Becoming

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

This thesis project accompanies the 2019 photographic portraiture series entitled *Becoming*. Using James Baldwin, Audre Lorde and Zora Neale Hurston as departure points, both the photo series and this academic explanative seeks to explore the question of what does it mean to become? Or in other words, what is the imperative to be who you are, to actualize within a space that demonstrates a regular investment in the destruction of bodies that are Black and queer. Through a set of five individual interviews, the questions of what does it mean to be who you are? why is it important? how do you become through your creative work? serve to create space for knowledge production, combatting what Spivak dubs as epistemic violence. Guided by the principles of post colonial life writing, African and Black feminist thought, Black queer theory, and art as an emancipatory tool, this thesis centers voices often theorized about yet rarely heard and argues that creative work more broadly offers a path for liberation.

The published work of *Becoming,* both the photographs and interviews, can be found at **www.becomingphotoseries.com** and fulfils the creative media aspect of this dissertation/creative project.

Acknowledgements

For the beauty of Black queer people: knowing, seeing, listening, and finding each other has saved my life. Thank you to each participant in this project who became a collaborator. You give me excitement for this world and colour my eyes with hope and strength.

To Toni Morrison who passed during the completion of this project; your impact on myself and so many of those involved is profound and immense; something we knew, but were forced to feel quite intensely. Your life and spirit remind me to be bold and fiery all the way through.

Although crude and basic, to the men and systems that made me feel so small, this project would not have been inspired without your challenge of my personhood and self esteem. I work for a world where expression and art doesn't stem from a place of painful, systemic, and fundamentally boring experiences.

To lovers, friends, and family: thank you claiming me, thank you for seeing me, thank you for affirming me.

To survivors.

To South Africa, a complex and heartbreaking place. You broke me so many times over, yet somehow still Black people find ourselves rising. Thank you doesn't cover it.

For love and for struggle.

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Introduction

In writing to his nephew, James Baldwin told younger James about his father, and how he was long destroyed before he ever died because “at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him”.

Audre Lorde tells us that she had to define herself or else she would be “crunched into other people's fantasies” and be “eaten alive” as she routinely introduced herself as a “Black lesbian feminist mother warrior poet”

And Zora Neale Hurston said “if you are silent about your pain, they will kill you and say you enjoyed it”.

These three poignant and brief excerpts from Black american (lowercase intentional) writers, two of whom were openly gay, beg the question of how do we *become*? In a world where we can die long before we stop breathing, where we are erased, where we are simultaneously overdetermined, how do we be who we are? Why is this important? How does it happen? Where and when? What these authors point out are similar to the concepts of subjectivity, depersonalization, and systemic silencing and marginalization. This project seeks to answer the question of what does it mean to be who you are in the teeth of a world that is very heavily invested in the destruction of what we called marginalized persons? In a sense, this project disengages from a “speaking back” positionality but rather centers and honors the knowledge and realities of the worldviews and politics of five self identifying Black, queer, South African interviewees turned co-collaborators. The portraits compliment this work as the aim is to capture each co-collaborator in settings and moments that are part of the becoming process. This looks like an intimate shot of someone doing their beading work as a healer or a more staged portrait of a poet who aims to create worlds for herself and others through her writing. As such, the scholarship that informed this work is postcolonial feminist theory, postcolonial life writing, Black queer studies, and art as an emancipatory form of expression for subaltern

groups, which will be discussed in full in the following chapters. The discussion section of this thesis will include excerpts from the interviews that work in concert with the literature and exemplify the creation of new worlds entirely. Moreover, this work seeks to add to the existing body of both scholarship and art that honors knowledge creation from Black queers. Each chapter is directed by an italicized phrase whether it be a quote or a more social science direction like methodology, as a means of intertwining the two means of understanding, while also attempting to break from a binary understanding that sees "literature" and "scholarship" as mutually opposed or against one another in a hierarchy.

Which teeth, which world?

This thesis takes the political stance of centering voices of those who identify as Black, queer and creative. It is first useful to explore the deployment of whiteness that creates the structures of power that invisbilize Black queer people (not withstanding invisibilazation pre-colonial imposition), but also the mechanisms that attract violence to these kinds of bodies. As such, the categories of what we understand as race and sexuality on the continent and in the diaspora are agreed upon and traced to the moment of colonial imposition. Oyěwùmí traces the (broad) history of Yoruba people and culture to understand how the construction of the Black woman was part and parcel of a co-constituted system of power that relied upon a racialized otherness as well as a sexualized violence of gender. By tracing the 'creation' of the Black woman through colonial state policy, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997) demonstrates how the binary imposition and understanding of gender from the colonial perspective "created" the Black woman as a structurally marginalized group. Oyěwùmí notes firstly that when theorizing the colonial hierarchy, it should be expanded to incorporate four components- the two races and the two genders, where both rise from the "bio-logic of Western culture" (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p.122) ; this hierarchy of four reads as "men (european), women (european), native (African men), and Other (African women)" (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p.122). From here Oyěwùmí cites examples like missionary schools as a transformative colonial tool in enforcing a raced and gendered marginalization. Missionary schools did the work of reinforcing a gendered society by privileging male education and schooling children for different roles; women to be family

