



In discussion with Nadia Sanger

What it means to have 'personhood': women's visual productions and identities in South Africa

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As part of a post-doctoral Fulbright scholarship in the United States, I focused my project on the cultural productions of South African women of colour, and what they had to say about identity through their work.

I moved from the premise that all identities are formed by the social context in which we find ourselves. As different components of our identities, gender, 'race', sexuality, culture, and ability, can therefore never be stable, or fixed. Instead, as feminist Judith Butler has noted, we are always changing; always in a process of becoming.

My interest in this work is based on what I see as critical in the study of the humanities — how art, or using the more post-modern term, cultural production — tells us stories about ourselves, and about the world. African feminist scholars such as Desiree Lewis, Pumla Gqola, and Gabeba Gaberon, among many others, have long been aware of the potential of women's visual productions to disrupt and subvert negative and often socially accepted representations of gender, 'race', culture, and sexuality.

RE-INVENTING IDENTITIES THROUGH ART

We are at a moment in South African history when the importance of re-inventing our identities as individuals, and as a collective, is crucial. The need to move away from our brutal past cannot be accomplished through denial, and the shutting down of alternative voices. Instead, it is precisely the alternative voices that we need to be listening to with pricked ears, in order to confront our wounds; wounds that have not disappeared in the 'new' South Africa, but which have instead been glossed over with silence.

The work of South African visual producers, Zanele Muholi, Shelley Barry and Nandipha Mntambo, breaks this silence, and provides an alternative language, one that allows for a re-imagining of the self and our relationships with others: human beings, and the other animals with which we share our planet.

The introduction to Zanele Muholi's book, *Faces and Phases* (2010), articulates her visual activism

in making visible, preserving, mapping, and documenting in history, the lives of black South African lesbians:

The portraits in the book reveal that a life cannot be owned by anyone other than oneself. The expressions on the faces of the individuals in the photographs express pain, frustration, happiness, arrogance, sadness and joy. These photographs reveal diverse and complex human expressions in a social and political context that often silences, marginalises and punishes gender and sexual non-conformity.

In the film 'Difficult Love', co-produced by Muholi, her role as the viewer/gazer of those she takes pictures of disturbs the often invisible and 'objective' role of the producer of images.

Through zoning in on Zanele in the film — her words and experiences — we see how there is an attempt to transfer power from the photographer to the photographed. Muholi's attempt to channel power to those who make her images possible, who tell their stories through her photography, visibilises black homosexual people, and turns on its head false ideas of the objective position of the photographer/filmmaker.

Nandipha Mntambo uses a slightly different approach in her work. She broadly focuses on subverting the stereotypes associated with femininity and desirability. Using cow hide as 'material' in casts of the female body — usually her own — as well as metaphorically through digitally produced images, Mntambo's work can be read as a commentary on what constitutes (black) femininity, at the same times as she makes visible black female bodies. This is an important endeavour, since black bodies in history (consider Sara Baartman and her treatment in the Western world) have mostly been represented as damaged, exotic, or different.

SHIFTING REALITIES

Mntambo's newer digital productions also begin to blur ideas of what it means to be a human being. The notion of 'becoming-animal' in this work starts to shift the separation between human beings and other animals, questioning ideas of what it means

to be a person. Through these works Mntambo has begun to engage a language that does not present human beings as the only subjects to be valued.

The connections made in her work between humans and other animals is a step towards an alternative language, one that potentially destabilises the idea that human beings are fundamentally different from other animals, and that other animals are unfeeling entities. This kind of language makes available possibilities to move beyond the ways we ordinarily speak about having personhood: it questions the basis upon which human identities are shaped, and how we define the term 'animal'.

RECORDING OF LOSS

Shelley Barry is a South African filmmaker, who works from a wheelchair. In her short films, her concern is to represent marginalised groupings on screen. These include different representations of people with disabilities, people classified as coloured, women and lesbians, and the interconnections between these identities.

Barry's films celebrate living in a differently-abled body, and help to create an understanding of different ways of being-in-the-world. One of her films, titled 'Where we planted trees' (2006), is an attempt at documenting her family history, and a heritage that is missing from South Africa's archives. The film captures interviews with Barry's family, and their narratives about the forced removals from their homes as part of the 1950s Group Areas Act.

In recording this history for the screen, we see the violence of forced removals, and the scars it leaves, not only on those directly affected, but on the generations that follow. Barry's prose about the trees that her family planted, and how they hold memory, is beautifully documented in the film. Barry narrates:

'Coloured'. That was the name apartheid baptised us with, us that didn't fit quite so easily into neat categories of 'white' and 'black'. 'Coloured'. That tiny word that stole our home, gleamed too much of our pride. If only I could erase it...

