

National College of Art & Design

Illustration, Design

## How is Blackness intrinsically Queer?

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How is Blackness intrinsically Queer?	3
Foreword: Discovering Pleasure	4
Introduction	6
Chapter one:	7
Who the hell am I? What is going on? What am I doing here?	7
Ireland, Our Scene, Black Queer and Irish	8
Identity, The Self, The Space in which we exist	9
Chapter Two:	12
What? Why? And for how much longer?	12
Society, Queerness, Heteronormativity	14
Queerness and just not normative?	16
Defining and Accepting Difference/Sameness and Our Identifiers	17
African Homosexuality - History, Colonisation and Repercussions	19
Case Study: Motsoalle relationships	20
Slavery, Racism and Black Hetero - Queerness	21
Chapter three: It's in the Art	23
Zanele Muholi	23
Bla/Q - Zainab Bolande and Origins Eile	29
Conclusion	34
Appendix	35
An interview I conducted between Myself and Zainab Boladale, the creator of the Bla/Q exhibition:	35
Bibliography:	37

#### List of illustrations:

- Figure. 1 Orla O Boyle, Discovering Pleasure, 2020, pen and paper, A5, Tongues Origins Eile, p.4
- Fig. 2 Black Queer Studies - A critical anthology, Book cover, 2005, p.13
- Fig. 3 Zanele Muholi, Somnyama Ngonyama hail the dark lioness, 2014, photograph, Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York, p.24
- Fig. 4 Zanele Muholi, Miss D'vine I, Johannesburg, 2007, Photograph, Courtesy of the Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, galleries, p.26
- Fig. 5 Zanele Muholi, "Brave Beauties" series - Dimpho Tsotetsi, Parktown, 2014. Photograph, Courtesy of the Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, galleries, p.27
- Fig. 6 Zanele Muholi, Yaya Mavundla, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2017, Photograph, Courtesy of the Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, galleries, p.28
- Fig. 7 Origins Eile, Macy Stewart, Bla/Q, 2021, Photography, Origins Eile, p.30
- Fig. 8 Origins Eile, Bla/Q, 2021, Digital Image, Origins Eile, p.31
- Fig. 9 Origins Eile, Macy Stewart, Bla/Q, 2021, Photography, Origins Eile, p.33

## How is Blackness intrinsically Queer?

“Nonetheless—and at the risk of seeming to create divisiveness when unity and community are the overriding goals—we believe that the term “black queer” captures and, in effect, names the specificity of the historical and cultural differences that shape the experiences and expressions of “queerness.” Johnson and Henderson (2005)

## Foreword: Discovering Pleasure



Figure. 1 Orla O Boyle, *Discovering Pleasure*, 2020, pen and paper, A5, Tongues Origins Eile

“It has taken me years to discover my body, and deepen my understanding of what it truly is. Time spent staring at it, touching it, admiring it. I’m still unsure of it, but I am learning. I love it. The beauty of our bodies is that they change. They change shape, they squeeze and grow. With this evolution comes a change in our feelings and our respective relationships to our bodies. The connection between mind and body can be a struggle, but it can also be harmonious.

I spent most of my adolescent life in a string of heterosexual relationships complying with societal norms. I was led to believe that heteronormativity was what I wanted, not by anyone in particular, just by the expectations of the world we exist in. It wasn’t until separating from that part of my life that I fully discovered my queerness. What I desire and how I present myself now is not tied to anyone but myself, not attached to any societal expectations but my own. It is from this new understanding of myself that I am redefining my relationship to pleasure.

Previously, I found myself designing my appearance to appeal to the desires of cis men; the ones I have dated, and men in general. I have since begun my journey toward finding sanctuary within my own pleasure, unaffected by power dynamics and unaltered to fit the expectations of others.

I have spent the past year single, using the time to explore a kind of self fulfilling pleasure, both emotionally and physically. Engaging in sexual relationships and connecting with other Queer people has given me a whole new perspective on who I am. I use my art to illustrate my perceptions of and observations on what I’m feeling in relation to my body, sex and my evolving relationship with myself.”

A piece written by myself for ‘Tongues’ a queer black publication 2020.

## Introduction

This thesis explores the relationship between what we understand of queerness and the connection it has to blackness. It will initially give a brief explanation of the Black and Queer community in Ireland and the personal accounts of Black and Queer Irish people. It will explore the bounds of queer theory in relation to black history and the results of colonisation. This work will question and divulge into the idea that blackness as it stands socially, is inherently queer. My objective for this thesis is to answer the question ‘How is blackness intrinsically queer?’.

This work includes the studies of Johnson and Henderson (2005), including the essays and theories of Cathy J. Cohen (1997). It includes a case study of Moatsalle relationships of South Africa and will explore the art of Zanele Muholi.

Chapter one will pose the question of ‘Who the hell am I? What is going on? What am I doing here?’. Chapter two goes on to discuss the history of society, queerness and heteronormativity and finally Chapter three studies the importance of art surrounding this topic and the results it has on our community and our place in history.

## Chapter one:

### Who the hell am I? What is going on? What am I doing here?

The Background to this project (Thesis.)

The question of self is something that assumedly every conscious human goes through. A myriad of questions and explorations and desire to have meaning and purpose in this life.

But what happens to those of us who for reasons external to ourselves may find an answer, but cannot find a place or means to be accepted into this society that has been coded for people other than ourselves.

Of course society is ever expanding and evolving and adapting, but where do we stand when the prescribed boxes don't have a match for the crossovers.

Examining the relation both internally and externally between blackness and queerness is ever present but also runs deep.

In a society where the only predetermined existence for differentiating between races, sexualities and genders is a direct result of 'whiteness' and colonisation. Now being black and queer and scrambling for our space, for a right to our existence is shattered into the worlds placements.