creators and maintainers and men to be leaders, clerks, politicians, etc. Missionaries paid for pupils to incentivize parents to let their children go (as it was a loss of help on the land or at the house) but the prospect of employment made boarding school popular and attended, overall inscribing a domesticity in the "female" gender and a public-ness to the "male" gender. Oyěwùmí (2007) also argues that gender as a social construction and biological essentialism are in fact of the same coin, where the west consistently invents new biologies to justify gender traits. Ultimately both gender and biology essentialize difference, and the difference is a heavily policed binary. In this vein scholars like Oyěwùmí as well as Pumla Gqola demonstrate the ways in which white colonial patriarchy creates multiple stratas of oppression rather what many thinkers deem as Blackness with all other facets of oppression as second thoughts. Or in other words, feminist intervention in the theorizing of oppression creates a more rich and expansive base for the functioning of oppression, a plane often not explored by canonic thinkers. As such, the understanding that colonialism is racist capitalism *and* "pornography" (Gqola, p. 12) or highly reliant on the sexualized violence of Black women's bodies provides us with an explanatory base that can account for and understand the production of homophobia and transphobia and generally consequences for movement outside of cis-hetero binary.

With this base, Desiree Lewis's work around African sexualities and Yvette Abraham's historical work on Sara Bartman make the necessary linkages between the sexualized violence that was a core component of colonialism and the marginalization of what became defined as deviant sexual behaviors which attempted to also produce normative (two) genders. Abraham's *Images of Sara Bartman* focuses on the historical record of Sara Bartman, a Khoisan woman born in the Western Cape in the late 1700s who is most known for having her body exhibited in Europe for the display of what Europeans found to be her abnormally large buttocks. Abrahams makes key points to note that Sara's case was instrumental in the ongoing project of colonialism and the construction of whiteness more broadly; "institutions such as the savage freak show were an important contributor to the psychological makeup that enabled these functionaries to rob, maim, and murder for the greater glory of the British Empire" (Abrahams, p.225). Further Abrahams (1998) suggests that Sara's exhibition marks an explicit link between "bestiality and unbridled sexuality" (p.226) or in other words, she was used by settlers and the

system of white supremacy as one the primary spectacles which attempted to formalize and synonymize savagery with Black “woman”-ness. Simultaneously within England, there was a growing presence of Black men in working class positions, and this signaled the “conceptual split between white female identity and Black”, where Black men are beasts, white women are innocent, and Black women were defined by their perceived hyper sexuality and promiscuity. As such, Black women’s routine sexual abuse was not constructed as violence, but a consequence of their “hypersexuality”. Lewis (2011) echoes Abrahams in noting that “legacies of colonial-inspired knowledge systems have defined bodies, human subjects, and social histories” (p.209). Everything from the Linnaeus system, to freak shows, to contemporary advocacy campaigns about gender based violence on the continent play into ‘colonial scripts’ (Lewis, 2011) that construct Blackness to be sexually deviant, strictly gendered, and homogenious. Most significantly, Lewis makes the connections between colonial imposition and the existence of anti-homosexuality acts in many countries on the continent. During the violence of colonialism and the production of knowledge about Black and gendered bodies, there was an emphasis on Africans being “natural” (Lewis, p.207) or close to nature in the understanding of animals and compulsory heterosexuality (reproduction), therefore homosexual relations were not compatible with this understanding; “colonial and early anthropological representations of sexuality (especially as it has coerced heterosexuality as an institution) have therefore been central to many present-day taboos, laws and attitudes surrounding sexuality in Africa” (Lewis, p.208). These myths have been swallowed and reproduced in the name of “crafting of nationalism” where “discourses of national belonging have been anchored in familial scripts and the invention nations as biological families” (Lewis, p. 206) in addition to the influence of (settler) Christianity’s principled disdain for homosexuality. As such, this feminist grounding of the project of colonialism as co-constituted systems of power that relied on sexualized violence as well as racialized otherness illuminate the ways in which knowledge systems from Black queer (read: policed sexuality) persons have been marginalized, erased, spoken for, and shamed. With this foundation, we can understand how the colonial imposition not only vastly changed and transformed Black people, Black communities, and Black traditions, but demonstrate how the marginalization is done along the

lines of race and sexuality. Importantly, gender as a categorical marker or criteria for collaborators is left out of this project for reasons of including multiple perspectives. Importantly, this work doesn't seek to reproduce the reductionist views described above where one lens is adopted and all other forms of oppression follow after, but rather, the identities of Black and queer prove to be expansive and deeply interconnected and overlapping with the constructions of gender. As such, participants' gender presentation and identity varied, for example ranging from trans male to cis-women, both of which have uniquely textured experiences, but are fundamentally cast as unhuman and a betrayal to ones prescribed gender and racial role in the practice of queerness. Significantly, the criteria for this project omitted gender to acknowledge the placelessness of gender itself.

The next section highlights the contemporary renditions of the gaze continues to overdetermine Black queer persons as demonized owners of narratives that are pre-set and one dimensional, further grounding the importance of projects that center such voices on their own terms.

