

# Contesting Beauty: Black Lesbians on the Stage

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## Introduction

The 1995 publication, *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (Gevisser and Cameron, 1995), pioneered a new field of study that is yet to be fully recognised in South Africa. This rich collection, written by South Africans across the country, assembled a wide range of gay, lesbian and, although unnamed, transgender experiences. The literature has expanded over the years, taking consideration of the changing landscape of lesbian and gay politics in the country. Topics of concern, beauty, style, fashion and glamour tend to be located in particular bodies, namely the bodies of gay men. More specifically, the figure of the drag queen or the effeminate gay man is often viewed as representing notions of beauty and femininity that are yet to be fully explored.

This representation is not without contestation. The drag queen or ‘moffie,’ as popularly known in Cape Town, is both an ‘undesirable’ figure and a site of beauty and entertainment. Typically a coloured effeminate gay man of a particular social and class background, the ‘moffie’ is a regular feature in the ‘coon’ carnival, often seen leading the troupe (Jeppie, 1990). The annual ‘coon’ or Cape Minstrel carnival, held around New Year, has a long history in the Cape, dating back to as early as 1907 (Meltzer, et. al, 2010). In the 1950s carnivals, the ‘moffie’ was perceived to be both ‘sexually abnormal’ or pathological, as well as colourfully joyous or symbolising “the most subversive” (Jeppie, 1990: 82). It is not uncommon for the beautiful and the ugly to be viewed in relational terms; as Sarah Nuttall (2006:8) argues, “beauty is to be found at the limits of the ugly.” In the African context, the history of beauty is an ugly one. For centuries, colonisers have seen Africa and Africans as both beautiful and ugly – doomed to capture and exploitation.

South Africa's transition to democracy had significant effects for the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The Equality Clause, often dubbed the 'gay rights clause,' in the post-apartheid constitution was the first of its kind in the world to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Cock, 2003). Prior to this, gay and lesbian people were criminalised because of who they were and because of the people with whom they chose to spend their lives. By the mid-1990s, however, people were able to claim their sexual and gender identities openly, although social acceptance continued to be a challenge. Lesbian and gay annual pride events, which had started in 1990 in Johannesburg and later in Cape Town, became spaces in which gay and lesbian people could publicly claim or fight for their rights. The events around Pride also often included a 'beauty' contest. Pageants or beauty contests also took place among gay male hairstylists, many of whom are at the forefront of fashion and styling (Reid, 2013).

Beauty contests, drag contests in particular, continue to be popular and spectacular shows in Cape Town, accompanied by regular drag queen performances in some areas of the city. These have a longer history in Cape Town than Johannesburg, having been recorded as early as the 1950s (Chetty, 1995). Currently, in the 'pink village' alone, located in an area of Cape Town known as Greenpoint, at least three bars have regular drag shows, featuring some of the city's most talented drag performers. In the pink village strip, Bubbles Bar used to be dedicated to drag shows. Since its closure, Zero21 has showcased shows by coloured and black drag performers. The high presence of drag in certain areas of Cape Town is "employed as a form of 'queer visibility'" (Tucker, 2009: 21). Similarly, the annual Miss Gay Cape Town and Miss Western Cape are both events where drag queens show off, and where male femininity is displayed and spectacularly contested.

Lesbian and gay specific contests have a more recent history – the first recorded as having taken place in 1987 (Gevisser, 1995). On the surface, these contests appear to be somewhat different from drag shows. Drag shows are more glamorous and public affairs. They also attract a wider audience and can rely, to some extent, on sponsors, due to drag queens' public visibility and relative presence in popular culture. By contrast, lesbian and gay contests appear to be much more community driven and focused. Often, these contests are organised by lesbian and gay organisations or related groups. The Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand hosted the first contest by

an organisation in Johannesburg in 1995, Miss GLOW-Vaal (Gevisser, 1995). This article looks at three different gay and lesbian beauty contests in Johannesburg that, while fascinating and visually entertaining, have received very little scholarly attention. This is because, in some respects, beauty contests are often seen as frivolous (Hansen and Madison, 2013). The concern of the article is with what constitutes beauty in these contests, and how so, as well as the significance of the events for Black lesbians.