## Ireland, Our Scene, Black Queer and Irish

In present day Dublin, Ireland the black queer scene is only beginning. After years of so many first generation immigrant children and families growing up and discovering their sexuality and feeling wholly misplaced in this country and at home, there existed a dire need for belonging.

“Being black and LGBTQIA+ in Ireland we are faced with constant injustices regarding our identities and livelihoods. We experience many years of silencing ourselves in the company of friends or family in the name of safety and security.” Mou (2020)

During the lockdown of 2021 there was a desperate need felt by so many to connect to oneself and others alike. Suddenly, as if from nowhere so many of Ireland’s black queers began to congregate. With multiple introductions made over an online space almost daily, an influx of names and pronouns and social media profiles shared it was a rush of euphoria. Everyone felt it. We were making history.

“I knew that the burden of existing on the peripheries of society wasn’t mine alone to bear. I knew that there was an overwhelming need for a space to call our own. Black Pride Ireland’s existence was never intended to prove anything to anyone. It’s merely a testament of our existence and our need for solace with people that remind us of ourselves.” Hamid (2020)

This massive growth to the Irish queer black community is hugely owed to Karen Miano and Mia Nunes of Origins Eile. Origins Eile which is a grassroots organisation/ curatorial collective founded in 2017 which unites and supports black and queer creatives and artists

in Ireland. Not only supporting the black and queer creative scene in Ireland, Origins Eile provides spaces for us, the black queer community to meet and connect. In 2020 Origins Eile published 'Tongues', a black and queer publication that "honours and amplifies a diverse range of identities, voices and perspectives present within our community." This group in particular is a main focus point of how this project has come to be. Not only Origins Eile but also Black Queer Book club, a new group that has suddenly found ground to meet and expand within the community here in Ireland. 'Black queer book club' is giving artists, writers and performers a platform to share our thoughts, work and ideas as well as a book club to meet and discuss books and writings of black authors.

### Identity, The Self, The Space in which we exist

The self understanding of someone who is black and is queer is living in a constant state of being "othered". In white spaces, you are black.

Using 'white spaces' as a hugely broad statement, this is referencing the media, universities, and general everyday experiences. The list could continue on, but in a wide sense of the western world, it is safe to use the description 'white spaces'. Within white spaces of course, there are queer spaces.

Finally, a place to be, amongst the other outcasts of our prescribed societal walls. Only it is such, that majority of these queer spaces are indeed, white.

"We are living in a world that is remarkably hostile to anyone diverting from its narrow track [...] For too long we've led a transient existence. Floating from one overwhelmingly heterosexual space, to a queer one that is overwhelmingly white."  
Hamid (2020)

Now, this can be argued as “circumstantial” of geographical situations. However for historical and violent reasons, that is not the case.

“That is why our existence is inherently political. The ways in which Black Queer folk are dehumanised across the world is savagery of the highest order. From our siblings on the African continent fighting endlessly for a semblance of peace and respect, to our trans siblings in the U.S who are murdered at an alarmingly high rate. Their names are never screamed as loudly as their cisgender male counterparts. Our realities are grim wherever we go. This is due in part to how deeply entrenched homophobia is within Black communities.” Hamid (2020)

There is then the existence of ‘black spaces’, tiny as they are and not at all a natural occurrence of the western world. They are rather an organised set of events or areas, even bars or clubs or college societies in which to meet and be around black people. This comes as a solace to so many young black people, who had grown up in white towns after years of being perhaps the only black person in their school and as a result, in a group of friends. After living an incredibly isolated and alienated lifestyle, finding these spaces to exist in can be a huge relief. However, for the queer black child, this can be just as damaging.

“Colonisation brought about the violent erasure of a diverse range of “Queer” people and practices existing on the African continent, and of course the enforcement of patriarchal cis-heteronormativity. Europeans dubbed what they perceived to be “Queer” practices as animalistic and barbaric using them as proof, alongside eugenics, that Black people were in fact subhuman and therefore suitable for enslavement. Whiteness as a construct is synonymous with cis-heteronormativity and queerness therefore became a source of much fear and hatred within the Black community.”

“Black people were and are still trying to prove their humanity as it relates to whiteness, and queerness (as one of the original justifications for enslavement) is seen to further distance Black folk from their “humanity.”

Nunes, Miano (2020)

Many young queer black people are ostracised from their black families and friends for being queer. Of course this is somewhat similar to people of every background, being queer

is widely met with disgust and shame worldwide. However it is the being black and being queer and being met with such hardship in this life from all sides that is so interesting in how it overlaps and why.

“With the passage of time under this white supremacist system, queerness was conveniently repackaged as a Western construct, causing the people who once historically led publicly homosexual lives or lived in polyamorous arrangements (sometimes both) to from at anything that deviated from the two-parent household model. Queerness became alien to Africa. We lost pieces of our history along the way, and we are now made out to be a product of western influence. Thus our blackness is always questioned and most times erased.” Hamid (2020)

## Chapter Two:

What? Why? And for how much longer?