Semiotics of Difference

In the field of semiotics, it is the visual that does the work of conveying meaning. The work of bell hooks and Stuart Hall is advantageous to begin to understand not only the meaning-making of the visual, but how the visual often reproduces systems and ideals of oppression. Stuart Hall notes that difference is "essential to meaning" (Hall, 1997, p.234). In this case, the construction of a binary is what holds ideas that are created in opposition together, together. Hall (1997) cites David Green in noting how the racialization of the other has been done through "visual discourse and the production of racialized knowledge" (p.234). It is the (unstable) marker of race and the pigmentation of the skin that marry and legitimize racialized knowledge. As such, the body became "the discursive site" through which much of this 'racialized knowledge' was produced and circulated. (Hall, 1997, p.245). It is the marriage of white supremacist knowledge production and centering of the body that naturalizes difference to normalize the hierarchy and value systems attributed to difference. Both aforementioned Desiree Lewis and Hall note that naturalness and Blackness became interchangeable where

Black people were “reduced to their essence” (Hall, 1997, p.245) mobilizing the ‘regimes of representation’ that portray and legitimize ideas of primitivism, child-like qualities, laziness, and generally a subhuman status (Fanon, 1963). Said’s *Orientalism* shares obvious frequencies with this work in noting how the hegemonic discourse of creating the “Oriental” was bound up in the power dynamics of white supremacy and creation of a racialized “other”, or in this case a mythologized mysterious “Arab” other.

In addition to the images of Bartman as mentioned previously, bell hooks’s work adds another layer of nuance to the representational work of Blackness and how narratives and demonization are performed visually. Turning to gangsta rap in the United States, hooks (2006) critically deconstructs the various layers to a music genre that is often deemed in mainstream discourse as violent and misogynistic. hooks firstly points out that the capitalistic intertwining with music perpetuates a culture that rewards and feeds off of misogynist ideas and values which is not exclusive to music created by Black people. She notes that the preoccupation of gangsta rap in the mainstream american discourse is largely underpinned by the impulse of spectacle and “demonizing black youth culture in general and the contributions of young black men in particular” (hooks, 2006, p. 135). The prevailing racism and construction of Black people as a collective other obscures the reality that (some) gangsta rap is a reflection of the capitalist patriarchal society of the United States while simultaneously locating such issues of violence and sexism solely in the bodies of Black men, perpetuating stereotypes and perceptions of Black men as particularly violent and particularly regressive. Such a stance does not recuse Black men of their actions, but rather pulls out the mechanism of indignity that continue to homogenize and marginalize Black people broadly. hooks’ analysis can be stretched then to a Black queer understanding where both Blackness and queerness relegate one to zones of spectacle and essentialization along the lines of deviancy of Blackness and deviancy of queerness. Black queer studies broadly as a field can further lend a hand to this understanding while also moving us forward into a conversation about possibility, imagination, and emancipatory potentials of Black queer art specifically.

"No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free."

Assata Shakur

Black queer studies is a field of knowledge that is generally agreed upon as coalescing in the academic space in the early 2000s, however, work from artists and writers outside of a formalized timeline of the academy too has provided us with a plethora of epistemological understandings and conceptualizations of what it means to be Black and queer, which will be expanded upon later in this section.

Black queer theory in the academy speaks to similar frequencies as the above literary and activist figures in dissecting how the "deviancy" of homosexuality is what deploys the essentialism of queer people as overly sexual or completely sexual beings. Tanya L. Sanders notes that queer of color critique has been present in various discourses in activist circles both in the United States and beyond. In reflecting up their coalition building in Cuba through hip hop and art practice broadly, Saunders (2016) notes that queer of color critique has "always been a part of radical black feminist activism, especially in Black internationalist feminism" (p.152). Further, Black feminist and queer theory concern themselves with questions of "race, heteronormativity, nation, and colonial/imperialism" (Saunders, p.153) and how these interlocking system maintain a system of oppression, or as hooks (2007) would note a "culture of domination" (p. 59).

Jafari S. Allen in the first essay of many in *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* edited by Patrick E. Johnson, positions Black queer theory as a field that looks to grow outwards rather than upwards. Allen (2016) posits that Black queer studies should finding "rhizomes rather than 'roots'" (p. 27). Rhizomes as described by Allen (2016) find their expression and growth underwater and are "neither limited to one place nor destined to go only one direction" (p.28). Citing Audre Lorde, Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of the

rhizome and its multiplicities, Allen (2016) stretches this to a Black queer politic that is "generative" (p.29) and "inspires connection beyond a staid, linear genealogy" (p.29). Just as a bamboo plant pulled from its "so-called roots" (Allen, p.29) doesn't make the bamboo no longer grow there again, Black queer studies finds itself growing, and continue to grow and expand beyond the confines of what can be understood as more 'established' fields of Black studies and queer studies. The generative aspect of Black queer studies derives from its unique positioning and ability to view and theorize from an expansive base.

Taking note from Allen, we can turn to someone like Marsha P. Johnson for the expansiveness of Black queer studies and its multiple rhizomes of knowledge. As a well remembered human rights activist (perhaps best known as one of the instigators of the Stonewall Riots and throwing a brick in protest of police brutality routinely directed at queer (Black) bodies in New York City) who was also a performer and Black trans woman, the name she used for herself was initially for her drag character, took on a much larger meaning when she began using it for herself in everyday beyond the performance of drag. Marsha P. Johnson was her name and the P stood for "pay no mind". In interviews remembering Marsha and her activism, overwhelmingly her contemporaries, friends, and lovers note that Marsha's affirmation in herself moved her through struggle but also demonstrated a lack of concern for the politics that were imposed on her body. In responding to an interview question, "how do the police treat you", she responded with saying that the police treat her like she is "the biggest murderer" in New York City (Kasino, 2012). Such a response reveals the absurdity of gender and its literal policing, affirming that such a construction (both raced and classed) is incredibly unstable and its disruption, while threatening, is also imperative (for those with capacity). It becomes imperative to move through the violence of overdetermination and a status quo that maintains subjugation.