### **“Beauty is inside, it is not make-up”**

In September of 1996, the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) hosted a beauty contest, ‘Mr and Ms HUMCC,’ at the top of the Harrison Reef hotel in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. It was fairly well attended, mostly by Black lesbians and gay men, many of whom were members of the church (GALA, 1996). While the contest was entertaining and a success, because winners were crowned, the rehearsal was of particular fascination. A few days before the contest, participants had to undergo ‘coaching sessions,’ as captured in video footage archived at GALA, during which they would be taught how to ‘turn.’ ‘Half turns’ were reserved for gay men and ‘full turns’ for their counterparts, lesbian women. To successfully accomplish the task, gay men were asked to walk and turn like ‘gentlemen,’ and lesbians to do so like ‘ladies.’ After much annoyance and irritation, the flamboyant coach, a gay man, left the rehearsals greatly disappointed and elected for divine intervention from the Reverend. In both groups, none could ‘turn’ according to their gender.

Enter Reverend Tsietsi Thandekiso, a charming and charismatic gay man and leader, loved and respected by his congregants (Reid, 2010). He started his address to the contestants with much vigor, quoting a passage from the scripture and encouraging them not to give up on the contest:

It’s the first time that this is done by the church... you are here to contest about beauty. Beauty is inside, it is not make-up; you’ll still be an ugly person if you are ugly inside... Bring out your beauty and show it to yourselves and demonstrate it to our God... How does God see you when God looks at you as a young person? When you make the twist and turn, you can invoke God in it... When gay and lesbianism is said to be unAfrican, unChristian, inhuman, unwanted and unnatural – you are called to be beautiful at that time... God made you beautiful...

Reverend Thandekiso managed to recapture the contestants' attention and interest in the contest. His assertion that the goal of the contest was to evoke beauty was the first time that beauty had been the frame of reference during the rehearsals. In this way, the first contest situated and pursued the politics of beauty as a form of building self-confidence and fashioning a lesbian and gay identity. The Reverend also suggested a rarely articulated and complex relationship between sexuality, beauty, technique and religiosity. This was surprising, even for the contestants, and many were adamant that they would proceed with the beauty contest. It was also a powerful tool to position lesbian and gay sexualities within religion when, even today, some religious leaders and Abrahamic faiths continue to use it to alienate lesbian and gay people (Mutua, 2011; Rossouw, 2009).

Indirectly, Reverend Thandekiso alluded to an idea of beauty contests as “not just about femininity or beauty or even competition. They (beauty contests) evoke passionate interest and engagement with political issues central to the lives of beauty contestants, sponsors, organisers and audiences – issues that frequently have nothing obvious to do with the competition itself” (Cohen et.al., 1996: 2). At the same time, Thandekiso did not trivialise beauty. Rather his use of the beauty contest platform served to communicate a different political message than the dominant heteronormative, homophobic and alienating discourse to which contestants are regularly exposed.

The contestants' inability to 'turn' per the gender assigned them may easily be seen as failure. Instead, gay men mastered how to 'turn' like 'ladies' while lesbians' turns were 'half turns.' Whether this represented role reversals was not clear. What was clear, though, was the fact that 'half' and 'full' turns required no rehearsal or coaching for lesbians and gay men respectively. Thus failure, in this instance, must not be seen as the inability to produce desired results. Rather, it is a case of seeing preferable alternatives and rewards (Halberstam, 2011). It was the very idea of making 'ladies' and 'gentlemen,' through turning, that failed. Simply put, failure lay in coaching a technique that turns people into gender stereotypes. In successfully exposing the failure of turns, contestants created an opportunity to escape and resist society's rigid gendered norms and behaviours.

