Readings of Zwelethu Mthethwa's South African Photographs: Postcolonialsim, Abjection, and Cultural Studies

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READINGS OF ZWELETHU MTHETHWA’S SOUTH AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHS:
POSTCOLONIALISM, ABJECTION, AND CULTURAL STUDIES

by

DUSTY KATHLEEN ROSS

Under the Direction of Pearl McHaney and Renée Schatteman

ABSTRACT

South African painter turned photographer, Zwelethu Mthethwa, was born in Durban during Apartheid. In 1980 Mthethwa began taking his photographs in the shanty towns on the outskirts of Cape Town and later took pictures in Mozambique and New Orleans. His work has global significance. Using art and literary theory and criticism, I expand upon the significance of his photographs in the contemporary world. I do “readings” of eight photographs from eight different series of Zwelethu Mthethwa’s work using postcolonial theory, abjection, and cultural studies as theoretical constructs to provide three different angles for interpreting his work.

INDEX WORDS: Zwelethu Mthethwa, Photography, South Africa, Art, Postcolonial, Abject, Cultural Studies
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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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For Nana.
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1 INTRODUCTION

As I turned the corner of Hirshhorn Museum of Contemporary Art in Washington, D.C., I was immediately drawn to the large six-foot by four-foot color portrait of a worker standing in a field. The life size man filling the borders of the image looked as if he could step into the room. The bright colors popped against the white walls. The eyes of the subject of the photograph pierced the empty room. I was instantaneously captivated. South African painter turned photographer, Zwelethu Mthethwa, was born in Durban during Apartheid. In 1980, Mthethwa began taking his large format bold color pictures in the shanty towns on the outskirts of Cape Town and later took pictures in Mozambique and New Orleans. Mthethwa continues to travel and take photographs all over the world. He currently lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa. His work carries global connotations. Using art and literary theory and criticism, I will expand upon the significance of his portraits in the contemporary world. I do “readings” of eight photos from eight different series of Zwelethu Mthethwa’s work using postcolonial theory, abjection, and cultural studies as theoretical constructs to provide three different angles for interpreting his work. Postcolonial concepts of boundaries, the idea of the other, and authenticity shed light on the significance of Mthethwa’s photographs. By reading the images with abjection theory, one can understand the importance of borders, subject/object, and darkness in his images. Reading the photographs with a cultural studies lens will help the viewer understand the relationship of the photographer and the photographed, identity, the narrative nature of Mthethwa’s work, and the significance of creating a new history, a new language.

Zwelethu Mthethwa was born in 1960 in Durban in the KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa. In 1979, he received his BA in pre-med from the University of Zululand. Mthethwa realized he was not suited for the field of medicine, and he decided to take art classes at the
Abangani Open School. In 1981, Mthethwa transferred to the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town (UCT), which at the time was an all white school. In order for Mthethwa to take classes at UCT he had to major in an area that was not available in the all black universities. This is when Mthethwa chose to move from a concentration in painting to photography, as photography was not available at the all black universities. Mthethwa was one of two black students taking classes at UCT at this time. He received his Fine Arts degree in 1984 from UCT.

Apartheid was met with opposition from the people of South Africa since inception, but in the 1980s South Africa’s political and social environment was particularly tense due to massive uprisings and the resistance campaigns. Internal resistance was married with international criticism/activism as several nations refused to trade with South Africa in opposition to Apartheid. International boycotting further intensified an already weakened economy. With the economy crumbling people were forced to break Pass Laws that limited non-white mobility through various regions, in search of work. This heightened political environment fueled protests and demonstrations. In 1985, a State of Emergency was declared, making it illegal for people to meet in large groups. Furthermore, people were being detained without due process or the ability to appeal to the courts. During this time, Mthethwa received a Fulbright scholarship to study imaging art at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. He received his MFA in 1989. In 1994, South Africa had its first democratic elections and Mthethwa returned to South Africa to continue his photography and to be a professor. From 1994-98 Mthethwa taught photography at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at UCT. He now concentrates full time on his artwork and occasionally serves as a senior guest lecturer teaching photography at universities such as Virginia Commonwealth University, Columbia, and Emory. Mthethwa has
had numerous solo and group exhibitions throughout the world and has won several awards for his artistic endeavors. Mthethwa aims to reinvent the image of his people. His work is in direct opposition to a haunted history of photographs of South Africans.

The earliest photographs produced in South Africa date from 1842. Photography in South Africa is stained by a colonial presence. John Peffer, Professor of Contemporary/Nonwestern Art History, addresses the complicated history of South African photography in his book, *Art and the End of Apartheid*. Peffer states, “In Africa, as in Europe, a cult of likeness was stimulated by the accessibility of portrait photography during the second half of the nineteenth century” (242). Upon the introduction of the medium to Africa in the mid-nineteenth century, it was the colonizer’s instrument. Photographers such as F. Heldzinger, Wilhem Bleek, and Lucy Lloyd captured images of the whites and natives alike. Photography in Africa was used as a means of identifying the “other,” of documenting the colonizer and the colonized. In the archives of the images from this time the settler is represented in his best clothes and is surrounded by luxury goods, whereas the native is depicted barefooted, half naked, and carrying savage weapons or rustic tools. The native is represented anthropologically. There is also the image of the reformed savage, of the savage in the western clothes of the colonizer, saved from barbarianism. Peffer elaborates on the constructed image of the native, “While white subjects would have been able to negotiate the terms and setting of their pictures as well as to control the distribution of their images, black subjects had little or no control over the process or use of their depiction” (246). Black South African’s initially had less control over their representation in photos. Whites were creating the images.

With the discovery of the Eureka Diamond, found in South Africa in 1867, many Africans and Europeans migrated to the southern African states in search of possible work
generated by the African diamond rush. Duggan-Cronin, who was employed by De Beers Consolidated Mines, took hundreds of photographs of southern Africans and Europeans throughout the southern African states. John Peffer comments that Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin compiled 6000 images for the “native types” archive and that his work is “situated awkwardly between studio portraiture and natural science” in the library (248). This physical location of the images between art and science illuminates the intention of the work and the problematic categorization. It wasn’t until much later that the camera became a tool that non-whites could manipulate.

In 1955, Peter Magubane, a black South African, began manipulating the camera to expose Apartheid and its atrocities. He took black and white pictures for the anti-Apartheid magazine *Drum*. Later, as a freelance photographer, he was imprisoned on several occasions and at one point was banned from taking photographs for five years. Magubane is well known for his 1976 Soweto Riot pictures; he was the first non-white to win a photographic award in South Africa. Another revolutionary black South African photographer is Ernest Cole. In 1967, Cole depicted the subhuman living conditions in the shanty towns in his book *House of Bondage*. His work serves as a political commentary on the horrific conditions of apartheid. Following in Magubane and Cole’s footsteps, in the 1980s, several South African photographers known as the struggle photographers were documenting political issues framed by apartheid.

Exhibitions/projects such as *The Cordoned Heart* (1986) that included 136 black and white photos taken by 20 South African struggle photographers such as Omar Badsha and Paul Weinberg, attempted to shed light on the hostile environment in which many South Africans were living. Badsha and Weinberg went on to form Afrapix, a collective group focused on documenting and challenging the atrocities South Africans were facing. “Afrapix members
produced photojournalistic images of the struggle with immediate impact” (Peffer 254).

Afrapix’s images can be seen as representing a positive struggle. The struggle photographers wanted to encourage positive change in their society, but they were using a photojournalistic documentary approach to achieve this goal.

This history of South African documentary photojournalistic photography is the exact type of image against which Mthethwa’s photography works. Zwelethu Mthethwa does not consider himself a documentary photographer. Peffer clarifies this distinction, “Where documentary photography sociologizes, art photography tends to aestheticize” (265). Mthethwa does not attempt to sociologize the sitters of his photographs but rather focus on the aesthetic beauty of their lives. South African photography of the shanty towns has a similar history to the photography of other impoverished areas. The images are meant to inspire pity for the victims in the picture, albeit this pity is meant to inspire change and serves as a message of protest.