Zanele Muholi's work, both their visual activism and their public commentary, also demonstrate a liberatory potential. In writing about Muholi's work, Gabebe Baderoon (2011) begins with a quote from Muholi, "Before I knew about transgender, I called it gender within gender" (p. 390). Baderoon expands upon the liberatory potentials of Muholi's work by tracing Muholi's career as an activist working closely with lesbian women who are survivors of sexual

assault, as well as their reverence to the art of portraiture of Black people. Muholi visited London's Autograph gallery in 2010 and came across 100 portraits from W.E.B. Du Bois and is recorded noting that that experience sparked an intergenerational and transnational linkage for them; that portraiture of Black people in their lives is an archiving project, a resistance project, and educational project, able to communicate worlds and stories. Further, Baderoon notes that in Muholi's own work of both self portraits and portraiture of others, there is a disengagement from "appropriation" and this is evident in what Baderoon cites as one of Muholi's earlier series entitled "being". In capturing lesbian and trans life, particularly people who have experienced violence as a result of their identities, Mohuli's focuses on listening to the stories of the people they shoot. In doing this, there is a breaking of a transactional or surface level engagement between two binary roles of photographer and subject, but rather Muholi relates to the people they capture as an art but also as an acknowledgement of the community they both come from and are trying to build. Their work also resonates on a political level. Baderoon (2011) notes that Muholi's particular affection for trans women is an assertion of "beauty and belonging" which ultimately "subverts the expected view of women's bodies in public space" (p. 410). My own interaction with Muholi's work has impacted my understanding of the potentials of photography and writing into history narratives, stories, aesthetics that are meaningful and present amongst communities of Black queers. I first encountered Muholi's work at the same gallery in London, Autograph, and was particularly struck by the aesthetics of their self portraiture. In the creation of images that are sensual, sexual, political, tender, firm, intense, and visually stunning in size and texture and color (contrast), I felt an overwhelming sense of wonder. I felt wonder and awe in the possibilities of Black queerness and of seeing the work of someone who I could see myself in. Lola Flash's work had a similar resonance with me.

Lola Flash is a Black lesbian photographer and visual artist from the United States whose work focuses the lives and actions of queer, gender fluid, and gender non conforming people. Flash's early work gained her notoriety in the portraits from her time in ACT UP, a "New York-based art action affinity group fighting AIDS phobia, censorship, homophobia, misogyny, and racism" (Strong, 2019). In an interview with A&U magazine, Flash recalls her time in the 1980s when she first moved to New York, "I got sucked in, and before I knew it I was demonstrating,

planning demonstrations, visiting sick friends in hospital, and going to funerals. In hindsight, I always wanted to be part of a revolution. I was too young for the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War protests, so the AIDS crisis gave me my chance to put my body on the line, I am very proud of the work we did" (Strong, 2019). Flash's work and her process of cross coloring speaks greatly to how she can express her thoughts. She would develop pictures in a way that resulted in hyper pigmented photos and give effects of a dark room, able to bring out certain aspects of a photo and emphasize chosen subjects in objects. She notes this as were method before photoshop existed and open up avenues for her to make statements about race, gender, and sexuality via photography. Flash notes that she chooses to photograph queer and gender non conforming folks for the importance of writing one's own story. In the same A&U interview Flash said, "I use photography to challenge stereotypes and offer new ways of seeing that explore, interrogate, and transcend perceived gender, sexual, and racial norms. Cliché though it may sound, so much has changed, but so much has stayed the same" (Strong, 2019). This particular quote resonates with the focus of this work. There are serious political intentions with this work that have been explored through tracing of Black feminist theory and history and the work of current contemporary Black queer artists whose work focuses on Black queer subjects, and in these political intentions is a reckoning with the world at hand. It is a celebration of textures, an affirmation of existence, an intimacy and focus- it is these things because there is an absence of them. It is these things as well because the current world order is one that is fundamentally unhuman, destructive, and cruel. James Baldwin (1964) noted often in his work that the United States is an 'anti-sex' nation, and such a reality ignores what he dubs sensuality which is to respect the essence of life "from the act of loving to the breaking of bread" (p. 53). In this case, the act of making and the act of becoming is imagining a world that is more dignified and less cruel- rather strive toward one that is inventive, considerate, and more human becomes important. Lastly, this work is also inspired by Black queer London based analog photographer and archivist Burnice Mulenga. Burnice's present work documents and archives a great deal of Black queer life, particularly night life, or as they name it "afro-documentary" (#BHMVisualHistories). In capturing the burgeoning and popular Black queer scene in London via collectives like BBZ and Pxssy Palace, there is a writing into history of

liberation, political, pleasure movements that center both Blackness and queerness. Bernice notes that they approach their work as a member of the community they photograph and that building relationships and ensuring consent have been integral to capturing what are stunning scenes of voguing, sensual dancing, DJ-ing, and what I see as the general moments of becoming and expression of Black queers in London contemporarily. Some of these photos include up close detail shots of queer clothing and queer persons, while other catching some mid walk in a moment of performance excellence. The capturing of these moments and serious focus on liberation of sexual expression but communal fun in general I think will have impact beyond measure and more importantly contribute to the archive of Black queer knowledge and expression. I greatly admire Bernice's work and seek to also capture the community I am a part of in its contemporary form; quite simply and literally capturing a happening moment that is rooted in the liberation project of being oneself in the midst of a world that would prefer otherwise. Lastly, the lives and work of Thomas Allen, Essex Hemphill, Joy Miessi, Kiyan Williams, Tobi Adebajo, Martina, Dionne, Buki, Phyls, Mattie, Alexandra Bell, Akwaeke Emezi, Chinelo Okparanta, Lorraine Hansbury, all the collaborators, my dearest friends and lovers are inspirations and contributors to my personhood. Overarching, this work seeks to love; seeks to love Black queer persons that are routinely subjected to violence and seeks to love Black queer persons as human beings and hopefully work to a point where as Jennifer Declue (2016) notes, "trauma will no longer be a requisite threshed to cross" (p.218).