Again, there are possibilities to see and read failure differently, as a tactic for something else. Judith Halberstam (2011) suggests that by embracing failure, new forms of challenging the status quo and the norm are opened up. Those who fail, lose, forget and so on are usually relegated to the margins

of society. Often, they are not seen and not recorded. However, through alternative ways of seeing, the marginal, the non-normative and the non-conforming can become sites where theorisation and resistance take place.

### “...let’s show we are proud of being women”

A lot can be said about the absence of lesbian bodies in relation to beauty and beauty contests. Overwhelmingly, in contemporary South African writing, Black lesbian bodies are seen as sites of danger, trauma and violence. Moreover, the characterisation of the Black lesbian as victimised works towards making her invisible, enforcing the dominant narrative that positions her as undesirable and threatening (Matebeni, 2015). In this framework, Black lesbians cannot appear or be beautiful.

It is within this paradigm that Ashley Carrier’s (2012) *Out in Africa: LGBT Organizing in Namibia and South Africa*, which maps out the different strategies of visibility and invisibility deployed by lesbian organisations such as Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) in Johannesburg, fails to see one of the most significant cultural and political forms that these strategies take, namely beauty contests. While lesbian beauty contests do not appear in most LGBT scholarly writing, they have been taking place in Johannesburg since at least 1997. Following ‘Mr and Ms HUMCC,’ Nkateko, a Black lesbian organisation, formed in late 1996, hosted ‘Ms Sappho.’ Contestants were Black lesbians only, a political stance taken because Black lesbians were carving out their own spaces and determined to render themselves visible. It is worth noting that one of the winners of ‘Ms Sappho’ was Zanele Muholi, an internationally renowned photographer whose work will be explored in the next section of the article.

The political landscape in relation to lesbian and gay rights had changed by 1997, and so did the nature and purpose of the lesbian contests. With the protection and promotion of their rights, lesbian and gay people became more visible. However, as their visibility increased, so did the heteronormative backlash. Violence and hate crimes towards Black lesbians became much more reported and, by the early 2000s, the term ‘corrective rape’ had become synonymous with Black lesbian lives in South Africa (Muholi, 2004). Threats to lesbian visibility and spaces grew enormously, leading to increased demand for safe spaces and supportive networks. These were some of the challenges that contributed to the closure of Nkateko in 1998.

As Nakedi Ribane (2006) has argued about heterosexual beauty contests generally in South Africa, they are always implicated and entangled in the political climate of the time. The same applies for lesbian beauty contests. The escalation of violence towards Black lesbians in the 1990s saw a group of Black lesbians organising to form the Forum for the Empowerment of Women in 2002 (FEW, 2005). The organisation aimed at providing a safe space for Black lesbians affected by escalating homophobic violence. Undeterred by the challenging context, FEW also ensured that it continued to create visibility for Black lesbians. The organisation – some of whose members and co-founders had been part of Nkateko – also carried on Nkateko’s legacy of hosting, among other things, lesbian beauty contests.

‘Miss Lesbian 2004: Celebrate the Woman in You’ was held in a stylish and hip venue in downtown Johannesburg. The organisers chose the venue for its safety and accessibility. The two-storey bar/restaurant welcomed hundreds of Black lesbians and gay men for a fun-filled evening with different versions of lesbian expression and performance. Of particular interest were the performances by Black lesbian contestants. Ace, a contestant who had won previous Miss Lesbian contests a number of times, and two other contestants performed *indlamu*, a dance traditionally performed by heterosexual, masculine Zulu men during coming of age ceremonies. For this dance, the trio wore men’s *amabeshu* (skins), headrings, ceremonial belts, ankle rattles and carried shields and spears. Ace, with much confidence and control of the shield and spear, led the others in a flawless and captivating war song that revealed their fearlessness.