“It is difficult to write about “pre-colonial queerness” because many practices that we, having been successfully indoctrinated in colonial ways of thinking, would now call “queer” were not considered as such by the people engaging in those practices. In many cases “queer” practices and ways of being were an integrated part of normal social life, part of daily ritual, part of spiritual practice, a cultural norm.”  
Nunes, Miano (2020)

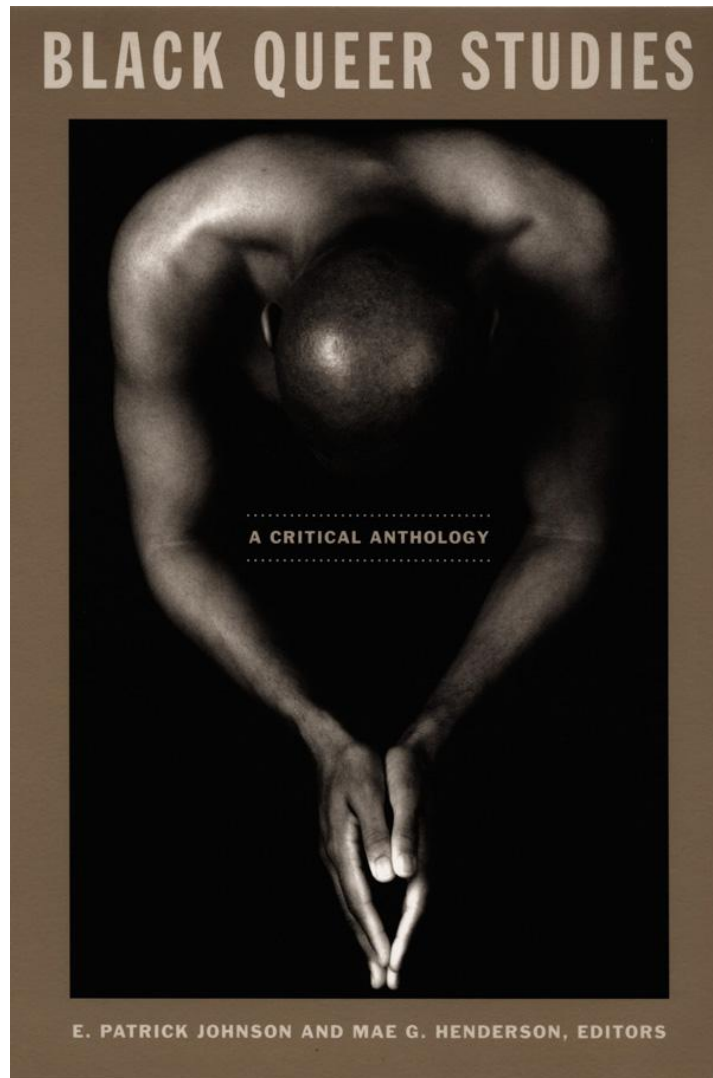


Fig. 2 Black Queer Studies - A critical anthology, Book cover, 2005

This chapter aims to construct and realise the connectedness of queerness and blackness, through a variety of case studies, readings and essays on the subject of queer theory and the construction of race. The title ‘What? Why? And for how much longer?’ Is to signify the deep rootedness of this subject and the historical lives of queer black people, alongside the

struggle for meaning, reason and a sense of belonging and home. The reality in fact is that black queer people are “othered” to heteronormativity in the ways in which diversity spans across normative society altogether. The above quote, written and composed by ‘Origins Eile’ on the topic of Decolonisation and the black queer body, is a indicator of this coming chapter and the understandings of pre and post colonial queerness amongst black individuals. In addition, the concept of queerness in and of itself. How the existence of non heteronormative society amongst black people in Africa, pre colonisation existed without gender, without the binary, and without heteronormativity whatsoever.

### Society, Queerness, Heteronormativity

“The social categories “women” and “men” are social constructs deriving from the western assumption that “physical bodies are social bodies”... The original impulse to apply this assumption transculturally is rooted in the simplistic notion that gender is a natural and universal way of organising society... But gender is socially constructed: it is historical and culture-bound.”  
Oyewumi (1997)

Oyeronke Oyewumi writes of the social categories of “women” and “men”, and how the basis of our socially constructed society has grasped, through the spread of western ideals, onto these non naturalistic ideas and forms of gender. The idea that our “physical bodies are social bodies”. To apply this theory and way of living, internationally and transculturally simply makes no sense. When the origin of the basis of gender is socially constructed, historical and cultural, to enforce those aspects of the ways we as people interact and grow and interconnect is destructive and simpleminded.

This simple categorization of gender has aided in the mass spread growth of the patriarchy, the objectification of women, the discrimination of the LGBTQ and the basis of so many

societal wrongs and hardships that have affected all “gendered” bodies, who are not cis white men. (Cis meaning, ‘Cis gendered’ which is when you identify as the gender you were assigned at birth.) The simple but violent concept of the existence of two genders, and all expectations that are a result of those boxes, are the cause of so much pain and suffering in the world.

Before continuing further, as this theory contains many abbreviated and normalised definitions and explanations, and as a lot of the basis of this subject lies to the subjection of colonisation, thus, ‘heteronormativity’. Heteronormativity should first be defined. Cathy J. Cohen explains it clearly in her writing on “The emergence of queer politics and a new politics of transformation.

“By “heteronormativity” I mean both those localized practices and those centralized institutions that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and “natural” within society. I raise the subject of heteronormativity because it is this normalizing practice/ power that has most often been the focus of queer politics.” Cohen (1997)

Society is heteronormative. In simplistic terms, in the not so deep, dark and political, but in the workings of everyday life. The music that you hear on the radio, the love songs between man and woman, It’s rampant in the media and always has been. The TV and films centering around heterosexual love stories and characters, predominantly white of course. It’s a component of everyday life, through advertisement, music, media. The assumption of having a partner of the opposite sex when people meet for the first time, or start a new job. It is the assumption of heterosexuality, it is heteronormativity. For the lives of queer people in a heteronormative society, being queer is something unexpected, it is secondary, it is to be defined and disclosed.

However heteronormativity is dark and it runs deep and it is dangerous. It’s systematic, it is racist, it is sexist and oppressive.