Mthethwa actively chooses to disrupt this tradition. He does not want to generate pity but rather highlight beauty and strength. He declares that he intentionally uses color photography, as opposed to the traditional black and white, in order to restore dignity to the people of South Africa who heretofore have been victimized in journalistic/documentary style photography. In an interview with Isolde Brielmaier, chief curator at the Savannah College of Art and Design, Zwelethu Mthethwa states, “I wanted to use color film to bring out the vibrancy of their lives and the care and pride that they put into how they are living” (Zwelethu Mthethwa 93). The results are stunning portraits showing proud people in their homes and at work. In addition, he lets the people of his photographs arrange their rooms and choose their positioning in the picture to best represent themselves, giving them the authority to convey the expression of their settings. This exchange between the photographer and the photographed creates a different exchange than is
accomplished in documentary photography. He uses natural light and attempts to capture an image of the person and their surroundings that is representational of the owner. Mthethwa also offers each of the sitters a copy of the image he creates. They become the owners of their images. However, the sitter remains anonymous to the viewer. The sitter and Mthethwa are the only viewers of the photo that know the history and the story behind the image. The person is part of a larger community represented in the series of photographs that Mthethwa compiles but at the same time the individual has authority over that singular image.

Another choice that Mthethwa makes that changes the reception of his images is the decision to leave his works untitled, the subjects unnamed. This choice allows the picture to speak for itself. Furthermore, an untitled image gives authority to the sitter of the photograph, as he or she has not been named by the artist. Mthethwa asserts, “by calling my works ‘untitled,’ I was trying to offer the basic narrative and then allow viewers to embellish the story with their own experiences and place the people whom they are looking at within an environment which they can relate to” (Zwelethu Mthethwa 94). By identifying the people by the group they are affiliated with as opposed to naming them individually, he is magnifying this cultural importance. By leaving his works untitled, he allows the viewers to bring their own interpretations to the work. By titling the series, Mthethwa gives a context or narrative for the work but leaves a space for the viewers to incorporate their own experiences.

In 1996, Mthethwa began photographing the inhabitants of Crossroads and Paarl shanty towns on the outskirts Cape Town. These shanties were constructed against government regulations and were intended to be temporary abodes. They are made of ephemeral elements and go through a process of entropy. As seen throughout Mthethwa’s work each photograph often contains only one person. The makeshift home of the sitter plays a key role in the
composition of image. Later he created series that were focused on relationships between mothers and their children. He also did a series of photographs of empty bedrooms in hostels. Mthethwa chose to title the series by the common thread or bond that appears throughout the collection. These series are titled *Interiors* (1995-2005), *Sacred Homes* (1999), *Mother and Child* (2000), *Empty Beds* (2002), and *Women in Private Spaces* (2005). The bond of the community is the linking factor that the title highlights. These abodes and the people in them tell a story. Mthethwa’s work has a strong narrative aspect that speaks to a universal audience.

Figure 1.1, *Untitled* from the *Empty Beds* series, depicts the narrative nature of Mthethwa’s work. Although no bodies occupy the frame, the details of the photograph give the viewer a glimpse of the inhabitants. The picture is of a bed in a hostel that houses men who are displaced from their families looking for work. Two men live in this room. Due to lack of furniture to house their clothing the men have hung their jackets neatly on the wall. They are displayed as if they are art. This is a common custom in hostels in this area. The sea foam green brick walls corner the gentleman’s bed. The curtain is tied back. Once the men return the curtain will be closed to separate the two sides of the room. The ghosts of these men linger in their absence as their jackets stand watch over their space.

The history of South Africa plays a large role in the understanding of these photographs. The space the people occupy, whether a hostel, a public work place, or a private home, tell a story. The walls of the private homes are often plastered in cover pages of magazines that show pristine white women and luxury products the inhabitants of the shanty could never afford. And yet the way the people build their homes and reappropriate the colonizer’s images to decorate their homes provides a commentary for the viewer. I expand on this commentary by using scholarly theory and criticism. By referencing work by scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Neil
Figure 1.1: *Untitled, from Empty Beds series, 2002*

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Lazarus, and Octavio Paz, I do a postcolonial reading of an image from *Interiors* and one from *Women in Private Spaces*, concentrated on people and their homes.

Mthethwa contends that he would like to restore dignity to the people of his photographs. Restoring dignity involves creating an identity and Bhabha’s postcolonial theory on identity can be used to further interpret Mthethwa’s work. In *Location of Culture*, Bhabha extrapolates on the importance of identity and the ways in which culture frames that identity. Furthermore, Mthethwa makes an effort to un-other the subjects of his photos. Mthethwa gives the people in his photographs a platform to establish and define their own identities within the context of their communities. Similarly, Lazarus’s theory on postcolonial identities and authenticity can be used to better understand Mthethwa’s images. The effects of colonization are discussed in depth by Lazarus and offer a means of deciphering Mthethwa’s work. Paz’s writings dealing with space and appearance are also applicable to Mthethwa’s images. Each of these theoretical ideologies provides a language to discuss the significance of these pictures. When paired with the narrative nature of the images and the history of the area in which they were created, the viewer is better equipped to interpret the photographs.

*Brick Workers* and *Contemporary Gladiators* are two series that Mthethwa completed in 2008. The *Contemporary Gladiator* series is photographed in Mozambique, reminding viewers that the southern African countries share many similarities. He states, “There is a phenomenon in African politics where people speak of ‘south African countries.’ The borders have become very loose and more fluid” (*Zwelethu Mthethwa* 95). The idea of borders and the marginalized are themes that similarly appear in the *Brick Workers* series photographed in South Africa. I do a close reading of two photographs, one from each of the series *Brick Workers* and *Contemporary Gladiators*, while applying abjection theory. I will use research from Julia Kristeva, Elizabeth
Grosz, and John Lechte, to discuss abjection within the context of Mthethwa’s photographs. The people and homes represented in these images have been discarded; they are living on the margins of society. By reading these photographs through the abject lens, I can offer the viewer a better understanding of the universal and global importance of Zwelethu Mthethwa’s photography.

Julia Kristeva’s theories on abjection, which incorporate studies of subject, object, borders, the marginalized, the cast off, and identity, are extremely applicable to Mthethwa’s useful in understanding Mthethwa’s photographs. The brick workers, the boys living in the landfill, are being abjectified, not by Mthethwa but rather by society. They are the people that civilization wants to ignore and, therefore, they live on the margins, on the borders, on the outside. John Lechte discusses the relationship between culture, art, and abjection. Each of these theorists offers a different perspective linked by the common theme of abjection and expands upon the ways in which abjections affects identity.

In 2003, Mthethwa created his series of photographs Sugar Cane, and in 2006 he created the Gold Miners series. Both of these collections focus on laborers in South Africa and Mozambique. The men in these pictures work in excruciatingly uncomfortable and dangerous conditions. Rather than showing a people that are victims of their environment, Mthethwa hoped to once again restore dignity to his people. I will do a cultural studies reading of a photograph from each of these series to elaborate on the conditions and community that allow for the creation of such images. By referencing work from scholars such as, John Fiske, Homi Bhabha, Ian Chambers, and Victor Burgin, I will interpret and dissect the photos to incorporate the ideas of cultural studies. Political, economic, and social structures play key roles in the context of Mthethwa’s work. By using cultural studies to read these structures within the context of
Mthethwa’s photographs, I will elaborate on the connotations of his work not only in the South African environment but in the global framework as well.

I use Bhabha and Chambers’ theories on culture and identity to frame my reading of Mthethwa’s images taken of migrant laborers as I feel this area of theory offers a lens through which to understand the connotations of the images and the people represented within the borders of the photographs. In addition, Homi Bhabha’s book, *Location of Culture*, provides a critical analysis of identity that is applicable to Mthethwa’s work. John Fiske writes comprehensively on the cultural implications of everyday activities. His ideology is useful when dissecting Mthethwa’s images and in particular when understanding the body in regards to its place in culture.