The loss of a home, for Barry, is very much



Mntambo, Europa 2008: The bull-human

Nandipha Mntambo, 'Europa' (2008), Courtesy Mmusá Bhevetsho Gallery



Gazi T. Zuma, Umlazi, Durban, Faces and Phases, 2012, by Zanele Muholi

about the loss of a history, and the wounds inflicted by that loss that need healing. Her film is one way in which she tries to honour the history of people called 'coloured', forcibly removed from their homes, and displaced, with no choice but to begin a new story. Her work is significant in current South Africa because it takes the space to make this (mostly untold) reality count in South Africa's national archive of painful experience.

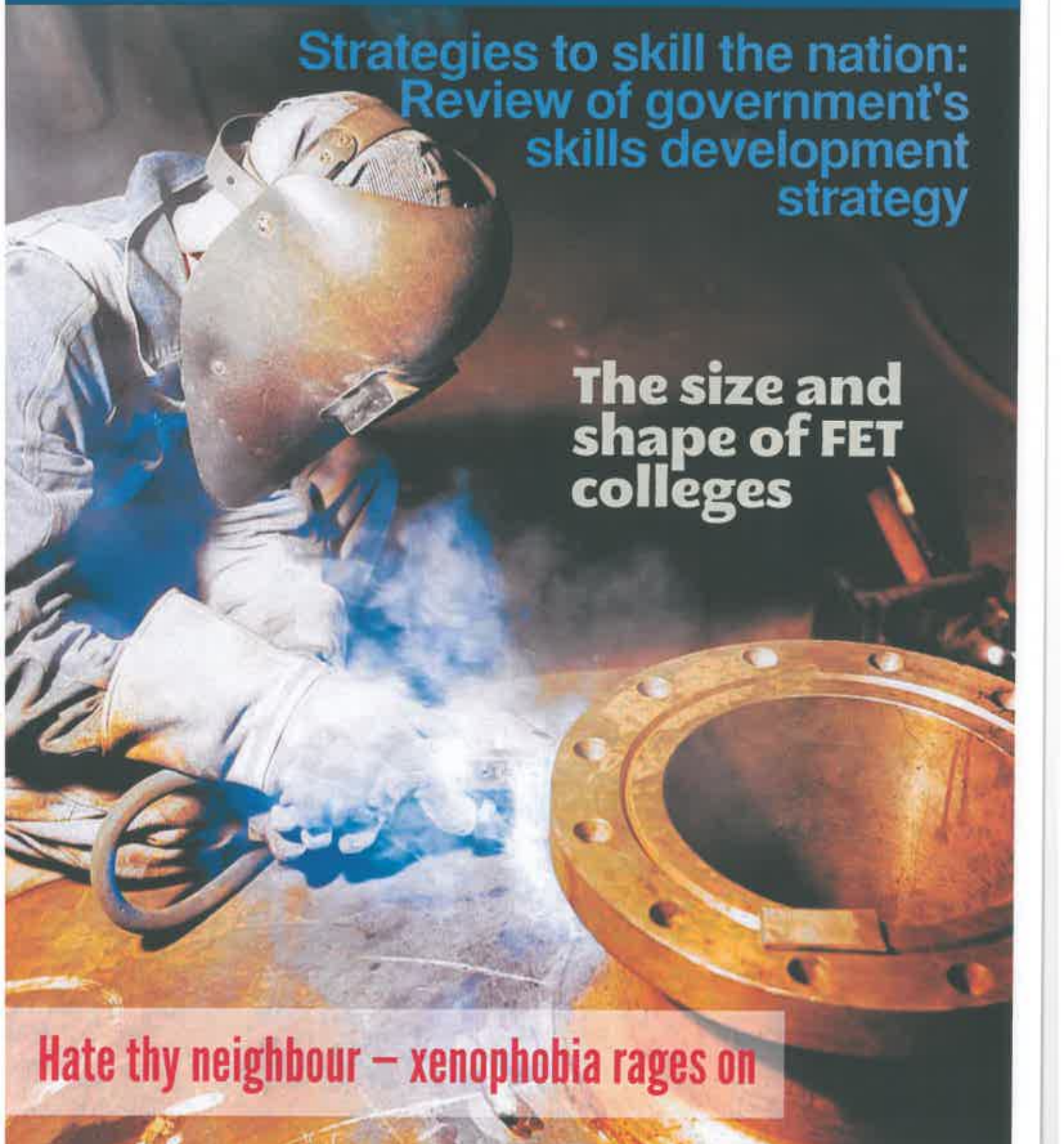
FOUND IN TRANSLATION

Zanele Muholi, Nandipha Mntambo, and Shelley Barry have begun the process of creating an alternative language. Through their images, they reveal our inherited identities, and how we can use agency to re-create and name ourselves. It is through their cultural productions that we are allowed to see alternatives to the current discourses on what it means to be a person in a world that is becoming increasingly more driven by capitalist principles, which, at its core, needs inequality based on 'race', class, gender, sexuality, and speciesism to exist.

We need to listen to what they have to say. ◀ ◀



Sacha 'Kalmplex' Morrison, Toronto, Faces and Phases, 2012, by Zanele Muholi



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