“Thus, while the politics of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered activists of color might recognize heteronormativity as a primary system of power structuring our lives, it understands that heteronormativity interacts with institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation to define us in numerous ways as marginal and oppressed subjects.” Cohen (1997)

### Queerness and just not normative?

This work aims to draw a connection between blackness and queerness, while also examining the existence of homosexuality within pre colonisation amongst black and african people. It will also divulge into all aspects of queerness in relation to blackness, which includes the concept and theories of the queer heterosexual, pertaining to the black ‘queer’ heterosexual. This is a subject of great intrigue that relates to so much of queer theory, racial theory and identity politics.

In his essay ‘Fear of a queer planet: queer politics and social theory’ Michael Warner writes “Every person who comes to a queer self- understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences.” This observation alone and concept of what it means to be “queer”, can resultedly encompass the lives of a person living outside of normativity, normativity being white. “Being queer means fighting about these issues all

the time.” This is not to say that being heterosexual externally to whiteness does not still have some privileges, however, in a society constructed to alienate and discriminate all but the cis white heterosexuals of the world, results in othering, it results in an uproar for self identifying. “In this way, marginal group members lacking power and privilege although engaged in heterosexual behavior have often found themselves defined as outside the norms and values of dominant society.” Cohen (1997)

“In fact, since it is fairly evident that queer studies takes many of its founding mandates from the model of the black studies movements of the 1960s—in particular the constitution of its subjects of study as a minority—it is important to emphasize that black studies can also work to preserve the pertinence of questions of racial difference and its various class formations to a project that has quickly become a “white queer studies project.””  
Johnson, Henderson (2005)

The question repeatedly asked, is of where the gay liberation rights movement would be without the civil rights movement of African Americans?

Alongside that, it was Marsha P. Thompson, a trans black woman, who was responsible for Stonewall and the beginning of the gay liberation movement in the United States. “For example, activists of color have, through many historical periods, questioned their formal and informal inclusion and power in prevailing social categories.” Cohen (1997)

Black people, and black queer people have been a huge component of these communities, which are somehow, unsurprisingly being overtaken and credited by and to white people.

## Defining and Accepting Difference/Sameness and Our Identifiers

“[...] we believe that there are compelling social and political reasons to lay claim to the modifier “black” in “black queer.” Both terms, of course, are markers or signifiers of difference: just as “queer” challenges notions of heteronormativity and

heterosexism, “black” resists notions of assimilation and absorption. And so we endorse the double cross of affirming the inclusivity mobilized under the sign of “queer” while claiming the racial, historical, and cultural specificity attached to the marker “black.” Johnson, Henderson (2005)

As the writer of this work, I identify as Black. I identify as Queer. I identify as a lesbian, as non binary, as a black woman, as mixed race, as Irish. I, like so many others, have a multitude of identities, of components that make up who I am, who we are, how we understand ourselves, how we are treated and how we navigate the world. This is not extraordinary, it is human, it is a result of society and it is important to me now, currently. And to so many others. This is not to say these things are rigid or constant, they are transient and evolving like the world.

“Yet, as some theorists have noted, the deconstruction of binaries and the explicit “unmarking” of difference (e.g., gender, race, class, region, able-bodiedness, etc.) have serious implications for those for whom these other differences “matter.” Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color who are committed to the demise of oppression in its various forms, cannot afford to theorize their lives based on “single-variable” politics.” Johnson, Henderson (2005)

For those who identify as both black and queer, (queer being an umbrella term for all that lies outside the bounds of heterosexuality), excluding blackness from our ‘differences’ would be harmful, and due to societies notions of what queerness is, would automatically fall under the assumptions of whiteness.

“Recognizing the limits of current conceptions of queer identities and queer politics, I am interested in examining the concept of “queer” in order to think about how we might construct a new political identity that is truly liberating, transformative, and inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality.” - Cohen (1997)

The issue with our regular normative understanding of the word queer is that it is still so directly linked to whiteness. Even though homosexuality and non gender conformity were

the norm in the continent of Africa and many non white countries. One of the problems with heteronormativity is that in its definition, doesn't explicitly claim whiteness and now within the definition of queerness, whiteness is also presumed. Cohen's desire to construct a new transformative and inclusive term for "queer" that is inclusive of all outside of the above mentioned 'norm' is interesting and perhaps required. However for right now, queerness needs to be observed and understood that it is inclusive and intrinsically linked to the concept of blackness.

An understanding of the ways in which heteronormativity works to support and reinforce institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation must therefore be a part of how we problematize current constructions of heterosexuality." Cohen (1997)

### African Homosexuality - History, Colonisation and Repercussions

"How can we begin to resist external colonisation aka the extraction of our personal resources and richness for the perpetuation of the systems that oppress us, and internal colonisation; removing the "settlers" and their methods of control and management from our internal landscape- mind, spirit, emotion. How can we begin to identify and intentionally divest from the societal structures that have been wielded against us and implanted within us over the course of generations? To return our bodies to ourselves, to return to the wholeness of ourselves, to return home?"

Nunes, Miano (2020)

We now understand that the taboo of homosexuality in Africa is a reaction to the existence of the taboo based on imported European morality. It was not homosexuality that was imported but the intolerance of it. It was through colonisation and the results of it that same sex relationships were forgotten as part of Africa's history and it soon became stigmatised.

“Despite the persistent misconception that same-sex orientation is a colonial import to Africa, we could argue that religious missionaries imported elements of homophobia to Africa. They had strict beliefs about the “ideal” nuclear family. Many missionaries used same-sex orientation as “proof” of Africa’s “primitivism” and need for reform. They therefore sought to transform African sexuality to one of heteronormativity.” Dooling (2007)

The repercussions of the stigma of homosexuality amongst Africans and black people has caused an incredulous amount of homophobia within the black community. The result has caused a desire to aspire to heteronormativity and strict heterosexuality. The homophobia in the black community is so rampant while homosexuality is now becoming more tolerated in white communities. The lasting result of colonisation seeking to transform African sexuality to heteronormativity is one that cannot be achieved. As we now can understand that heteronormativity includes desire to attain whiteness, something not possible and only damaging and racially problematic.