By using postcolonial theory, abjection, and cultural study theoretical approaches to read Zwelethu Mthethwa’s photographs I can display the universal nature of Mthethwa’s work. In conclusion, I will reference a photograph from Mthethwa’s first series that was photographed outside of Africa, *Common Ground*. The image was taken after hurricane Katrina and displays a water damaged and abandoned house. This image fully embodies the universality of Mthethwa’s body of work. His photographs tell a story that is interrelated with the lands within which those works were produced and the history that precedes that moment in time. Furthermore, each of the aforementioned ideological perspectives addresses identity and the image. I have set clear parameters for each theoretical genre within the context of my research, but I am aware of the interrelated nature of not only the topics of the various fields but of the scholars themselves. Therefore one scholar’s cultural studies work can be applicable in the field of postcolonial theory or abjection theory. I use this cross-disciplinary approach to expand on the interconnectedness of my topic to various areas of theory. The interrelation of these three theoretical approaches, when
applied to Mthethwa’s work, provides the audience with an additional lens through which to read the photographs.
2 | POSTCOLONIALISM: INTERIORS AND WOMEN IN PRIVATE SPACES

South Africa struggled with colonization starting with the Portuguese in the 1200s and legally ending with the British in 1909, although racial discrimination is still alive today. The Native Land Act of 1913 was the beginning of legalized segregation in South Africa. The National Party institutionalized Apartheid in 1948. This further complicated an already tense postcolonial environment. Mthethwa’s work attempts to provide a different lens through which to see South Africans than has previously been available. Annie Coombes, Professor of Material and Visual Culture at the Birbeck University of London, has published extensively on art and culture in South Africa. In her book, *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*, she claims of Mthethwa’s work, “His photographs clearly embrace the creative ways in which individuals extend the limited means at their disposal for expressing individuality (limited through either the restrictions of social control or economic constraints) by projecting an ideal personality via the small spaces that do remain in their control—in this case their shacks” (189). With so many aspects of their lives dictated by laws, decoration of a house was something that could not be controlled; it was one of the ways people could express themselves freely. During the 19th century the British colonial rulers created Pass Laws, which prohibited any non-white from entering certain areas and, furthermore, from migrating between districts without a properly signed pass. The townships, located on the margins of white urban cities, became small isolated communities where people had to create their own identities within the boundaries that society had laid out for them. Their makeshift homes became a means of expressing their individuality on the outskirts, on the borders, and on the margins of society.
Mthethwa’s representation of shanty town life restores dignity to the people that his contemporaries typically victimize and dehumanize in their black and white documentary/journalistic style photography, as previously mentioned in the introduction. The sitters in Mthethwa’s pictures almost always directly face the camera and engage with the viewer in a very unapologetic and dignified way. Coombes asserts, “They are neither defined primarily as the ‘victims’ of apartheid, nor are they oblivious to the limitations of their environment” (190). Mthethwa’s subjects are not the victims represented in the struggle photography era. His various series of photographs, which usually are life-sized at about 6ft X 4ft, address class, gender, race, and labor issues that exist in this postcolonial/post apartheid space. He allows for the sitters in the photograph to redefine their place in their community.

The Interiors and Women in Private Spaces series are collections of photographs of people in their makeshift homes. The subjects authoritatively gaze at the viewer. Their clothing is usually just as colorful as the magazine and advertisement prints that substitute as wallpaper in their improvised homes. Whereas these ads could be seen as a commentary on the poverty of the subjects who cannot afford the items pictured on their walls, Mthethwa prefers to highlight the bright color scheme that is so important to his people. The pattern and color scheme the people chose to decorate their homes in is a significant cultural reflection of South African society’s affinity for color. This is one of the many choices Mthethwa makes to disrupt the constraints of a postcolonial society. Although the people in these images live in a postcolonial space they are not defined by postcoloniality. Neil Lazarus, Professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies, has written expansively on postcolonial literature and culture. He discusses the mark of postcoloniality: “There has been a tendency to read postcolonial studies as mere ideology, as though in fact the class position of its leading practitioners relative to the class position of most
members of postcolonial societies were itself a mark, or brand, of inauthenticity” (Lazaus 5).

What is the relationship between the postcolonial subject and the postcolonial practitioner and what does this relationship say about both classes? Although Mthethwa is a South African photographer, not an “outsider,” he still comes from a position of privilege, as he received an American and European education and his art is exhibited throughout the world. He, unlike many of the sitters of his portraits, has been able to see a much wider world, in spite of the limitations of a postcolonial space. Mthethwa rather than being unauthenticated by his privilege has used his position to shed a new and brighter light on South Africa’s people. Therefore, both he and the sitters of his photographs defy the postcolonial mark and its limitations.

Postcolonial is seen as the period of time following colonialism. The postcolonial subject comes from a history of colonization. Homi Bhabha, critical theorist and professor at Harvard University, is predominately know for his work focused on hybridization, which can be seen as an extension of Edward Said’s ideology on multiculturalism. Bhabha suggests that, “Colonial discourse produces the colonised as a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (“The Other Question” 41). In order for a subject to be “knowable,” the viewer must feel that they are acquainted with or recognize and are familiar with the subject. The people in Mthethwa’s images are not knowable, however they have now been made visible. Mthethwa rejects a direct identification by refusing to interpret the subjects of his images with titles. He dilutes the idea of the “other” and allows the sitters of his pictures to manifest their own identities and representations. Although Mthethwa’s photographs are giving the outsider a view of the effects of oppression on the “other,” he does so in way that defies the usual limitations of journalistic photography. All of his images are untitled as if to create an identity of a community of people who have been denied the liberties of community. Bhabha implies that
although a person may be considered ‘the other,’ they are still knowable. Mthethwa’s portraits refute this claim.

Figure 2.1, *Untitled*, from Mthethwa’s *Interiors* series (1995-2005) depicts a young man standing in his home next to a blue water basin. The walls of his home are plastered with newspapers. The newspapers are not arranged so that the text can be read. Instead it appears that the newspaper has been arranged to highlight the pattern the text creates. Rather than running left to right like traditional text, the print is upside down and sideways. Hovering over the young boy’s left shoulder, in a blue frame, is the portrait of a dignitary. The blue photo in the upper right hand corner and the blue water basin in the bottom left hand corner create a strong diagonal. The boy is at the center of the diagonal, therefore, implying the connectivity of the main focal points of the image. Mthethwa informed me that man in the framed photo on the wall is Barnabas Lekganyane, the bishop of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC). He also informed me that many people in South Africa have framed photographs of Lekganyane in their home to show their affiliation with the ZCC. Mthethwa does not alter the homes of the people. They arrange their belongs in a way that they feel best represents them. The words “SERVICE Group” are written in black and surrounded in yellow and red. This is the only other color on the black and white newspapered walls. Cassie Wu in her article published in the Journal *African Arts*, “What Is This Place?: Transformations of the Home in Zwelethu Mthethwa's Portrait Photographs,” claims there is an inauthenticity to the photograph because Mthethwa has photographed other people in the same room. Therefore, she implies this space does not belong to this young man. I argue that his presence in the space gives him ownership of the room, ownership of the image, and therefore representational ownership, just as the other people who have been photographed in the same space also own the image and the room. Bhabha argues that, “Each time the
Figure 2.1: *Untitled*, from *Interiors* series, 1995-2005

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encounter with identity occurs at the point at which something exceeds the frame of the image, it eludes the eye, evacuates the self as a site of identity and autonomy and—most important—leaves the self a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance” (*Location of Culture* 49). Bhabha implies there is authority for the sitter of the image. The subjects have left their mark on the photograph and the room in which they are depicted. There is ephemerality in the construction of these homes that lends itself to a communal presence. This is the sitter’s space.

To better understand the space in which the sitters exist, one must understand the history that envelopes that space. Robert Thornton, a professor of Anthropology at University of Witwatersrand in the Johannesburg area of South Africa, studies photography and ethnographic methodology. In his essay, “The Potentials of Boundaries in South Africa: Steps Towards a Theory of the Social Edge,” Robert Thornton makes the claim that apartheid was a modern and postcolonial construct and therefore post-apartheid is a postmodern reality (136). The sitters of Mthethwa’s images directly work against modern, postcolonial, and apartheid constructs. Therefore, the postmodern subject is defying the superstructural establishments previously mentioned. This young postmodern boy occupying the frame is represented as an individual that contradicts the limitations of modernism, colonialism, and apartheid. He is not simply a product of modernism or colonialism any more than he is simply a product of apartheid. Modernity changed his experience and he had to deal with colonial presence and live in shadow of apartheid, but these facts do not define him. His life consists of many other stories. He is a boy, someone’s son, a member of his community, and a citizen of his country. Most importantly, he is an individual within these larger superstructures. He is telling his story through the image and stepping out of the confines of the frame, unlike the dignitary who is static in the frame above his shoulder. Couze Venn is an Emeritus Professor of Cultural Theory. He is currently the editor of
Theory, Culture and Society. He has researched extensively on postcolonialism, psychology, and social relations. Venn observes that, “Narrative has a recognition effect, since subjects recognize themselves in the stories they tell about themselves. Furthermore, each narrative identity is entangled with those of others, since the story of a person’s life is a ‘segment’ of other people’s life stories” (271). This young man’s story is intertwined with that of his history and his community. The image has layers of complexity that require the viewer to accept that the sitter, although visible, is not wholly knowable. The viewer has been given a glimpse of the subject and therefore only a glimpse of his story.

