Zanele Muholi is a photographer and activist whose work explores issues of black women’s sexuality in post-apartheid South Africa. Muholi’s images raise issues such as hate crime, HIV/AIDS, gender dissidence, performativity and passing. Muholi documents some of the key issues within the lesbian community in Johannesburg and by doing so de-romanticizes sexual pleasure by transgressing normative perceptions of (hetero)sexuality: she achieves this by introducing objects and practices such as strap-ons, breast-wrapping and dental dams into her photographs (see, for example, Muholi’s book and exhibition *Only Half the Picture*).

At the same time Muholi demonstrates an awareness and responsibility in her attempt to reclaim the body. Her pictures not only tell the story of the subject but also Muholi’s story as the photographer. Muholi knows the women she is visualizing and that she portrays. The women are her friends, her colleagues or women she meets within her work as an activist: ‘These are not only subjects, these are my people, this describes the person I am.’ Her work represents the postcolonial idea of self-definition, while at the same time targeting the assumption that homosexuality cannot act as a signifier for a decolonized subject. The photographs emerge as a political act, as an act of becoming. The subjects of the photography, and Muholi herself, work in opposition to the determinations of the colonial project. They reappear as subjects not objects or the so-called objectified Other. By doing so Muholi challenges the sex/gender regime that underwrote colonialism and apartheid and opens spaces in which people are able to constitute themselves. DM.

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Zanele Muholi (with Sabine Neidhardt)
‘dead bodies do not bleed’- bell hooks

*Is’khathi* is a Zulu expression that is translated as ‘time of the month’ or ‘period in time’, with the added connotation that there is something secretive in/about this ‘period in time’. It is also about the politics of time. The project focuses on our bleeding, on menstrual blood. It consists of 7/18 photographs — portraits — of my own and my partner’s April menses captured in a colour digital format.

Figure 1: *Amahluli* - clot(ted)

Figure 2: *Ibala* - bloodspot

Figure 3: *Iveza* - reveal(ing)

Figure 4: *Impukane* - fly

Figure 5: *Ububende* - thick blood

Figure 6: *Isibonelo* - evidence

Figure 7: *Isililo* - outcry
With this blood series, I wanted to highlight that one cannot talk about the body, about a body politic, without addressing the biological functioning of the body. One cannot theorize the aesthetic of the body across space, culture, and time without talking about the social and gendered aspects of the body, its internal components and functions, especially menstruation. bell hooks makes a similar point in her discussion of the use of blood in photographer Andres Serrano’s work *Heaven and Hell*. Serrano depicts the body of a white female nude, hands tied behind her back, blood dripping from her. hooks reads Serrano’s work as ‘[piercing] the screen of patriarchal denial, [demanding] that we acknowledge what we are really seeing when we look at the female nude in Western art.’ There is no pre-modern, modern, or post-modern aesthetic of the body to theorize without speaking of what is the life force within. Menstrual blood is life and hooks is right when she says ‘dead bodies do not bleed.’

*Is’khathi* is about natural biological functions, of blood flowing with life through our butch/femme/trans cracks with ease, without hindrance — unless of course our flow is contained and hidden from view by various *man-made* technologies such as pads, tampons, cups, gauze, toilet paper, cloths, cotton, rayon, contraceptive pills, and so on. I want to intervene in our own complicity as women and transmen in allowing our bleeding to be contained. We need an aesthetic of transgression in order to confront what is now a global culture’s contradictory relationship to blood, to genders, and to sexualities. The series means to raise important questions about the socio-political landscape of menstruation by situating the cultural politics of blood within the structures of heteropatriarchies and the market. It also opens dialogue on the culture/s of menstruation and how different cultures have shifted their relationship to bleeding historically and globally.

Between the 15th and 17th centuries, the birth of modernity in Europe with its ‘rational’, enlightened thinking positioned the corporeal female body within the realm of nature and therefore the ‘irrational’, while all things male were placed into the realm of culture and the rational. Before the European South Atlantic slave trade, the rise of capitalism, and the period of colonialism that followed it, the bleeding female body was understood as a source of power and strength, and menstruation was celebrated in Europe as elsewhere. For instance, in pre-modern pagan European cultures, and in pre-modern Tamil Nadu (present day South India), the aesthetic of the bleeding female form was revered and celebrated. However, once the gender/sex binary was born and spread across the globe via the slave trade and colonialism, a fundamental shift from woman-positive, matriarchal cultures to patriarchal and heterosexist cultures is traceable, and the bleeding female body becomes a source of contamination, an unhygienic body that must be relegated to private spaces. Modernity and Westernization took the bleeding female body out of the public arena of collective celebration and ritual, and banished it not only to visual and intellectual obscurity, but also to collective cultural secrecy.