### Case Study: Motsoalle relationships

“Looking at queer studies in a transnational way is important because there are cultures out there that don’t conform to any of our Western ideas of what is queer. The women from Lesotho, Africa, are a prime example of transcending our ideas of what is considered homosexuality. In the 1900’s the women of Lesotho engaged in intimate relationships with other women; this other woman would be called their “Motsoalle.” It is important to note that these women were married to other men, and their husbands knew of their Motsoalle. This relationship shared between two Lesotho women consisted of love, intimacy and a special bond. These women were intimate with each other but sex was not considered a part of it. Sex was seen as only something that could be done between a man and a woman, so although these women engaged in intimate acts they did not consider it to be sex. This idea in itself crosses the boundaries between what is considered a lesbian relationship in the Western sense.” Fortunato (2015)

Motsoalle relationships are a prime example of homosexual relations in Africa that are entirely outside the limitations of heteronormativity. These relationships were seen as completely natural and absolutely the norm. They lie outside the parameters of the nuclear family and even gender binary. To discuss in relation to queerness is difficult as queerness in western terms and our understanding of the definition now is something that is different or strange. However, in these times of the Motsoalle relationships these companionships were not “queer”. They were normal. It cannot be entirely seen as ‘lesbian’ relationships in the western sense of the word but it was accepted and widely understood that these women would love each other, care for each other and be sexually intimate with one another. Something that was a desire for the women in this community. These Motsoalle, were where these women would be loved.

“It’s like when a man chooses you for a wife, except when a man chooses, it’s because he wants to share the blankets with you. The woman chooses you the same way, but she wants love only. When a woman loves another woman, you see, she can love with her whole heart.” Nthunya (1997)

### Slavery, Racism and Black Hetero - Queerness

“Higginbotham informs us that the final law prohibiting miscegenation (the “interbreeding” or marrying of individuals from different “races” that was actually meant to inhibit the “tainting” of the white race) was not repealed until 1967: “Colonial anxiety about interracial sexual activity cannot be attributed solely to seventeenth-century values, for it was not until 1967 that the United States Supreme Court finally declared unconstitutional those statutes prohibiting interracial marriages.”  
Cohen (1997)

Slavery, Racism and Black hetero-queerness. Colonisation and slavery have played a part in the queerness that exists in ways not limited only to homosexuality. This subsection and study examines the result of the prohibition on relationships and marriage among black heterosexual slaves in the United States. This ban was enacted during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. M. G. Smith states in his article, written on the structure of slave economic systems that: “As property slaves were prohibited from forming legal relationships nor marriages which would interfere with and restrict their owner’s property rights” (cited in Cohen 1997). This dehumanisation of black people as slaves and undeserving of forming relationships can draw a common link to the dehumanisation of queer people and the “primitive” excuse used to exclude both social groups from acceptance into society and deserving of human rights.

“Thus it was not the promotion of marriage or heterosexuality per se that served as the standard or motivation of most slave societies. Instead, marriage and heterosexuality, as viewed through the lenses of profit and domination and the ideology of white supremacy, were reconfigured to justify the exploitation and regulation of black bodies, even those presumably engaged in heterosexual behavior. It was this system of state-sanctioned, white male, upper-class heterosexual domination that forced these presumably black heterosexual men and women to endure a history of rape, lynching, and other forms of physical and mental terrorism.”

Cohen (1997)

Colonisation was a destructive, violent and damaging act that had countless repercussions. The ‘queering’ of black people being the one in focus currently. Not only did it remove, erase and alienate the African people from their culture and history of homosexuality and exclusion of the gender binary. It removed the humanisation of black people all together within the western world and enslaved them. Stripping them from all senses of humanity and forcing a divide between them and the prescribed aspiration to white heteronormative greatness.

## Chapter three: It's in the Art

This chapter 'It's in the Art' will use examples of artist Zanele Muholi a photographer in South Africa who documents the lives of Queer South Africans and Zainab Boladale a Nigerian and Irish creator who set up an exhibition with Origins Eile and collaborated with Black Queer Irish people for Black Irish history month. Being Black and being queer is an identity, it is a multitude. These projects are contemporary as well as being historic. The existence of blackness and queerness coexisting must be spoken about, documented, seen, heard, known and understood.

There can exist hundreds of texts, books and lengthy academic essays but within art, it can be accessible to all. Taken in and interpreted by anyone willing to know and hear the truth and the stories of the people.

### Zanele Muholi

Zanele Muholi is a South African artist. They are a photographer that documents the faces and lives of the LGBTQIA+ people of South Africa. Their work as an activist and artist aims to create a living archive of the queer lives that exist in South Africa. They photograph themselves and hundreds of others in the hope of showing future generations that we are here.



Fig. 3 Zanele Muholi, *Somnyama Ngonyama hail the dark lioness*, 2014, photograph, Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York.

Muholi says: “Since slavery and colonialism, images of us African women have been used to reproduce heterosexuality and white patriarchy, and these systems of power have organised our everyday lives so that it is difficult to vitalise ourselves as we actually are in our respective communities. Moreover, the images we see rely on binaries that were long prescribed for us (heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, African/UnAfrican). From birth onwards, we are taught to internalise their existences, sometimes forgetting that if bodies are connected, connecting, the sensuousness goes beyond simplistic understandings of gender and sexuality.”