The boy’s flesh shimmers either from the water in the basin or sweat caused by the heat. His left hand is closed as if it could be holding onto a pamphlet to give to the viewer. The boy is proud and standing tall as he directly confronts the observer. He has a look of intensity and his mouth is slightly open as though he may ask a question. Mthethwa has given this young man an opportunity to represent himself as anything but a victim. He is writing a new history for himself in the image Mthethwa has created. Mthethwa’s work could be seen, as Aijaz Ahmad suggests, as ‘postcolonial writing.’ Ahmad is a Marxist literary theorist who has written on the importance of a movement against imperialism/colonialism. Ahmad implies that, “‘Colonialism’…becomes a transhistorical thing, always present and always in process of dissolution in one part of the world or another, so that everyone gets the privilege, sooner or later, at one time or another, of being coloniser, colonised, and postcolonial” (283). Mthethwa’s photography is an example of this dissolution, and it also incorporates references to the colonial presence and the decolonized body persevering in spite of a history of oppression. This young man has reclaimed his space and yet he is still marked by colonialism. The presence of English print on the newspapers plastered behind him is evidence of this reality and yet the reappropriation of the newspaper as wallpaper
gives a new life to the oppressor’s tool. Furthermore the framed portrait of the suited dignitary hanging on the wall acts as a new headliner for the paper. The colonizer’s newspaper therefore becomes secondary.

Mthethwa strives to bring a sense of equality and universality to his photographs. It is almost as if his images allow the sitter of the picture to look directly at the viewer and say, I am here and I am just like you; I am human. Although, the subjects of Mthethwa’s photographs live in their own space, a space that is undoubtedly different from the space in which you, the reader, live in, or the space in which someone living in Papua New Guinea lives, or someone living in Switzerland, all people exist in a realm that is no longer isolated. Simon Njami is a Cameroonian art critic and writer who participated in the African Sniper Project (in which Mthethwa also participated) and Africa Remix art exhibits. He wrote the chapter “The Next Flag” in the book Next Flag: The African Sniper Reader. The African Sniper Project was a 2003 contemporary African art exhibit that was organized with the intention of highlighting the fact that at the time there were currently no museums of African art in African countries. The show aspired to bring global recognition and local appreciation together. Njami suggests we are a human race that shares similar experiences; “The world is a whole. A single entity. Humanity cannot be reduced to different races, religions, or geographies. The history we have inherited is a delusion, and the notions we have endowed it with are nonsensical” (16). Using Njami’s ideas on universality and connectivity, the viewer can assess that the young boy in the photo is part of a whole, not only the owner of his own space, a resident of his household, but also he is a member of his community, possibly a member of the ZCC, a citizen of his country, and a participant in the human experience. The individual history that is imagined is part of a much larger human history. We are not as different as we would like to believe.
Although Mthethwa’s subjects are part of a much larger human experience this reality does not deny them the authority of individuality. Colonial presence attempts to remove one’s autonomy, to have them assimilate into the controlled masses. The people are alienated from their identities. Bhabha elaborates on this sentiment introduced by postcolonial literary theorist Franz Fanon and contends that, “The extremity of this colonial alienation of the person—this end of the ‘idea’ of the individual—produces a restless urgency in Fanon’s search for a conceptual form appropriate to the social antagonism of the colonial relation” (Location of Culture 41). Mthethwa’s subjects unquestionably carry the stains of prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes that the colonial presence leaves on all of its victims, and yet Mthethwa attempts to give the sitters of the photographs an alternative means of representing themselves as a new individual unsullied by their pasts.

The walls of the room the young boy stands in are presumably made of plastic, plywood, cardboard, and/or corrugated metal. They are covered with newspapers, newspapers written in the language of the oppressor. The newspaper was surely put up in attempt to provide some insulation. But the newspaper does more than insulate. The reappropriation of the text as decoration for the boy’s provisional home gives the newspaper new meaning. John Fiske, Professor of Communications at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, currently researches popular and mass culture. In his article, “Cultural Studies and the Culture of Everyday Life,” he strongly argues that, “Oppression is always economic. Yet the everyday culture of the oppressed takes the signs of that which oppresses them and uses them for its own purposes” (Fiske 157). The newspaper (the oppressor’s tool) is not displayed in a manner that highlights the content of the writing. The newspaper has been reappropriated and the homeowner who has used the paper
as insulation and decoration focusing on the color and pattern that the paper now creates as wallpaper.

This young boy’s home was meant to be impermanent, but it is seen as worthy of decoration. It stands on the outskirts of the city. It likely does not have electricity and surely does not have running water. This home almost certainly sits in a community that does not have a fire department or police station nearby further emphasizing the impermanency and entropic state of the living establishment. This home was built out of necessity, out of the need to be close to one’s place of work. If you cannot live inside the city where you work, living on the margins is the second best option. Regardless of the temporariness of the materials, the owner of the home has taken the effort and time to wallpaper the home. Ian Chambers is a history professor who researches the significance of the mental and spatial elements of colonialism. In his book Culture After Humanism: History, Culture, Subjectivity, he asserts that, “Everyone lives memory, but no one possesses it. The house of memory is not simply our customs, rituals and traditions, our bodies, institutions and monuments, nor even our innermost selves and individual unconscious. It is ultimately that place of concentrated being that is the historical hum or our earthly habitat” (Chambers 53). A home is the habitat of memories. The space the young boy occupies tells a story of his existence. The dignitary floating over his shoulder stands there for a reason.

Barnabas Lekganyane as the current bishop of the ZCC is a highly respected individual. “Today the paramount leader of the ZCC is the bishop, the only person to whom this title is given, and whose hereditary office is for life” (Anderson 287). The ZCC believes in prophecies and the healing powers of their spiritual leaders. The placement of this particular photograph on the wall affirms the importance this family places on this man and the religion he leads.
Saturated in color, Mthethwa’s 2005 series, *Women in Private Spaces*, once again reclaims the home as a sacred space. Mthethwa asserts in an interview in the book *Liberated Voices*, “I do not believe that poverty is equal to degradation. For me color restores people’s dignity. As does acknowledging the spaces in which they live as worth recording” (65). Space and ownership of space are important themes throughout Mthethwa’s work. Octavio Paz is a prolific Mexican author who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He has written extensively on colonialism and identity. According to Paz, “The act of spreading oneself out, of blending with space, of becoming space, is a way of rejecting appearances, but it is also a way of being nothing except Appearance” (14). In figure 2.2, the young child in the doorway is cocooned in the curtain and appears to blend into the space with the ground beneath, shadowing the child’s feet. He is rejecting appearances, and I argue that his presence in the photo, his story, defies the limitations of being identified as only “Appearance.” The woman with her arm akimbo and her stern gaze addressing the viewer creates a self-assured juxtaposition to the small child’s bashful innocence. Although apartheid no longer legally exists, the housing issues created by segregation continue to propose issues for the marginalized non-whites of South Africa. And yet, as Paz suggests, these people have defined their space and become a part of it. Visually this idea is culminated in the child’s blending into the room in which he/she stands.

Bright yellow labels cover the walls of the woman and her child’s home. The advertisements have been arranged in a way that highlights the pattern. The labels lose their originally intended potency, as did the newspapers in figure 1.1, once they have been reappropriated as wallpaper. Okwui Enwezor is a Nigerian art curator, critic, and writer. In 2011, he was noted as one of the most powerful critics in the art world. He was the Dean of Academic
Figure 2.2: *Untitled*, from *Women in Private Spaces* series, 2005

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Affairs at San Francisco Art Institute, has been a visiting professor at Colombia University and the Institute of fine arts at New York University and is the founding editor and publisher of the *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*. Enwezor has written comprehensively on the significance of contemporary African art and in particular Zwelethu Mthethwa’s work. He discusses in detail the importance of the advertisements that often appear on the walls of Mthethwa’s photographs, “The Pop-repetition of these repurposed ads saps away their corporate impact, perhaps denaturing the myth of consumer pleasure that they tender” (*Events of the Self: Portraiture 3*). The color and the pattern the labels create become the focal point of the walls. The advertisements are not serving the purpose of luring people to buy a product. In the book *Visual Cultures and Critical Theory* Patrick and Kelli Fuery argue, “A key element of visual representation—from an advertisement to a painting, a film to a photograph—is the interplay between what we see and how it relates to us” (111). The viewer does not see the label, unless one is familiar with the product the label was intended to advertise, and therefore the label becomes exactly what it is being used as, wallpaper. Furthermore, the photograph Mthethwa has taken creates a relationship between the viewer and the subject. The viewers brings to the picture their own personal experience and knowledge to interpret the meaning of the details in the image. The photograph therefore has a different meaning for each observer.