While the group performed, the audience clapped and an affirming voice screamed in isiZulu: “*Amadod’ethu!*” (our men!). The voice, electric, articulated what many in the crowd felt. That the contestants’ moves were so impeccable was surprising. It was the first time that many had seen female bodies exhibiting ‘traditional’ male roles so boldly. Arguably, it was the connection of a dominant heteronormative masculinity performed by Black lesbians that most moved the audience, blurring as it did the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ As if Buhle, the host, knew the audience was mesmerised by what it had witnessed, holding the mic she came on to the stage requesting a round of applause, and shouted: “Dear sisters, let’s show that we are proud of being women.”

It is necessary to pause on the use of dominant masculinity in ‘Miss Lesbian 2004’. In his ethnographic exploration of beauty pageants and hairstyling in

a small town in South Africa, Graeme Reid (2013: 33) noted the aspirational value attached to contests “within the constraints and uncertainties of social and political transformation.” In these contexts, gay men were making use of femininity to articulate beauty, fashion and style. At the same time, their deployment of femininity allowed them to assimilate easily into heterosexual women’s work, such as church ceremonies and other gendered cultural rituals and networks in their communities, as well as to negotiate acceptance. For gay men, feminine beauty then became a tool for social integration.

Conversely, masculinity on female bodies is often considered threatening. Some masculine Black lesbians deploy masculinity, often through dress, as a tool for attracting women and for publicly claiming their boldness and same-sex erotic stance (Matebeni, 2012a). Exploring one’s gendered roles can be a liberating experience. The relationship between dress, body and performance, as Karen Hansen and Soniyi Madison (2013: 3) argue, come together as “embodied practice.” In addressing the lack of serious attention to the relationship between dress and the body, it is important to note the “experiential and physical dimension to the power of clothing, both in its wearing and its viewing” (2013: 3). The black lesbians at ‘Miss Lesbian 2004’ eloquently portrayed this through their performance of *indlamu*, both through their clothing and in the bodies that wore the clothes.

Femininity can be very restricting, especially for more masculine, cisgender lesbian women. As Halberstam (1998) shows, female-born people have exposed and scrutinised the assumed coherence of male masculinity. Unlike the versions of femininity that some gay men embody, as Reid (2013) explores, when Black lesbians deploy masculinity, a set of negotiations in navigating dominant culture is required. Mignon Moore (2006: 13) notes how dangerous it is for black non-feminine women to present black masculinity, as this goes against strong conventional norms. She argues that, because they challenge “core” assumptions about male dominance, such presentations can “invite openly punitive responses from others and may cause men to question the meaning of their own masculinity.” The importance of safe spaces for Black lesbians is all the more imperative in this context to allow for a public negotiation of gender that is not constrained by threats of violence and policing.

The need for Black lesbian spaces resonates also for Tanya Saunders (2012). In her study of black lesbians in Havana, Cuba, she argues that the

social isolation that they experience, and the complex racial system they face, ‘hides’ them away. This is compounded by the homophobic, sexist, patriarchal and classist societies that Black lesbians find themselves in. Thus, Black lesbian spaces are a necessity, and indeed have continued to be a defining element of Black lesbian organising in South Africa. FEW remains one of the very rare spaces that working-class Black lesbians in Johannesburg occupy, or from which they find social support. In recent years, different groupings that offer social and networking spaces have emerged, including queer monthly events such as ‘Open Closet’, which takes place in Melville in Johannesburg, and the most recent ad hoc travelling event *#ForBlackGirlsOnly* that is held in different South African cities. Sivu Onesipho Siwisa, organiser of *#ForBlackGirlsOnly* describes it as:

a deliberate and unapologetic space to centre the lives and experiences of Black women right across gender and sexuality lines. It is a space to share tools to build ourselves. A space to tend to our wounds – wounds we may have not even known we had. It is a space of safety, however momentary, where Black girls are not threatened." (Vanguard Reporter, 2015)

