on board, especially those who were not working. I gave them tasks and encouraged them to write. So the grammar might not be at university level. It's just ordinary people textualising in every way they know. But, because sometimes people think it's so difficult to write, I kept on saying, 'Write! Write! Write! Doesn't matter to me! Do anything as long as you are not insulting anyone!'

Then I realised that people were writing poetry and most of the poetry was angry, so I encouraged them to write about love and express themselves in a lovely and loving manner. We have twenty poems, which will be self-published.⁸ And how will that happen? I'm just doing it. These poems will be put into a book form. I have asked one of the people who started the organisation FEW with me to come on board as an editor. Some of the funds I have earned from my talks at the University of Michigan and at San Francisco MOMA will be used for the self-published publication. This will encourage people to know that self-publishing is another possibility, if somebody who is sophisticated cannot recognise that you write.

IC Zanele, I wish you continuing success and good luck with your projects. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me today.

Notes

- 1 *The Paris Albums, 1900: W.E.B. Du Bois*. 17 Sept.–27 Nov. 2010. Autograph ABP, Rivington Place, London. For more details see <<http://autograph-abp.co.uk/>>.
- 2 See Busi Sigasa, *Faces and Phases*. Munich, Berlin, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2010. 103.
- 3 Available at <<http://inkanyiso.org/2013/11/18/2013-nov-9-ayanda-nhlanhla-wedding/>>.
- 4 Available at <<http://inkanyiso.org/2013/12/18/2013-dec-15-photos-from-the-funeral-of-the-recently-murdered-lesbian-in-ratanda/>>.
- 5 Canaan Banana held the office of President of Zimbabwe, in a largely ceremonial role, from Independence in 1980

until Robert Mugabe took over as executive president in 1987. He helped to broker a political deal that put an end to the genocide in Matebeleland after Independence but his reputation was later damaged by his trial and conviction in 1998 on eleven charges of sodomy and indecent assault. During his lifetime, Banana continuously denied the charges and discounted them as politically motivated. For more details, see Hoad xii. See also Donald G McNeil 'Zimbabwe's Ex-President Convicted of Sodomy' in *The New York Times*. 27 Nov. 1998 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/27/world/zimbabwe-s-ex-president-convicted-of-sodomy.html>>.

- 6 On 24 September (Heritage Day) 2006, leading up to the passage of the Civil Union Act later that year, South Africa's President Jacob Zuma made a number of homophobic statements and came out publicly against gay marriage. He later apologised and withdrew his comments. See <<http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Zuma-invokes-gay-wrath-20060926>>.
- 7 *Detropia* (Dir. Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, 2012) examines how the collapse of the automobile manufacturing base has affected the population of Detroit.
- 8 A number of these poems have been published online by Inkanyiso. See, for example, Damsel 'The Colours of Love' at <<http://inkanyiso.org/2013/03/07/2013-march-7-the-colours-of-love/>> or Koketlo Matsawen 'If I Only Had Five Minutes' at <<http://inkanyiso.org/2014/01/27/2014-jan-27-if-i-only-had-five-minutes/>>.

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'Reading Communities: Connecting the Past and the Present'

Call for participants in Oral History Collection workshops

Do you or members of your family (parents, grandparents) have memories of reading during the Second World War?

Are you, or your family, from a migrant background, and remember particular books that were read and loved in your ancestral homeland?

Are there books or diaries in your possession that trace your family's reading through the generations or between countries? Are you interested in sharing your remembered reading with our research group, and with the wider public?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, the 'Reading Communities' team would like to hear from you. We will be holding oral history workshop events in Birmingham (August 2016, on migration and reading) and in London (September 2016, on memories of reading during WW2).

Both events are free to attend. For more information, please email the team on:

readingcommunities@gmail.com.

Or you can get in touch via [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/readingcommunities) (www.facebook.com/readingcommunities), [Twitter](https://twitter.com/ReadCommunities) (@ReadCommunities), or [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/readingcommunities) (www.instagram.com/readingcommunities). You can also find out more about the project at www.open.ac.uk/readingcommunities.

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