In addition to the experiences the viewer brings to the image, one must consider the experiences of the sitter of the image. The history of the subject plays a key role in interpreting the image. Black, Coloured, and Indian women in South Africa were doubly discriminated against during apartheid and colonial spheres as they were seen as inferior both in race and gender. Women had very few rights. Usually they were not allowed to receive an education, and they were not allowed passes to travel through the different segregated areas. Refusing to be
subjugated, many people aligned with various community groups in attempt to maintain a sense of self and national pride. Neil Lazarus states, “Many scholars active in postcolonial studies are, indeed positively cynical about decolonization and national liberation” (33). Mthethwa, in several artist statements, has declared his desire to show the successful decolonizing efforts of South African people. Several of Mthethwa’s photographs are published in the book Liberated Voices. The book is meant to be a collection of images that align with national liberation endeavors. This liberation is a key element to Mthethwa’s work. He sees his photography as a means of dismantling colonial power. Leela Gandhi, Professor of English at the University of Chicago, is a renowned postcolonial theorist. She coedits the academic journal Postcolonial Studies. Gandhi describes the way in which some people attempt to eradicate the colonial presence from their personal history. She implies, “Principally, postcolonial amnesia is symptomatic of the urge for historical self-invention or the need to make a new start—to erase the painful memories of colonial subordination” (Gandhi 4). Although Mthethwa’s work reaffirms his sitter’s authority of self, it inevitably incorporates elements of history. The subjects are not trying to erase their past but rather reappropriate their past. Essentially they are creating a new history.
The forgotten, the rejected, the ones living on the margins, the discarded. These are the abjectified people of civilization. Abjection can be understood as the disregard of a human by society. Abjection theory addresses issues of culture, subject, object, marginalization, borders, and identity of those who are cast off from society, relegated to the outside. Those who are abjected are on the borders of social order; they are marginalized and exist on the outskirts of a community. Elizabeth Grosz, an Australian academic who has written extensively on the work of Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan, argues that, “[Abjection] is what disturbs identity, system and order, disrupting social boundaries demanded by the symbolic. It respects no definite positions, or rules, boundaries, or socially imposed limits” (90). Both the Brick Workers series and the Contemporary Gladiators series shot in 2008 can be read with the abject lens.

Mthethwa photographed a group of a dozen women working on the edges of a small town in Mozambique for the Brick Workers series. The women buy loads of bricks from local businesses that have demolished buildings and they clean and resell those bricks to people who are building from scratch. Mthethwa notes that, “People are forced to be creative in creating their own jobs” due to the limited job availability in certain areas (“Interview with Okwui Enwezor”). Resourcefulness is a way of life. Contemporary Gladiators depicts the lifestyle of a group of young boys living off a landfill in Mozambique that is located next to the vacation resort, Phemba Beach Hotel. Covered in dirt, both the brick workers and the young boys in the landfill are taking advantage of their landscape, of the resources they have available. They exist and thrive despite society’s attempt to discard them. They are resourceful.

The Brick Workers and Contemporary Gladiator series are similar to Empty Beds, Interiors, and Women in Private Spaces, in that they display large format color photographs with
stoic figures filling the frames assertively. The *Brick Workers* and *Contemporary Gladiator* series differ from the previously mentioned three series in two significant ways. The images are not shot in the sitter’s home but rather in open space and they are not shot in South Africa. Mthethwa feels that it was a natural progression to move from confined spaces to open spaces. The significance of one’s home is equal to that of their working environment. The home is typically a more private space whereas one’s job is more public, but both locations are important to the subject’s livelihood. The message of dignity that Mthethwa captures in his previous images is also represented here.

In figure 3.1, two women stand together with a graveyard of bricks littered around them. White clouds fill a blue sky and bits of green grass grow on the margins of the piles of broken bricks the color of Caucasian flesh with bits of red scattered throughout. The women both have a firm gaze and mustard colored mud is smeared across their noses and cheeks. This appears to be a method for deterring the sun. The woman on the left wears a light green dress patterned with a dark purple and green print. There is a soft sheer pale green fabric making a V shape at her chest. The dress has a soft country feel with flowers and lace. Ruffles frame her torso. She also wears a cream-colored head wrap with a green circular print. She holds a tool in her right hand and the tendons in her neck protrude as if she is tense and feels the need to return to work. Her mouth is pulled in an interesting fashion. It is almost a smirk. “Zwelethu Mthethwa only enforces one rule on his sitters: they must not smile. It’s the antithesis of what one would expect a photographer to demand. This idea is founded in Mthethwa’s belief that smiles are rarely genuine. They’re a knee-jerk response to awkwardness, he suggests” (Corigall 9). The woman on the right does not smile either. She wears a purplish pink skirt with a black circular printed pattern and a blue denim button up shirt. She has a light purple head wrap with a dark purple plaid pattern.
Figure 3.1: *Untitled, from Brick Workers series, 2008*

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Her right hand awkwardly drapes over the other woman’s shoulder and her left hand falls naturally to her side. She has a bracelet on her right wrist and her mouth looks as if she is letting a small puff of air escape. Debris surrounds the women: bricks, plastic, wood, cardboard. They have stopped for a moment to be photographed and then surely will return to work. They are taking the discarded bricks, the bricks that no one wanted, and they are turning that trash into profit. They are sustaining life on others garbage.

These women have formed a community focused around their labor. This community grows out of the job they have created in recovering discarded bricks and repurposing them. Venn implies that, “The different devices that marginalized or subordinate groups have invented or preserved for keeping alive memories of their past are crucial in sustaining the ‘identity’ of the community and in informing resistance” (271). These women without a doubt are resisting the limitations of their circumstances in addition to maintaining a sense of community. They are reappropriating the bricks that once were the foundation of buildings that have ceased to be. They are also creating an identity, that of the brick worker, from the materials that are at their disposal.

Mthethwa has captured a picture of these women in their work environment. He has created a piece of art by freezing this moment. The women in this photo become the center of the work. Dr. John Lechte, Professor of Sociology at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, wrote his dissertation under the supervision of Julia Kristeva. His current research is concerned with society, culture, and problems of the image. Lechte claims that, “Kristeva views art less as an object, and more as a process, or practice, which ‘creates’ the subject” (Lechte 24). The women that pose in the brickyard for Mthethwa receive a copy of their likeness. They have been cast off from society and are working in the dirt and yet they maintain an element of stoic pride.
as they confront the camera, knowing they will eventually hold that image, that frozen moment, a representation of their identity. Mthethwa has given them a means of representation and in this act the subject is created. The women are not being objectified. The process by which Mthethwa creates his art is a shared process. The sitters of the photograph are asked to actively participate in the representation of their image. Often the people in the photographs have actually asked Mthethwa to take their picture. Mthethwa states that, “It’s very important for me to develop a sense of trust between myself and the sitters” (“Interview with Okwui Enwezor”). The trust and respect that are established and exchanged between the photographer and the photographed blurs the lines of abjection. Though society has cast off these women, Mthethwa has brought them back into the light.

There is an element of darkness that is associated with the idea of the abject. The dark human relegated to the dark folds of society where they are not to be seen. Their filth kept away from the white pristine cleanliness of an orderly and pretty society. They are hiding in the shadows and living on the margins. Julia Kristeva, literary critic and current Professor of Cultural Theory and Feminism at the University of Paris, Diderot, has written extensively on abjection theory. She states in her book Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection that “There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, and the thinkable” (1). The dark revolts of being can be seen as the revolt of society against the castaways. Mthethwa brings the discarded subject into focus, into the light, albeit a natural light. Mthethwa has made it very clear that he tries to refrain from using any type of flash in his photography, as he does not want to attempt to glamorize the image. He is aware of the
delicate subject matter of which he is taking pictures and wants to make sure the image is produced in a way that is natural and real and assures respect of the subject.

The process of creating this image relies on both Mthethwa and the people in the photograph. Lechte implies that, “Artistic endeavour, especially in its forms of literature and painting, has always featured prominently in Julia Kristeva’s writing, because for Kristeva, as a psychoanalyst, there is no fundamental discontinuity between the production of a work of art and the life of the individual” (24). If both the artist and the subject participate in the creation of the art then both the artist and the subject are equally affected by his or her relationship to the work. Furthermore, Lechte claims that, “To say that the work of art has analytic effects is to imply that it has the capacity for enlarging the symbolic (artistic, linguistic, religious) and imaginary capacities of the subject who appreciates it” (33). The symbolic capacities are among the most important elements of Mthethwa’s photographs. The identity of the artist and the subject are created in that moment that the image is produced.