Muholi has a multitude of ongoing series, of which they highlight the coexistence of blackness and queerness, and the importance of reminding the world of the relationship between the two.

One of their series 'Queering Public Space' does just that.

Muholi feels that photographing Black LGBTQIA+ participants in public spaces is something that makes their work and visual activism important and significant. "We're 'queering' the space in order for us to access the space. We transition within the space in order to make sure that the Black trans bodies are part of this as well. We owe it to ourselves." The locations that Muholi uses are important to South Africa's history. They are areas that are historically urban spaces and working-class neighbourhoods, as well as beaches and the beachfront of Durban. The Durban beachfront is close to Muholi's birthplace of Umlazi. During apartheid, beaches were segregated. They now symbolise how racial segregation affected all aspects of life, including the erasure of queer sexualities.



Fig. 4 Zanele Muholi, Miss D'vine I, Johannesburg, 2007, Photograph, Courtesy of the Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, galleries.

Muholi has a series titled 'Brave Beauties' which is an ongoing collection of portraits of trans women, gender nonconforming and non-binary people that celebrate beauty can come in any form. They celebrate and participate in beauty pageant contests and drag shows. "Queer beauty pageants offer a space of resistance within the Black LGBTQIA+ community in South Africa, expressing beauty outside of heteronormative and white

supremacist cultures.” Muholi comments that these participants “...enter beauty pageants to change mindsets in the communities they live in, the same communities where they are most likely to be harassed, or worse.”



Fig. 5 Zanele Muholi, “Brave Beauties” series - Dimpho Tsotetsi, Parktown, 2014. Photograph, Courtesy of the Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, galleries.



Fig. 6 Zanele Muholi, Yaya Mavundla, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2017, Photograph, Courtesy of the Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, galleries.

In 2006 Muholi began work on 'Faces and Phases', an ongoing portrait series. This project now includes over 500 portraits. "As a collective portrait, it celebrates, commemorates and archives the lives of Black lesbians, transgender and gender non conforming individuals." Muholi states "future generations will note that we were here."

“The history of portraiture is marked by colonial and racial violence. Under apartheid, the policing of Black bodies was enforced by using identification documents with a mug shot. Muholi embarks on portraiture as an act of reclaiming freedom, dignity and togetherness. ‘Faces and Phases’ includes long and sustained collaborations and friendships.” - Gropius Bau

Even within the United States, it can be seen that in the cases of news broadcasts and articles comparatively that amongst criminals both black and white, a white person’s mugshot is far less likely to be used than a black person which is much more commonly used in the news. This enforces negative connotations towards the black community and attempts to remove the criminality of the white offenders.

“‘Faces’ refers to the person being photographed. ‘Phases’ signifies a transition from one stage of sexuality or gender expression and identity to another. It also marks the changes in the participants’ lives.” - Gropius Bau (2021)

Zanele Muholi’s work is a prime example of blackness and queerness’s presence in the art. Not only is it art, but it is activism. The participants involved all are putting themselves out there in the world as dangerous as it may be. However they know that queerness has always existed in Africa. That colonisation devastated the existence of ‘queerness’ and destroyed it as the norm. Muholi’s work shows that it is not gone, it is their history, the present and the future, it is ongoing forever.

## Bla/Q - Zainab Bolande and Origins Eile

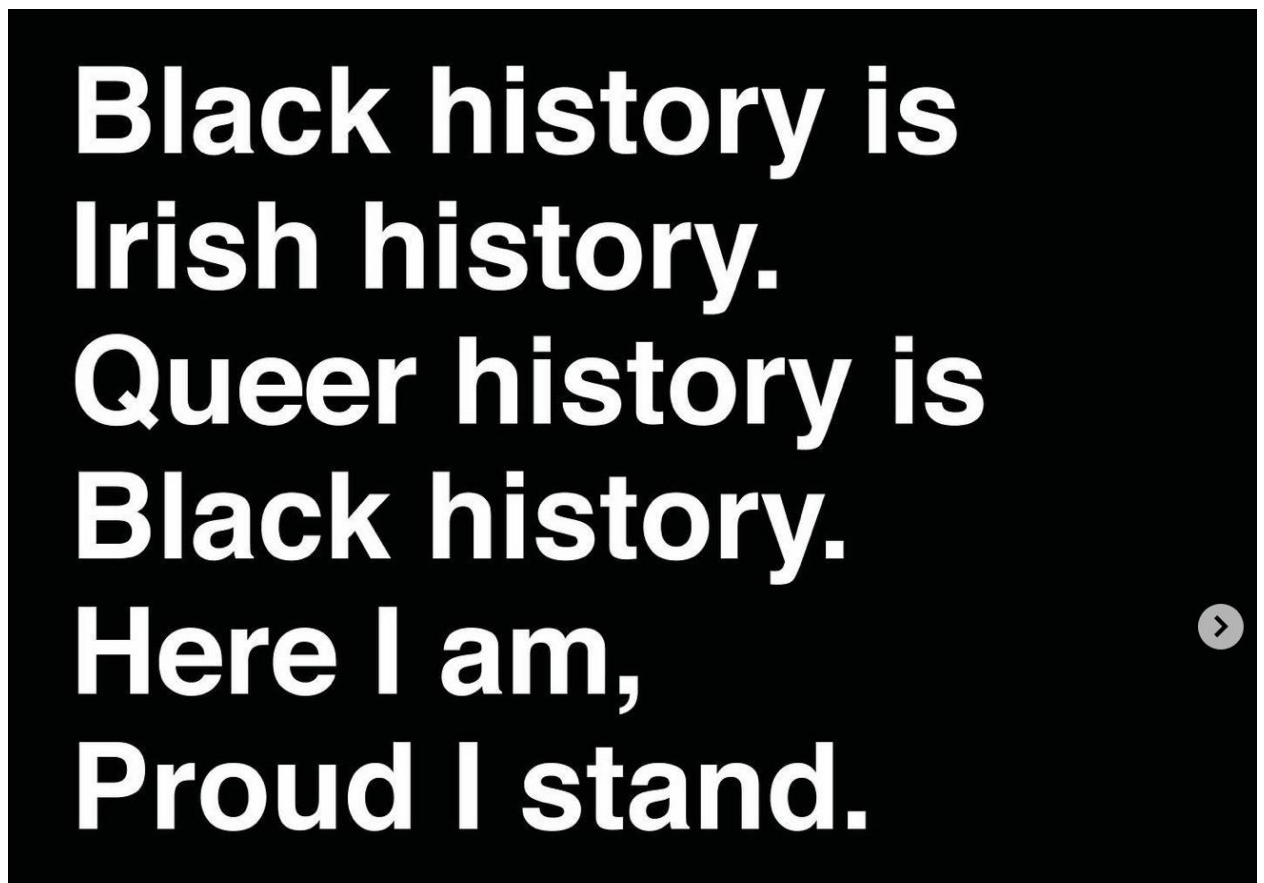
The Bla/Q exhibition was an online work as well as poster series in Dublin. Created by Zainab Bolande in association with Origins Eile. It consisted of a series of photographs of