Methodological Approach and Rationale

Individual interviews were operationalized for this photo series project, with a specific focus and practice on indigenous or decolonized research methods. Drawing upon the critique of bell hooks in her essay *Is Paris Burning*, I take note of the importance of my position in the creation of this work. hooks importantly points out that the film is often thought of by audiences as an oppositional work based upon the subject of the film, that being a Black gay subculture. However, the role of the filmmaker, a white lesbian woman, takes up space on the screen in the cinematic choices that depict ball culture. hooks argues that in the portrayal of the balls as *spectacle* rather than examined nuance of the *ritual* of the balls themselves results

in an image that is fundamentally reductionist and engenders a gaze that continues to *other* Black persons. As such, the hand of colonialism and discourse and power are consistently at play when engaging in the work of writing, creating, thinking, visualizing, and in knowledge creation generally. In this way, I take note from hooks in examining my role as the creator of a project that focuses on a "marginalized group" as a member of that group. I chose interviews as well as photography as a means through which to conduct this work in efforts to allow for collaboration and agency to take place at each turn. As a someone who identifies as Black, queer, and creative as well as with the politics of decolonialism, I attempt with this work to disengage from a colonial gaze. This disengagement is not a blind eye to the gaze, as colonialism was and is an ongoing phenomenon as well as a transformation of culture, but rather an effort to see ourselves outside of the constructed truth, to recognize the mechanisms of our dignity and express and think about what is it we want instead- how do we become human in a world that has told us otherwise, and **what does that humanness, not assimilation, truly look and feel like**? From a social sciences perspective, interviews are regarded as avenues for the centering and examination of a subject's world view. While social sciences or the practice of interviewing can be problematized in a voyeuristic and colonial endeavor, taking note from Linda Tuhiwai Smith, can be useful in the academy. As Smith (2012) points out, traditional and canonized methods of research are imbued with power dynamics that reveal themselves particularly clear when the "subjects" of said research are considered to be indigenous or a structurally marginalized group. Returning to Hall's (1997) understanding of the 'other as a spectacle' is useful in understanding the manifestation of colonist power dynamics between researchers and interviewees. As Hall (1997) notes, "the other" (p. 224) was constructed to prop up whiteness. The colonial imposition and the creation of whiteness depended entirely on the maintenance of binary oppositions, making white "human" and others "unhuman" or possessing less personhood (Pajaczkowska & Young, 1992). In this case, the other becomes a spectacle, a category that becomes observable and pathologized because they do not fit the category of human (Said, 1995). This process is what Smith (2012) calls "research through imperial eyes" (p. 24) , which mobilizes and solidifies ideas about marginalized groups that undermine and devalue knowledge from those who are constructed

as indigenous. In this case, Smith offers new ways of consideration of the power dynamics that invites researchers to understand themselves as collaborators to the furthest extent possible. Smith's interventions are largely on theoretical and historical planes, but she affirmatively provides an understanding that superficial or liberal notions of intentions or identity politics do not suffice for engaging in a decolonial process; while power dynamics are largely informed by colonialism cannot be dismantled entirely, being a collaborator rather than a spectator offers paths to research that center the voices of interviewees rather than deploying them as points of research to support projects that both essentialize minority communities and reside and stay within colonial mainstream academic institutions.

This adopted lens was used in the conduct of five qualitative recorded interviewees with participants from what can be considered marginalized identities, that being self identifying as Black and queer, with variation of identification on class and gender expression. Individual qualitative interviews prove to be an advantageous research methodology for the nature of this work that seeks to dismantle 'the gaze' and bring voices "from margin to center" (hooks, 1984). As Bauer and Gaskell (2000) note, interviews allow researchers to "map and understand the respondents' life world" where "the objective is a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviors of people in particular social contexts" (p.39). Further, interviews provide a path of "generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives" (Holstein & Gubrium,p. 140). Livingstone (2010) also notes that interviews can function as an intervention to the assumption that "one knows what other people think or feel" (p. 567). The generation of data or broadly knowledge creation aligns with the frequency of this project, which is to disengage from Spivak's (1988) "epistemic violence" (p.280) and instead partake in Mupotsa's (2017) imagining of new (liberatory) futures. Taking a nod from postcolonial life writing, my work as an interviewer was to 'facilitate' each persons' story with the understanding that it exists in multiplicities rather a "finite form" (Davies, p.8).

Additionally, the execution of this project expresses its collaborative ethos in the means through which interviews were reviewed by each collaborator. After each interview was transcribed, they were sent to each collaborator via a google document that allowed for editing

and commenting. This was sent in efforts to allow each collaborator to review their interview and consent to which parts, if any, they wouldn't like published as many shared personal stories involving family and friends. Additionally, collaborators were able to clarify spellings and meanings of vernacular language used in their interview. Most significantly, there is a social consideration about publically being a part of a project that is loudly branded as a queer work. As such, the sustained informed consent and consultation of this project is another extension of the efforts to disengage from an appropriation or spectacle production of work. Through my positionality as a Black, queer creative, my personal relationships with each collaborator, and ongoing collaboration, I would argue is less hierarchical (divestment from white supremacist ordering structures) and more collectively owned project was executed.