A moment, a snapshot, of the identity of the young boy, standing upon the heap of trash in figure 3.2, is temporarily frozen for the viewer to observe. The boy stands in the center of the image. The cloudy sky contrasts the dark pile of trash that is compacted beneath his bare feet. There are layers of dirt, plastic bottles, sticks, scraps of paper, and cans littering the Mozambique landfill. Unknown to the outside viewer, a hotel resort lies outside of the borders of this landfill. Outside of the frame of this dirt and filth lies luxury and opulence. The boy’s arm is akimbo; he wears a red t-shirt with “SUPER BOYS” written in yellow followed by a blue “7.” The shirt appears to have a basketball or soccer ball on it. He has on dark colored shorts. He looks defiant with his right fist curled into a little ball, his head slightly cocked to the side in an assertive
Figure 3.2: *Untitled, from Contemporary Gladiator series, 2008*

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fashion, and his knee slightly bent with his foot turned out. The boy does not smile and his face is partially hidden by a shadow.

The viewer of the photograph must interpret the meaning of the boy, his environment, his positioning inside the frame, his body language, and what each of these elements donates to the creation and understanding of his identity. This young boy is literally living in trash. He has been abjectified by a society that has thrown him away. With his hand on his hip and his sassy interaction with the viewer, it is clear that the young boy is not intimidated by being observed. In spite of the trash that monopolizes the ground, this young boy owns his space, he appears to own his identity within in the space. Grosz claims:

The subject’s acquisition of a sense of self, of continuous identity, is the result of the child’s ability to locate itself within a body in space, and thus have spatial comportment. Incidentally, the mirror stage not only presents the subject with an image of itself, it also duplicates in representational form the environment, enabling real and virtual space to be directly compared. (84)

The mirror stage is a theoretical concept developed by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. In the mirror stage infants recognize themselves in the mirror. This mirror may be literal or symbolic. This realization of self is seen as a moment of connection between the imaginary and the real and the ego and the body. The mirror stage is also where the subject becomes alienated from his or her self. Where is Lacan’s mirror stage for a young boy with no mirror? Could this image serve as a mirror, although this young boy has outgrown infancy? The moment at which children see their own likeness is a moment of self-awareness and simultaneously an ostracization from self. As stated before, Mthethwa collaborates with the subjects of his
photographs to create their likeness. This collaboration perpetuates the manifestation of identity. But what are the borders and margins of this identity?

Borders play an important role in the understanding of this image. The juxtaposition of filth and poverty that is brought to the forefront of the image defies the pristine luxury that lies outside the frame of the image. Kristeva asserts that, “We may call it a border, abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (9). The viewer could interpret the landfill itself as a danger to the young boy. In addition, the boy is ostracized from the resort that lies outside the walls of his space. He is just on the edge. He is close but not close enough to assimilate.
4  CULTURAL STUDIES: SUGAR CANE AND GOLD MINERS

Political, economic, and social structures are essential elements of Mthethwa’s work. Cultural studies focus on the significance of activities of everyday life in addition to the aforementioned superstructures. The *Sugar Cane* and *Gold Miners* series are centered on the labor of African workers just as the aforementioned *Brick Workers* and *Contemporary Gladiator* series focus on work. “Cultural studies has always been concerned to examine critically and to restructure the relationship between dominant and subordinated cultures” (Fiske 164). By looking at the superstructures in which these photographs exist—out of which they grow—the viewer can better understand the significance of the images.

According to Mthethwa, there is one major difference of the *Sugar Cane* series in comparison to the *Gold Miners* series. He states to the Jack Shainman gallery that:

> Whereas the *Sugar Cane* Series dealt with open space and landscape, the *Gold Mine* series almost moves back in the direction of the private spaces in that the workers are working in a very confined space and although it is essentially public in that it belongs to the mining company, it is also private because of the limited space and close proximity in which the miners work. Going underground made sense as a way of showing the contrast between inside/outside; private and public/communal. (*Jackshainman.com*)

Mthethwa’s earlier series of photographs, which focused on private spaces, intersect with the 2008 series that focuses on public spaces.

In Mthethwa’s 2008 *Sugar Cane* series, he photographs the dangerous working conditions of the modern day plantation workers. In one image from this series, figure 4.1, the
Figure 4.1: *Untitled*, from *Sugar Cane* series, 2003

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subject of the photograph faces the camera holding a machete and cane hook. These are the tools of his trade. His arms are slightly bent as if he could swing either of his tools in the direction of the viewer. He carries himself in a regal manner bearing his chest proudly. The center of his chest carries a scar the remnants of an injury. He stoically sports his red skirt and black boots. His sweat stained and tattered shirt hangs around his neck. Only two buttons are fastened on the shirt that looks as if it might have once been a cream color with pinstripes. It has withered to a dingy grey. A tattered hat sits atop the man’s head. His brow is slightly furrowed as he squints his eyes in the sun. His gaze is turned directly towards the viewer and some facial hair frames his unsmiling mouth. He is positioned against the rolling green cultivated landscape and cloudless blue sky. There are cuts into the green grass behind his right shoulder that clearly show the borders of crops. The cane stubbles at the man’s feet is trampled and compressed.

The composition of the picture and the subject’s unwavering presence in the photograph do not allow the viewer to feel sympathy. There is almost an element of fear the image invokes as the subject asserts his masculinity and strength as he stands before the viewer as though he was a samurai. In an interview with Okwui Enwezor, Mthethwa states that the sugar cane workers in their loose clothing and with their stoic positioning reminded him of samurai movies he saw as a child (Vimeo.com). The weather is hot and humid and they wear layers of clothing for protection so the sugar cane will not cut their skin. The clothing needs to be loose so that their skin can get air and doesn’t become irritated. Like the inhabitants of the hostels in the Empty Beds series the subjects in this series of photographs are displaced. The workers come from rural areas to the farms looking for work. Mthethwa came to this particular farm for the Sugar Cane series because he knows the owners. Mthethwa states that, “My sister-in-law and my brother bought a…sugarcane farm. The government sold a lot of farms in the composition of
transformation to black people” (“Interview with Okwui Enwezor”). In attempts to disrupt the social order of white farm owners and non-white laborers the Mthethwas were able to acquire a farm.

During apartheid there were four distinct categories of segregation: Black, White, Coloured, and Indian. These divisions may have been deconstructed as legal representations of South Africa’s people, but they are still present in contemporary society. The forty-six years of racial segregation, which legally began in 1948, leaves an indelible imprint on these postcolonial peoples. Over one million South Africans of Indian origin now live in the country. Their ancestors were brought over as indentured servants in the 19th century to work on the sugar plantations and in the coal and gold mines. This group of Indian South Africans is the largest concentration of Indians born outside of India. They received their own color class during apartheid, which often muddled the distinctions between white, colored, Asian, or Indian. Apartheid attempted to regulate all racial identities and classifications. The issue of race and employment is a problem that South Africa still struggles with till this day. The fact that Mthethwa’s brother was able to buy a plantation is a step away from the previous limitations.

Jobs were and still are hard to come by for most non-white South Africans. The Natives Urban Areas Act of 1923 often separated families from one another. Men were usually forced to look for work in urban areas in white-only districts, whereas women were domestic or agricultural laborers. The forced racial segregation of residential areas and removal of people from their homes created a demand for people to find work outside of their communities, much like the displaced men represented in the hostels in the Empty Bed series and the women in the Brick Workers series. This separation of people from their community to search for work creates a fissure in the home. There have been many studies documenting the AIDS epidemic in South
Africa and this forced separation of families is often seen as one of the many catalysts for the continued issue of AIDS. These issues disrupt the continuity of community. Ian Chambers’ position on the significance of community is, that “…even if the migrant still clings to an imagined community, it is one that is always accompanied by the transformations of its culture, tradition, language, even religious rites and myths, into a translated space in which both it, and the host community, undergo transformation” (162). The space that the subject occupies is a space captured by Mthethwa’s photography, but the contents of the image, the memories, the representation of self and of culture, the familiarity of the objects within the borders of the image undoubtedly are owned by the subject. Art is the means by which the memory of the subject’s culture has been momentarily frozen or saved.