### ***“I Stand Corrected”***

For many years now, Black lesbian visual activist Zanele Muholi has been capturing the lives of black LGBT persons in South Africa and elsewhere. Muholi has a long history of activism, having been a part of the Black lesbian organisation Nkateko in the 1990s and later co-founding FEW. Driven by the urgent demand of representing black queerness and ensuring its visibility, Muholi’s photographic work remains one of the richest visual archives on black queerness on the continent. It is Muholi’s *Miss Lesbian* photographs, a series of the artist’s self-portraits posing as a beauty contestant, that are of interest here. This series is a continuation of Muholi’s own experience as a runner-up in the Ms Sappho contest discussed earlier. At the same time, it speaks to other current realities that are taking place in South Africa.

In August 2012, Cape Town dancer and choreographer, Mamele Nyamza, in collaboration with British-based playwright, actor and director Mojisola Adebayo, put together a stage performance, *I Stand Corrected*, first performed at Artscape Theatre in Cape Town. The poster advertising the play was that of a Zanele Muholi photograph from the series *Miss Lesbian*. The

selection of the image for the play's poster was purposeful, as it portrayed the dual quandary faced by Black lesbians: being invisibilised by not being seen as women on the one hand, and facing regimes that aim to 'correct' femininity and womanhood on the other. In the image, Muholi poses as a beauty contestant who has won the title 'Miss Lesbian.' Writing about *I Stand Corrected*, Adebayo (2015: 135-6) states:

*I Stand Corrected* is a response to the so-called 'corrective' rape and violence against lesbians and transmen in South Africa, and the anti-gay marriage voices in Britain that direct so much emotional violence against LGBTIQ people. The play features Zodwa (played by Nyamza), a black South African lesbian woman who (we later realise) has come back from the dead, arising from a rubbish bin on what was supposed to be the morning of her wedding, after she has been raped and murdered in a township alleyway by a group of homophobic men who want to 'make her straight'. Zodwa/Mamela uses dance and movement to explore physically what it means to be a 'corrected' woman.

There are strong connections between the photographic series *Miss Lesbian* (2010) and the play. The latter is the enactment of the former. Both address the contemporary issue of Black lesbian erasure, either through feminising regimes (Matebeni, 2012b) or through destabilising dominant notions of femininity and violence. Through the series of seven photographs, Muholi positions herself as an uncontested queen in a Black lesbian beauty contest – perhaps to claim a title she missed in Ms Sappho – to make visible contests that have not been explored outside Black lesbian organising. What is at stake in exposing this title publically, and in the manner Muholi does?

Muholi opts to embody a type of beauty contestant who would be classified outside heteronormative feminine standards of beauty. Her muscular body; her poses and postures that claim space; her serious face without a smile; her unshaven legs and tattooed body; and her 'fake' hair and visible pubic hair disrupt conventional notions of feminine beauty. Muholi stages a provocation articulated by artist Nandipha Mntambo (2007, 2014) in her work on cowhide. In a recent presentation about her choice of cowhide as material and method, Mntambo argued that she was fascinated by the "idea around beauty, attraction and repulsion that seemed to centre around the body being hairless" (2014, n.p.). Through this work, she wanted to see "how the viewer would respond to a completely hairy female form". Thus the hairy

skin is used to “challenge and subvert preconceptions regarding representation of the female body, and to disrupt perceptions of attraction and repulsion.” And, tellingly, one viewer who was exposed to Mntambo and Muholi’s works was reportedly repulsed by what she saw (Matebeni, 2013).

Beyond ideals of beauty and femininity, the representations explored by Muholi and Mntambo expose the “struggles over power to control and contain the meanings mapped on the bodies” (Cohen et al., 1996: 9) of beauty contestants and women generally. This is but one of the power struggles that Black lesbians have to contend with everyday, made visible in *I Stand Corrected*. It speaks to how Black lesbian bodies are restricted from existing beyond gender binaries and associated expectations. Within this frame, any resemblance to masculinity on a female body is ‘corrected.’ Lesbian sexuality and gender presentation outside the norm carry severe consequences, limiting our understandings of these categories while also inhibiting lesbians from experiencing the fullness of their realities.