Sampling Process and execution

In following Robinson's (2014) four step sampling methodology, the following areas of research were considered in establishing the interviewees for the work:

- creating a "sample universe" (p.25)
- determining a sample size
- executing a strategy for sampling
- sourcing the sample

Firstly, the "sample universe" (Robinson, p.25) refers to what is more traditionally known as a target population. As noted by Robinson, the more criteria used to define a sample population, the greater the reality of the pool becoming homogeneous. The criteria for this project is derived from the aforementioned literature used for conceptualization, and that is a centering of a specific marginalized group's experience of becoming oneself. As such, the defining criteria for the project were collaborators (Smith, 2012) who openly identified as Black, queer, and creative. This selection criterion engendered a homogeneous sample along the lines of identifiers of race, sexual identity/expression, and producers of creative work. However, along these broad contours were heterogeneous differences amongst the collaborators. One of the obvious heterogeneous factors amongst us as co-collaborators were gender expression;

within identifying as Black, queer, and a creative, collaborators differed in their identification in gender expression, which demonstrated to be a significant factor in how one sees themself in their path of becoming. Overall, the universe of the sample participants who became co-collaborators were identified with a broad but unifying experience in mind, allowing for more nuanced differences and perspectives to shine through.

The second step in Robertson's (2014) methodology is determining a sample size that will render the outcome desired with analysis of the data. For the purposes of this project an "idiographic" (Robertson, p.30) aim was taken, where a small sample size facilitates a 'locatable' voice within the work. A small sample size of five collaborators does not lend itself to an outcome of generalizable data, but does allow for a detail rich snapshot of the collaborators and their voices for the purposes of asking questions rooted in their own reflexivity. As such, the postcolonial life writing ethos was adopted in attempts to create questions and environments were collaborators felt comfortable speaking themselves into existence.

The third executed step was sample strategy. Both Richardson's approach and Smith's understanding of participants as collaborators informed this strategy. As such, purposeful and stratified sampling strategies were operationalized. Purposeful sampling allows for "non-random ways of ensuring that particular categories of cases within a sampling universe are represented in the final sample of a project" (Robinson, p.32). The stratification is based on the three aforementioned criteria, that being identity markers of Black, queer, and creative. No further stratification was made beyond these three overlapping characteristics, creating diversity in age, class, gender expression, ability, and so on.

Lastly, the sourcing of the data was the final consideration in the sampling process. For the purposes of this project which was heavily located in what can be broadly understood as the personal, a snowballing sampling was executed. Snowball sampling was particularly advantageous as compared to recruitment through more formal or institutional channels as the idea and methods of collaboration could be better practiced amongst networks of other self identifying Black, queer creatives. As such, snowball sampling was done in regards to asking networks for potentially 'qualifying' and interested potential co-collaborators. From

snowballing and my own networks as a researcher and friend, co-collaborators were approached and asked to join the project.

All interviews were recorded and analyzed with a theme of agency. The selected excerpts from each interview presented on the website were chosen for both brevity and saliency. Therefore, the selected excerpts are subject to my selection, but under the guidance of the theme of agency and ethos of the project of "becoming". All collaborators were shown the final project prior to its publishing allowing for both revision and a co-working relationship.

Ethical considerations and limitations of qualitative interviews

All collaborators were approached with the informed consent of the project via consent forms that outlined the parameters of the project and options for anonymity. All collaborators were informed of their right to opt out at any point in the process. All interviews were recorded and securely stored. Collaborators were ensured that such recording were only to be used for the purposes of transcribing and publishing a short excerpt.

Qualitative interviews find their limitation in the lack of generalizable data. In this case, the research for this project cannot be used to make broad or sweeping conclusions on the discussed topics. Further, qualitative interviews are subject to the researcher's bias, which is further explained in the following section.

Reflexivity

Returning to the concept of reflexivity, I find it important to reiterate the nature of my work, what inspires it, and my positionality within it. This work is steeped in my interests and personal experiences as Black queer person who was molded in a racist and homophobic environment. Raised in a conservative white, catholic family in one of the United States' most segregated cities (Cincinnati, Ohio) unfortunately produced a childhood I felt I had to recover from. Being mixed race (Black), queer, and fat (fat used in a non derogatory way in alignment with the reclamation of the word but also asserting fat is not synonymous with ugly) colored my eyes with shame. In the burden of feeling constantly like a mistake, constantly small and desiring to take up as little space as possible resulted in a serious repression of personhood. It is