Victor Burgin is an artist and writer who is well known for his political photography that fuses images and text. He has written in detail about art, culture, and the history of consciousness. He states in his essay, “Art, Common Sense and Photography”:

> Manipulation is the essence of photography; photography would not exist without it. In photography, certain physical materials are technically handled so that meanings are produced. Photographers are people who manipulate the physical means of production of photography: cameras, film, lighting, objects, people. Using the productive capabilities of photography to reproduce the world as an object of aesthetic contemplation, and nothing else, is no less ‘manipulative’ than is any other use of photography: to turn away is an act, to turn away from social relevance is a political act, and to perform such acts in every working moment adds up to political policy. (Burgin 41)
Photography equals manipulation; however, manipulation does not inevitably denote negative or ill intentions. The struggle photographers manipulated their images in a way to depict their subjects’ victimization (often with the intentions of inspiring political change). Mthethwa manipulates his images to restore dignity and this too is a political act. The subject is reclaiming their space and their identity and reappropriating it as their own.

Mthethwa’s brother’s acquisition of a plantation could be seen as a reappropriation of the plantation. There was a time when Mthethwa had to change his major to attend an all white university. His brother now owns a plantation that is undeniably associated with white ownership and subordination of non-whites. In the book Geography of Sugar Cane: Environmental, Structural and Economical Aspects of Cane Sugar Production the argument is made that, “The intensive use of cheap labour, particularly black slaves and later indentured Indian labourers, resulted in a specific settlement pattern and a special social structure, causing rigid social stratification and racial tension” (Blume 163). The ownership of plantations by non-whites disrupts this polarization.

There are other ways to read this reversal of roles. Franz Fanon is a French-Algerian psychiatrist and postcolonial theorist who researched the cultural impact of colonization focusing on both race and class. In his book Wretched of the Earth, he purposes that, “The look that the native turns on the settler’s town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession” (Fanon 30). Mthethwa’s work implies that he disagrees with this sentiment. Even though his brother is a plantation owner it does not mean that he became so out of lust or envy. Mthethwa’s work suggests that the decolonized person is reclaiming the settlers’ town and does not envy their shallow ideas of possession. Rather the sits of the photographs are affirming their status as individuals of a recovering community that refuses to be subordinate or seen as
inferior. His photography does not excuse the inhumanity of the conditions these workers are subjected to but rather chooses to focus on the ways in which they persevere regardless of oppression.

In figure 4.2, from the *Gold Miners* series photographed in 2005, a migrant worker faces the camera as he leans on the tractor. The man wears a dingy jumpsuit/overalls and a hard hat. He has on heavy white rubber boots that are dirty and scuffed. Pops of color dominate the photograph. A construction pole and metal rack, both orange, are behind the worker and occupy the back wall is splattered and smeared with yellow, black, red, and white paint. The man’s purple scarf is the focal point of the image. The viewer’s eye then travels down his chest to the blue flashlight that hangs from a yellow rope about his hips. His left arm is propped up on a tractor that sits on tracks that run across the concrete floor. There are several tires in the image and a piece of white plastic hangs over the edge of the machine. The man’s right hand is softly curled in a relaxed fashion and his left boot is kicked up on top of the toe of his right boot. He appears relaxed as if he could be on break. He looks directly at the camera with his lips closed. The tractor that he leans on is one that he uses in his inhumane working environment. The temperatures in the mines often reach unbearable heights.

Mthethwa conversed with the gold miners prior to photographing them, and he asked them why they agreed to work in such horrific conditions. They explained that although the conditions were terrible they were appreciative of their employment, as they were aware that many of their peers were not as lucky to have any type of work. Mthethwa is very cognizant of his presence in the space of the subject of his photographs. In an interview with Okwui Enwezor, he discusses the way that he interacts with the sitters of his photographs prior to photographing
Figure 4.2: *Untitled*, from *Gold Miners* series, 2006

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them and the significance of establishing respect and trust in regards to identity and space.

Mthethwa states:

I will take the photos and then process them and I will go back and give them copies of the photo so that they [can] see how they have been depicted. That further enhances the trust between us. You know that is very, very important for me. Once you…get into their intimate spaces you have to respect them. It is very, very crucial that you respect them. One thing that I must point out as well, is that by me moving into their spaces that they are very familiar with, it gives them a certain kind of power to be very assertive, to be very sure of themselves.

(“Interview with Okwui Enwezor”).

The relationship of the photographer and the photographed is an element of Mthethwa’s photography that attributes to the proud, realistic, and respectful nature the images are produced. Had Mthethwa snapped the images without the knowledge or consent of the sitter, the photograph would take on a whole different reading. Furthermore, by Mthethwa agreeing to bring a copy of the finished product to the sitter of the photograph he assists in the creation of a new cultural identity for the subject. The interaction, collaboration, and cooperation add to the cultural significance of manifesting a new history.

History, the memory of history, is a form of narration. Narrative elements are an integral part of Mthethwa’s work. Furthermore, oral storytelling is the predominant way African cultures pass on their history and the memories of their community. In an interview with Bongi Dhlomo Mthethwa states, “The primary influence in my work is my mother. The narrative approach that I use stems from her story-telling tradition” (qtd. in Herreman & D’Amato 70). Mthethwa mimics his mother’s oral storytelling by creating a visual narration. Narrative theory is a facet of cultural
studies. It is the concept that narration is fundamental in one’s understanding of the human experience. It is the belief that although narratives in various cultures may be different in construction, they have a similar effect on culture. There is a dualistic nature to of narration: that of existing as a story and as a discourse. Mthethwa’s work is extremely narrative. Each detail and composition choice donates to the meaning that may be drawn from the work, contributing and enriching its story. These stories are the threads of a new history. They create a new discourse with which to better understand the environment in which the image is created, the culture out of which the image grows out of, and the human experience that it alludes to.

The subject matter of Mthethwa’s photography directly works against a sordid history of colonizer and colonized. Whereas Fanon sees “The native [as] an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor” (Fanon 41), Mthethwa’s subjects do not identify themselves as being oppressed or as victims. They do not want to become the persecutor but rather they want to reclaim their status as human, as worthy. Edward Said’s interpretation of the Orient as an unstable construct also applies to the systematic structures and their fallibility in South Africa as well. “Neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other” (Said xvii). Allowing the identity of the “other” to be perpetuated sustains colonial influence. Mthethwa’s work which is a means of disrupting this construct of the Other destabilizes colonial significance and allows the subject to form a new identity outside of the limitations of historical constructs of subordination. Margaret Olin, Professor at Yale University, researches the association of art and visual memory. In her article, “Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes’s “Mistake” Identification,” Olin states that, “The moment of identification, unlike that of illumination, does not distinguish photography from other visual images, or even from
encounters in the world at large. At work in any personal exchange, identification plays an integral role in the formation of groups” (99). As Olin implies, any personal exchange is a key element of construction of one’s identity. The construction of identity can be seen in Mthethwa’s photographs as he lends to the sitters a means of saving their memories of that moment, of their mark on their society, in their culture.
5 CONCLUSION: COMMON GROUND

*Empty Beds, Interiors, Women in Private Spaces, Brick Workers, Contemporary Gladiators, Sugar Cane,* and *Gold Miners* are seven very different series of photographs by Zwelethu Mthethwa. As different as the images in each of these series are, they maintain some key aspects that make it easy to walk into any museum room and immediately recognize each individual piece as the work of a single artist. The aesthetic similarities between Mthethwa’s various series include: bold colors, attention to detail, proud faces, and a lack of smiles with an abundance of stoicisim. Themes that overlap among the series: boundaries, identity, narration, culture, relationships between subject/object and photographer/photographed, history, authenticity, and marginalization. Mthethwa’s work serves as a cultural story of a new African southern identity.

Zwelethu Mthethwa creates a different lens through which the South African decolonized person can be understood. Franz Fanon eloquently describes this process:

> Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a programme of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of natural shock, nor of friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content. (27)

Mthethwa’s body of work restores dignity to a people that have been oppressed and subjected by colonization and its aftermath. The subjects of the photographs who could be seen as victims reclaim their domicile and workspaces. There is an element of authority that challenges the limitations of the boundaries that have been set for those who have been subordinated. Mthethwa
is taking action by creating these photographs to lessen the stain that a sordid history has left on his people.