Black and Queer people of Ireland. The participants chose a body part that they felt represented or connected to their queerness and their blackness. They then wrote about how they felt and it was accompanied by the photo on the website. The exhibition ran in poster form throughout the month of October of 2021. There were a multitude of posters all around Dublin City. They stated “Black history is Irish history. Queer history is Black history. Here I am, Proud I stand.”

“To give space to those in our society who may once have felt that they could not exist authentically as they are and to ensure that such stories are immortalised through imagery”. Boladale (2021)



Fig. 7 Origins Eile, Macy Stewart, Bla/Q, 2021, Photography, Origins Eile.



# BLA/Q



**Black history is Irish history. Queer history is Black history. Here I am, Proud I stand.**

Origins Eile X Zainab Boladale. In celebration of Black Queer Histories. Photography by Macy Stewart. Design by Goldmoth Media

Fig. 8 Origins Eile, Bla/Q, 2021, Digital Image, Origins Eile.

Zainab Boladale, the creative director for Bla/Q claims the heart of this project is: “To show the complexity and intersectionality of being Black and queer by artistically highlighting the journey and self discovery our bodies go through and the layers that come with that.”

Miano writes in their online article of GNC “Irish History needs to be revised and expanded to embrace Black stories and histories, because lawd knows we’ve been here for a hot minute. We saw a big cultural shift happen last year, but Éire still needs to make room for Black people, our present experiences, stories and histories.”

“To remind y’all that although Irish history and culture is full of tales of resistance, rebellion and liberation, our Island identity is still largely defined and built upon structures of whiteness. Black Irish history is obscured, deemed unimportant, marginal and difficult to access. But Black folk are still here resisting, rebelling and pushing for liberation every day.” Miano (2021)

For weeks it was a beautiful and constant reminder to those of us out in the city that we are here and we are proud. For there to exist a poster boldly claiming that all of these things can be intertwined with each other. Our histories as black people are queer and our histories of being black and queer people are Irish. It was undoubtedly a moment to be proud of and one that will be continuous and ever expanding. Each year there is another exploratory work or exhibition or project that illuminates the presence of queerness in black history. This exclamation also including our Irishness is a large step towards recognition and understanding and our marking and making of Irish history, black and queer.

“The photography and poster project is an unapologetically queer celebration of Black folk in Ireland.” Miano (2021)