largely through the experiences of my community of Black queer people that I gained a sense of humanity, desire, drive, and politics. As cited earlier, moving towards a future where trauma is not a threshold for art, I choose to center this work on the present; a present understanding of what it means to be in this world, outside of narratives that seek to legitimize a struggle story that has a clean beginning, middle, and end. As a self identifying Black queer person, I would consider myself a part of the communities and networks who collaborated and partook in this work. Throughout the conceptualization and execution of this work, several considerations were taken around positionality, power, reflexivity, and ethics. I approached the work with "activist intention" (Boucher, p. 100), incurring a sense of solidarity amongst the collaborators, which derives from a feminist perspective of interviewing articulated by Boucher (2017). In coming from a similar peer group and possessing knowledge (lived and otherwise) around the politics of the identities shared, I hoped to 'heighten trustworthiness' (Boucher, p. 100) through an established solidarity prior to the interview via building relationships with the collaborator. In this way, I sought to disengage from what Boucher names as moments of dominance via interruption and lengthy monologues from myself as the interviewer, which assert power through dominance of a conversation or attempted creation of status from the interviewer. Most importantly, I actively tried to refrain from superimposing meanings upon the stories of collaborators with the assumption that I shared the specific texture of their stories. Such assumptions halt their stories and center the interviewer's (read: my) perspective through an analysis that is heavily imbued with an assumption of understanding. In this case, the questions formulated were open ended with the intention of giving collaborators agency over their stories and how they preferred to answer, rather than reproduce a prescriptive answers informed by assumptions of similarity, or even bias on my end. As such, my experience as a Black queer person from america is different from the context of South Africa from which all collaborators are from. Additionally, English was the language used to conduct the interviews, which likely affects the nature of the answers and stories of collaborators as English is not most collaborators' first language or mother tongue. Overarching, considerations about structural and intrapersonal power dynamics as well as bias were attempted to be accounted for and

mitigated by a research design that asked open ended questions that centered the experiences of the collaborators as well as my own intentions and actions as a researcher and collaborator.

"She is a friend of mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order."
Toni Morrison, Beloved

This section details the interviews of this work, and the ways in which I would argue the collaborators give pieces of them to both me and themselves, all in the right order- Allison-Claire Hoskins, Cyan Peppah, Neo Baepi, Thabile Makue, and Qondiswa James. I will discuss the three prominent themes that came from each interview, utilizing literature and theory to make sense of the knowledge creation project.

Creative Difference

"Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist."
Audre Lorde (2007), p. 112

The first theme that was present through each interview was the emphasis on creative difference. Each collaborator noted that they found it incredibly important to have an expansive perspective; to honor the differences amongst us as we all continue to move through the world, armed with the aim of liberation. For example, Neo noted that it is through his job that he begins to have dialogue with others, "I meet a lot of people in my job- older people, younger people, straight people, racist people, homophobic people, people who aren't those things-and what I've learned being a photographer is that it's very important to have dialogues with people you don't agree with, otherwise it's just echo chambers and circle jerks". Later in

his interview Neo complimented this sentiment by reaffirming that this difference must be embraced, but not in an uncritical or unprincipled way. In this case, in response to the question, "why is it important to choose yourself?", he responded with

"...if I pick myself at the expense of others then you're not really choosing yourself, but if you pick yourself empathetically, then it's community based and you do it for everybody else, including yourself. It's very rewarding to do it that way. There's no point in picking yourself selfishly. No, there's nothing wrong with being selfish, but there's no point in picking yourself at the expense of other people which is what racism is, which is what whiteness is. But choosing yourself mindfully and empathetically is different."

Neo's focus here on picking oneself in community with others finds expression in what Angela Davis notes as Lorde's nuance about interdependency. In reflecting upon Lorde's idea of using difference as a generative vehicle for creativity, Davis notes that, "sameness is not a prerequisite for unity" and that in western society, in order for difference to be acceptable, it must be "capable of integration, incorporation, homogenization" (AALBC). Davis goes onto to say that it is this logic that has sustained homophobia and racisms in our society; diversity swallows and dilutes systemic oppression by encouraging "colorful" integration into the same violent and existing systems. The creative potential of difference lies in an honesty that does not fit itself into binaries or a white, capitalist, patriarchal power system. Lorde (2007) notes that womxn, partially marginalized womxn (acknowledging and holding space for trans and non binary people as well as acknowledging the placelessness and imposition of gender) have been "forged in the crucibles of difference" (p.112), and that from this position, we have been able to then forge an interdependence with each other that functions as reliance and support rather than replicating hierarchies of value of identity markers. In this way, Neo's point about choosing oneself within community and not at the expense of others disrupts western binary thinking and encourages a mutuality amongst Black and queer communities to find each other.

Qondiswa expressed this politic of using difference as generative for creativity in political organizing, an ongoing engagement of her becoming. In response to "why is it important to be who you are?", Qondi responded with,

"I speak to connect. I speak to explain where I'm coming from. That I know that depending on where we are, as we move, the particularities of my intersection are not always going to be the primary frame, but that I am here, and that I do come with this and that there will be times where solidarity will mean doing the work from my particular frame. So I speak to say this is where I'm coming from and knowing that we don't all think the same thing, but that the thing of overlap and be really transparent about this is what I think about things, and I know we are never think the same way about things, but we're never going to get to utopias either, so we can fight with each other for now, and these are the things we can do together."

Qondi's response speaks to Lorde's work in that there is work to be done amongst ourselves, and a great deal of that work is an undoing of things. There is a restructuring in how Qondi seeks to organize that does not replicate the hegemonic structures of power which we are resisting. In this way, Qondi's emphasis on finding each other embodies the sentiment of not using the Master's Tools to destroy the Master's house.