Along with this banishment of menstruating bodies also comes a commodification of the secrecy around bleeding. Resources are invested, technology is developed, and profits are earned to ensure that the invisibility and secrecy of menses is maintained within our capitalist, patriarchal cultures. In other words, the less we acknowledge, talk about, or collectively visualize feminine monthly bleeding, the more profitable this biological and vital function of human life becomes. My aim is to disrupt this disempowering dynamic that affects women and transmen alike.

*Is’khathi*

Every second, minute, hour, day, week, month women and transmen are bleeding in this world. We map our terrains with periods. Menstruation is a key component of human existence, and it is all around us in the every day and every night of our living. It is a permanent feature that contributes to our formation of being and always present in the environment.

Menstruation is part of the process of evolution for all mammals. The viewer is presented with a series of patches of menstrual bloodspot and clots in various spaces from bathtub to rough earth and dirt ground. In Figure 1: *Amahluli* and Figure 6: *Isibonelo* there is menstrual blood in the white bathtub. For any bleeding being, this phase highlights the existence of a nature which knows how to heal and renew itself.

One type of ‘robing’ used in this series is gauze, normally used to dress a bleeding wound, as in Figure 7: *Isililo*. Another photo is of a used tampon, abandoned on an open ground, a fly feasting on its nourishment, see Figure 4: *Impukane*. The idea with both shots is to link the absence of menstrual blood in public with the idiom we are all taught: ‘do not air your dirty laundry in public’.

The earth is filled with cracks: volcanoes spew lava through cracks in the earth; ground water rises
through cracks in the earth; seedlings sprout roots below the earth and crack the earth to grow. The image of a tampon on cracked earth recalls that passage of a crack (vagina) that releases life force-menstrual blood. I imagine a tree shedding its bark to renew its life, the skin falling to the ground nourishing the soil and adding life to it, much like the uterus shedding its walls in the female body’s attempt to cleanse the womb in preparation for possible fertilization. The blood and clots flow without any hindrance through the vaginal crack, unless a certain type of ‘robe’ is used to clog the passage ways and absorb the heavy flow.

In Figure 5: *Ububende*, my blood is diluted with water and presented on an off white ceramic dinner plate, alongside a jelly-like substance which happens to be a thick blood clot from my second day of April menses. The visual form resembles a foetus floating in amniotic fluid inside a woman’s womb-signifying life and growth, the circular plate suggesting the circulation of blood in the body which is necessary for life. The use of the ceramic dinner plate is also a statement of the irony that the kitchen, which is traditionally seen as a woman’s place to feed and nourish her family/community is off-limits to menstruating women in many cultures such as the Kambalathu Naicker community in the interior of Tamil Nadu. A menstruating woman is not allowed to enter a kitchen or any place where people gather for fear that she will contaminate the village. In my own Zulu culture, only postmenopausal women and virgins are allowed in the kitchen when *Umqomboti* — African beer — is made so that the beer will not spoil.

Two photos are absent: the bloodied and torn pad which is symbolic of the tearing, searing pain many women experience with the onset of menstruation; and the photo of thighs and knees pressed together, positioned sideways, blood flowing out from underneath, suggesting the loneliness women feel when left to their pain. Figure 2: *Ibala* and Figure 3: *Iveza* form part of this sub-series regarding pain.

This pain is culturally represented in our Western patriarchal culture as illegitimate, as more of a state of emotion that actual real pain. Within our popular culture, the menstruating woman becomes at best a source of amusement and a joke — she acts irrationally and like a fool. At worst she is depicted as merely a bitch and deserves neither sympathy nor respect. In contrast, the Khoisan of the Kalahari offer deep respect to a menstruant, allowing her to spend her bleeding days in a special hut. She is seen as so powerful that she has only to snap her fingers to bring down lightning on any disrespectful male.

Missing is also the photo of two tampons resting in a pool of blood with clot, signifying the intimate connection of menstruating at the same time that can sometimes evolve between women. It is about the synchronization between my partner and I when we reached our April menses on the same day-much like two people making love and reaching orgasm simultaneously.

This is a work in progress which began in 2003. My intention is to emphasize that corporeal bodies depend on periods for procreation and survival. Like the hierarchy of needs for the human species to survive — the need for food, water, land/shelter — the human reproductive process requires blood, especially menstrual blood, to ensure our existence.

Click on thumbnails to see larger images.

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Notes


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