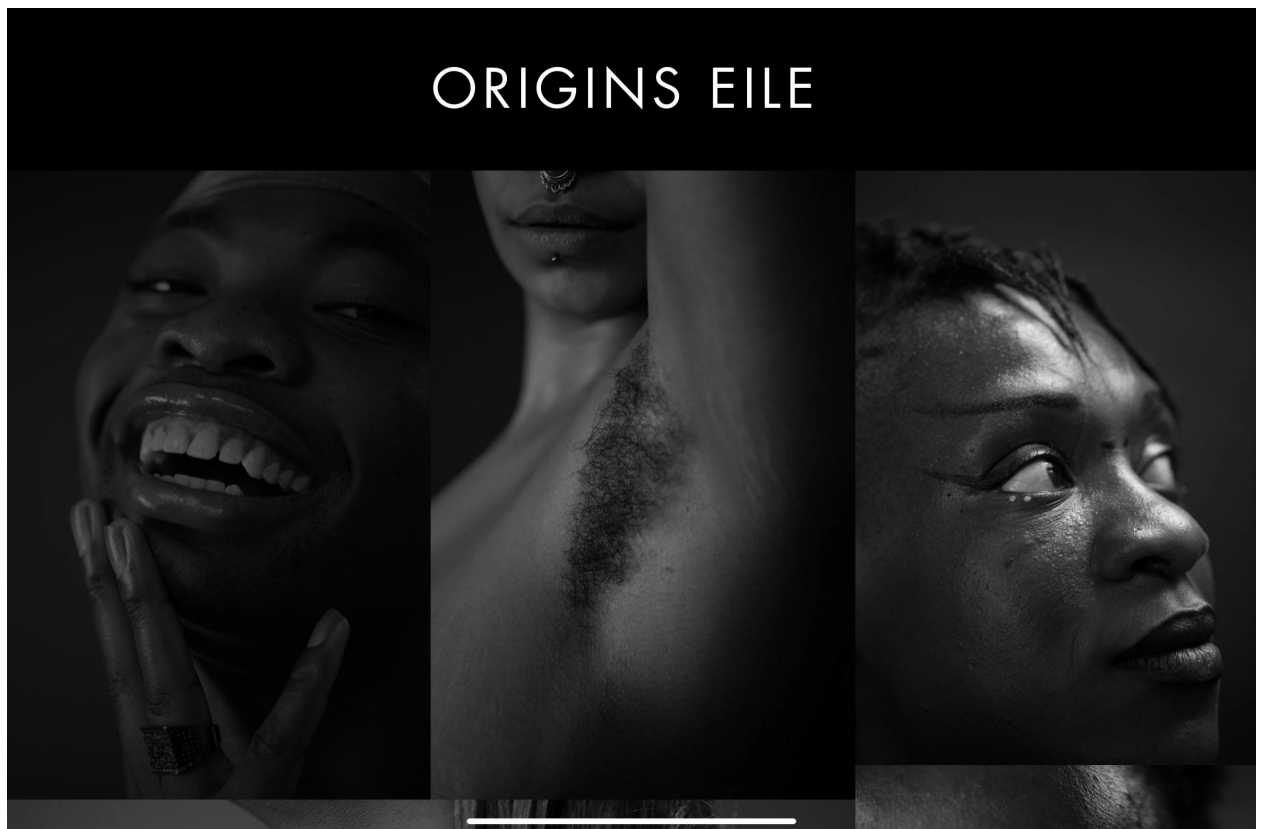


Fig. 9 Origins Eile, Macy Stewart, Bla/Q, 2021, Photography, Origins Eile.

On many occasions, I have been asked to participate on projects and work within Origins Eile. They often involve queer black artists in Ireland, myself being one of them. Each time an opportunity comes up, it is a glow inside my body, inside my heart. I know that I will once again have the chance, alongside multiple other Black and Irish, queer artists, writer, creators and performers to work together and create history for Black, Queer, Ireland. This project and exhibition in particular marked Black Irish history month. A celebration I, alike many others I'm sure, were not aware of even existing. Zainab's work initiating this exhibition was so needed and a project of this significance for the Black Queer Irish people was long overdue. We are a part of this history.

## Conclusion

How is Blackness intrinsically Queer? Because to be Black, is to be queer. To be queer is to be different. When whiteness is the prescribed societal norm, and heteronormativity is rooted in patriarchal, middle class, white values, everything outside those parameters are intrinsically queer. Not only is blackness queer, but the history of African relationships are rooted in what we now consider homosexuality and gender non conformity. This has been a hard question to answer in simple terms, as the definitions trans culturally and historically have evolved and differed, however it stands that in conclusion Black people have always been Queer. In the homosexual sense of the word, and later after colonialism, in the western world, our existence is 'othered'. Black people are not the 'standard', Homosexuality is not the 'standard'. To be queer is natural, it is beautiful. It has an incredibly long and complex history. To be black is natural, it is also beautiful. Blackness and Africa have an incredibly long and complex history alike. Identity is a wonderful and powerful thing, that differs and many claim to strongly. This thesis delves into Blackness and Queerness and explores and examines how the two are linked. They are connected in theory and in history. We are here, we have always been here.

Proud, Black and Queer.

## Appendix

An interview I conducted between Myself and Zainab Boladale, the creator of the Bla/Q exhibition:

*How would you describe our community here in Dublin*

For the longest time I didn't really think there was a black queer community In Dublin. I think because I was constantly looking for black faces in different queer spaces and I couldn't find them I thought maybe it just wasn't present and it's mad because at my present age of 25 I'm only starting to meet more and more queer black people who are either or perhaps aren't out but in a socially identify one way or the other so I do think there is still a lot of like, there is still a lot of queer people in Ireland who may just not feel safe enough to come out either because of cultural context or personal reasons but I'm really happy to see that with slowly finding each other and I think a big impact of that has been Covid. I think there's been more of a need for an online outreach to find the communities you fit within, and I really think that has helped us realise, I really think that has helped us realise that we do want to see more of each other, we want to know who we are and just create a community around that we feel comfortable in presenting as we are because I know that even outside of Dublin, they are black people but they just don't really have that united sense and that there really have that community aspect of them which they're

longing and it's funny because when I tell people that yeah I know a lot of people in Dublin for a blog that are black and they're outside of Dublin are quite surprised.

*What do you think could make it better for everyone?*

I know we have the likes of Black Pride Ireland and Origins Eile, I wish there was more inclusiveness of black queer people in bigger spaces but I also do know that you know that starting to happen thankfully, like we have the likes of Viola Gavis in the drag scene we have the likes of OE and Black Pride Ireland plugging into the bigger spaces of LGBT community groups. so I do think we need to see more people at the forefront of the larger bodies and I think really there has to be a safe space created to know that even if you cannot actively be out, because of your family, cultural reasons that you are still welcome into the spaces with us.

*What made you create this exhibition Bla-Q?*

For me this exhibition is a direct response to the lack of visibility of black queer people in Ireland not because they're not here but because a lot of us struggle to find each other or to even feel comfortable because there's a lot of fears around coming out or presenting as a person you want to present. so for me I wanted to create something that you know younger queer people can feel comfort in knowing that there is a growing community we are here, we are active in societal roles and – you know we are presently part of black history because the community is just at the very beginning of growing. so for me this exhibition symbolises a lot of things and it symbolises bravery, it symbolises the journey we've all been on as black queer Irish people, it symbolises we all have an active voice and an active and active role to play in tracing this community which is welcoming with open arms to our generation, the older generation, and the younger generation. because I wouldn't want any younger black people to feel like they're alone in this situation, because we are unique in

the fact that there is a lot of sectionality in what we experience even within our own black communities.

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