## Beauty Queers

It is difficult to describe beauty; not only because it is subjective, contextual or cultural, but also because beauty, and its relational ugliness, forces one to carefully consider what is prioritised in looking, seeing and imagining. In the South African context, where beauty has been racialised, gendered, sexualised and also classed, we must ask: is beauty what it really is? It appears that beauty’s construction is closer to heteronormative ideas around femininity and masculinity. This version of beauty is completely exclusionary and limited to those who perceive the world in rigid binaries. If beauty remains this fixed, then it can be argued that beauty has been made ugly.

Mbembe (2009) calls for a reimagining of beauty that would take into consideration new manipulations, constructions and strategies. José Esteban Muñoz’s (1999) disidentification can be seen as one such strategy. Disidentification, Muñoz (1999) argues, is a process whereby those who feel excluded by dominant cultures transform these cultures for their own purposes, rather than try to assimilate. In the first instance, a process of defamiliarising is essential. To experience “variations of the beautiful” (Mbembe, 2009) demands that one open up to new ways of seeing and feeling. Affective registers are deeply political, as are ways of gazing.

In the beauty contests explored above, disidentification is realised through

Reverend Thandekiso's intervention, as well as through the performance of *indlamu*. In the former case, the same biblical texts that are most often used to speak against lesbian and gay people are redeployed to affirm and assert connections between godliness and non-normative sexuality and gender expression. Following Muñoz, we can understand this as a "survival strategy that is employed by a minority spectator to resist and confound socially prescriptive patterns of identification" (1999:28). The traditional male Zulu dance, *indlamu*, performed by masculine lesbians is similarly strategic. When danced by women, masculinity's beauty on female bodies becomes attractive.

The use of disidentification in the performance of *indlamu* produced what the audience considered beautiful. It was no surprise that Ace, the leader of *indlamu*, won the 'Miss Lesbian' contest. The voice screaming *amadod'ethu* during the contest suggests a sense of ownership to female forms of masculinity. Moreover, the ability to watch and appreciate what is considered against the norm is in itself an important strategy for visibility and 'membership' in a kind of community. For the audience to claim masculinity (*amadoda/ubododa*) as belonging to them as well as the contestants hints at a level of acceptance that can be publicly owned.

## Conclusion

While much has changed in the queer landscape in South Africa in the last twenty years, many things do stay the same. The importance of lesbian beauty contests as fundraising events, awareness and visibility campaigns, claiming of space, and also entertainment remains. Beauty contests will keep evolving as queer people find new ways of defining themselves and carving alternative spaces for their existence. Over the years, and in the different cities, the shifts in beauty contests have been remarkable. In one Miss Lesbian contest organised by the Cape Town-based Black lesbian organisation, Free Gender, contestants were asked to wear school uniforms to encourage young people to go back to school. In another contest, organised by FEW, contestants were competing for the title of Ms. Township Lesbian to celebrate township life. But such shifts alone are not enough. The difficult and fundamental questions about what constitutes beauty, and how beauty ought to be represented, remain contested. Beauty can no longer be what it used to be in South Africa. Its colour, gender, sexuality and class have to consider the many who have long been on the margins of its constructions.

As I finish this essay, I am looking at a recent poster of the fundraising carnival for the ‘Mr & Miss LGBTI Triangle Project 2016’ contest. This poster captures the continuities and discontinuities of queer beauty contests in Cape Town. The categories for contestants are listed as Male (Mr. and Miss) and Female (Mr. and Miss). It will be curious to observe who makes it to the finals. The radical surprise, within such a contest, will be when the drag queen’s hyper-femininity is not the defining factor of beauty; or when beauty finds expression in bodies that are not restricted to gender binaries.

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