As previously mentioned, Mthethwa participated the African Sniper Project. He implies his bold and colorful work is not politically charged in the way black and white struggle photography is. In an interview with Sean O’Toole Mthethwa states, “I…realised that the mythology of black-and-white photography is attached to a political agenda, which is used for both good and bad. I decided I would employ colour to represent the colour of the places my subjects inhabited. Colour is just so beautiful. When you see beauty you think less of poverty.” If black and white photography is attached to a political agenda then one could discern that color photography is not politically charged. Yet, Mthethwa chose to participate in a politically-inspired art project. For example the name of the art exhibition was politically motivated. “The Senghorian Snipers were the Cubists, the Dadaists, the Surrealists and all those who, rejecting the canons of the Academy, embarked on new adventures. Using the same term over a half of a century later, we are choosing the same objectives” (Njami 20). The African Sniper Project exhibition was a politically positioned exhibit. Mthethwa’s efforts to restore dignity can coexist in the political spectrum. Mthethwa’s photographs give the subject a voice. And although the artist’s intention may not be politically motivated, his actions are giving the sitters of the photographs a political identity.

By taking photographs of the abjectified women in the Brick Workers series and the young discarded boys in the Contemporary Gladiators series, he further perpetuates this power to disrupt social order. Mthethwa simultaneously criticizes the conditions produced by imperial capitalism in postcolonial South Africa and implies the double abjection to which the young children of the landfills and the women of the brickyard are subjected. They are consuming
waste, and they are themselves considered abject. Mthethwa is bringing them out of the rubbish and giving them an opportunity to be seen. No one wants to see the abject, no one wants to acknowledge the “shit” of society. By Mthethwa giving these subjects a platform with which to communicate with the world outside the landfill/brickyard, he is reversing abjection. The title *Contemporary Gladiators* challenges the consequences of the destabilization and decomposition of family structures. In this situation the children have become responsible for their own sustenance and socialization. Although non-whites no longer need passes to cross the color lines, they are still limited in their access to work. As aforementioned, this creates a fissure in the family structure and in the case of these children has forced the children to become self-sufficient. “The general result for the capitalist-sponsored restructuring of class relations…has been devastating for the broad majority of people affected by it” (Lazarus 25). The issues created by colonization persist long after decolonization, but people find a way to preserve despite the limitations of their surroundings, for example the resourceful brick workers who reclaim the unwanted bricks, clean them, and resell them. Carol Magee argues in her article, “Spatial Stories: Photographic Practices and Urban Belonging,” that “Mthethwa’s photographs make these workers visible. He ensures that they are remembered, acknowledged, made present in understandings of South African urban spaces. His portraits assert that they belong in and to the urban fabric of South African life” (120). The subjects, even though they have been cast off from society, are able to leave a permanent mark. They are a significant part of the history of their culture.

It is key to keep in mind the cultural significance of the relationship between the photographer and the photographed. Mthethwa discusses his interaction with the people he photographs, as previously discussed in regards to the gold miners. He explains that he asks the
person if he can photograph them and then he allows them to arrange their settings as they please in addition to bathing or changing clothes so that they can make themselves presentable. For the image from *Interiors* figure 2.1, the young boy specifically asked if he could bath for the photograph. He wanted to present the best image of himself. They have the power to represent themselves, as they would like to be seen. Often the sitters of the photographs want to know why Mthethwa wants to take their photographs. In an interview for the Aperture Foundation, he responds, “There are two kinds of history and I like to tell our own kind of history” (“Interview with Okwui Enwezor”). It is important both to Mthethwa and the sitters in his photographs to participate in this discourse of narration and development of a new history.

This shared history is one of the overriding themes of Mthethwa’s work. Mthethwa feels that the American South has struggled with similar strife as the African South, as represented in his images from South Africa and Mozambique. Mthethwa did his first photographs outside of Africa in post-Katrina New Orleans in a series titled *Common Ground*. He states in regards to the similarities between South Africa and New Orleans that

> Both [locations] are in the south of the respective countries, and the land and homes belonged to those who are marginalized…there were so many similarities. Both places were beset by natural disaster; I saw homes that had been destroyed by flood [New Orleans] and wildfires [Cape Town]. In a sense I was trying to create a bridge of commonality between two very different, but also similar places and circumstances. (*Zwelethu Mthethwa* 96)

Figure 5.1 from *Common Ground*, looks similar to the images that Mthethwa has taken in the shanty towns of South Africa. Storm clouds fill the sky as a spot of blue peaks through the white and grey. The building is cobalt blue and pale yellow. A window is framed in blue with curled
Figure 5.1: *Untitled*, from *Common Ground*, 2008

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metal bars blocking entrance through the window. In sharp red, the numbers 675 and the letter A are spray painted on the wall. After the hurricane the houses had to be searched for survivors and damages needed to be assessed, these evaluations were documented with spray paint on the outsides of the buildings. Often the graffiti represented the date the building was searched, the unit who conducted the search, what contamination was found, and the number of deceased found inside the location. The roof of the colorful shack is made of corrugated metal. The building looks like a hodgepodge of found materials: metal, wood, plywood, and plastic (much like that of the shanty town abodes). The similarities between this image and images taken in the south of Africa force the viewer to consider the relationship of these two southern locations.

Bhabha claims that, “The fatality of thinking of ‘local’ cultures as uncontaminated or self-contained forces us to conceive of ‘global’ cultures” (“Cultures In-Between” 54). The idea of global cultures implies global connections, people reaching across the boundaries and connecting with one another. Bhabha argues that

\[
\text{Culture becomes as much an uncomfortable, disturbing practice of survival and supplementarity—between art and politics, past and present, the public and the private—as its resplendent being is a moment of pleasure, enlightenment or liberation. It is from narrative positions that the postcolonial prerogative seeks to affirm and extend a new collaborative dimension, both within the margins of the nation-space and across boundaries between nations and people” (Location of Culture 175).}
\]

Each of the aforementioned images momentarily freezes a memory of African history. The representation of that history may not always be comfortable or pretty, but it is raw and blatantly honest. Mthethwa’s photography eloquently captures and creates a new history that works
against the limitations that society so often attempts to set on the marginalized, the off cast, the down trodden. The people that are often “forgotten” are often the people that define a community and Mthethwa has given his society a means to come out of the shadows and back into the light. He brings the public into the private spaces of the subjects. His bold and colorful photographs blur the boundaries that South Africa has historically tried so hard to maintain.


O’Toole, Sean. “In Conversation with Zwelethu Mthethwa.” *ArtThrob.co.za.* 83 (July 2004).


Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude; The Other Mexico; Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude; Mexico and the United States; The Philanthropic Ogre.* New York: Grove Press, 1985. Print.


APPENDIX

The following appendix includes permission from Zwelethu Mthethwa for use of 8 of his images within the context of my thesis. The images are to be used for research and educational purposes only and are not to be replicated without consent of the artist.
Appendix A: Image Use Permission

15 February 2010

Dear Zwelethu Mthethwa:

I am writing to request permission to use 8 of your images in my thesis. My aim is to reproduce your images in print within the context of my thesis in order to increase availability for educational and research purposes. The following Notice of Copyright will be included in the thesis where the works appear:

“The reproductions in this thesis are being used for research consultation and scholarly purposes only. Further distribution and/or any commercial use of the works from this thesis are strictly forbidden without the permission of Zwelethu Mthethwa.”

Please let me know if there is any alternate or additional copyright information you would like included in the text.

1. Untitled, from Empty Beds series (2002), of the room with the bed and 2 jackets hanging on the seafoam green wall
2. Untitled, from Interiors series (shot between 1995-2005) of the young boy beside the blue plastic water basin with the portrait of the dignitary behind him
3. Untitled, from Women in Private Spaces series (2005) of the house with yellow wallpaper, the young child wrapped in the curtains of the doorway and the woman sitting, arm akimbo
4. Untitled, from Sugar Cane series (2003) of the man with the red skirt, machete and hook
5. Untitled, from Gold Miners series (2006) of the man with the purple kerchief around his neck and his arm propped on the equipment
6. Untitled, from Brick Workers series (2008) of the 2 women standing and facing the camera, one is wearing green and the other is wearing purple
7. Untitled, from Contemporary Gladiators series (2008) of the young boy in a red and yellow shirt that says "super boy #7" standing on top of the landfill with his hand on his hip
8. Untitled, from Common Grounds series (2008) of the blue and yellow shanty with 675A

Please review this letter, sign it, scan it, and email it back to me. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me. Thank you in advance for your assistance in allowing me to make these works more widely accessible and useful for scholarship.

Sincerely,

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