Distraction/ Importance

Thabile, Cyan, and Qondiswa's interviews embody the theme of disengaging from an orientation that seeks to prove one's humanity to the dominant power structure and instead focus on writing ourselves into the discourse. Thabile's interview took me through her becoming story of coming from a conservative and religious space to crafting circles that made more sense for her. She began and grounded her story in being in a very religious community throughout her growing up. This religious community as she recalled was one of her sole identifiers; it was a way through which she understood herself. In her young adulthood, she noted that something shifted for her, that she no longer found so much resonance in what was

her primary community. Through questioning both the religion of Christianity but the functioning of the people within it, she felt that things were no longer okay in her eyes. As she began to express this, the church kicked her out, and from there Thabile felt that she could step into herself in a new way, one not defined by scripture and the insular nature of her church, "So, I was out of the church and I really started to allow myself to be queer because I was like, "God's dead" [laughs]. "God's dead, now I'm gonna do whatever I wanna do", and I found myself on Black Twitter. I don't even know how I found myself in that space". Further, I would say Thabile's interview speaks greatly to what cited in her interview as Toni Morrison's (1975) view on racism:

"The very serious function of racism … is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary."

Thabile noted that much of her work doesn't concern whiteness or defending oneself; she asked me and maybe herself,

"I think we really do need to intentionally see ourselves beyond defense, like what else is there? What is beyond that lens, and how else do we define ourselves? All of our work is concerned with whiteness and everything we're running from, and our paintings and photos and poetry is about it, like, what else is there? How do we imagine ourselves out of that space? And is there even an identity, does it look like the same kind of social identity that we have now, beyond all of that and does it look the same? "

In this way Thabile's preoccupation with being un-preoccupied by the gymnastics of racism points towards the imaginative and generative nature of Black feminist thought as well as

Thabile's own work. She notes that a great deal of her poetry deals with imagining other futures and other worlds. "I try to write imaginative poems of a different world, and different form. I think about medicine a lot, like what heals the wounds…" . In this way, the question of who are we outside of defense opens up space for knowledge creation that does not concern itself with the gaze. hooks (2006) notes that it is imperative for this kind of focus to be centered, for defense will never provide a path towards liberation but only a reinforcement that our condition is somewhere in between the lowest Black image and the glass ceiling of whiteness.

Cyan stated in their interview that becoming is important in the project of documenting ourselves. Cyan noted that their upbringing in a coloured community and culture was complex, both meaningful but imbued with the legacy and loss of apartheid. As such for them, becoming is an opportunity to 'write a new history';

"the history that I'm writing is from a coloured perspective, yes, but also an African perspective as well and from a queer perspective. And that's another history that has been written out of African history, is queer history. Africa used to have a really colorful, beautiful, broad, extensive queer history that was just got forgotten about. Queerness was in some cases celebrated, and in others not acknowledged, but not acknowledged because it wasn't a thing or a spectacle some of the time. "

Cyan's focus on archiving and making space for oneself resonates both the Morrison's words about the nature of racism and its distraction, but also her ethos around storytelling. In a 2015 interview with *the Guardian*, Morrison noted that she is "writing for black people" and that her canonic novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was her attempt to portray a profoundly american experience, "how something as grotesque as the demonisation of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (Hoby, 2015). In this case, the writing of our experiences, and in the case of *The Bluest Eye*, combats the silence of our conditions and legitimizes a worldview from a Black perspective and can be

widely read and shared. Cyan's visual and producing work exists along this same axis; Cyan noted that their becoming and their presentation of self is intentionally rooted in the project of making space and history for Black queer people. In this way, their photography and videography exist in online spaces and can indeed write a new queer and African history.

Qondiswa also noted that the proliferation of documentation tools allows us space and opportunity to build to the ongoing archiving project of ourselves. In reflecting upon the work she does as an activist and theatre maker, she said

"There's something about the fact that we've got all these mediums- we have our phones, the fucking interwebs, photographs and digital cameras, and film cameras to youtube- archive yourself, archive your community and your reality, archive your struggle, and write into the discourse what do you, you as in we all, us, the left or whatever, assert it into the discourse, into the mainstream discourse."

These sentiments compliment well what Toni indeed warned us of, of proving our humanity to people whose identity is only stabilized by our inferiority. Fanon similarly notes the impossibility of whiteness and surpassing or convincing itself otherwise. Fanon (1967) in the *Fact of Blackness* notes that the Black body 'demands an explanation' (p.85) and that meeting the gaze of whiteness dissembles one's body. In this way, looking away from the gaze in regards to creating a sense of self provides a pathway to human dignity informed by a sense of humanness rather than object-ness. Becoming for the collaborators involved this introspection work as well as an urgency to write for ourselves.

Multiplicity

In their essay for *The Cut*, Akwaeke Emezi details how their surgeries (breast reduction and hysterectomy) went beyond altering a physical form but were 'bridges across realities" (Emezi, 2018). Emezi, author of *Freshwater*, shares that the realization of their trans-ness and the reality that they may be ogbanje were simultaneous, yet took time to find each other. Emezi

details that ogbanje is an “Igbo spirit that’s born into a human body, a kind of malevolent trickster, whose goal is to torment the human mother by dying unexpectedly only to return in the next child and do it all over again” (Emezi, 2018). Emezi’s surgery in some ways provides an avenue to end the lineage of the ogbanje, and demonstrates the seamless intertwining of the body and spirit; how the spirit was “customizing its vessel to reflect its nature” (Emezi, 2018). This similar notion of the spirit and human flesh, and overarching validity of Igbo spirituality, is in the pages of *Freshwater,* a novel that follows several narrators, all of whom occupy one body, the body of Ada. The narrators tell us their perspective on the story of life through the body of Ada, some brash with the decisions they make for the body, others more soft and patient. Emezi notes that the book embraces an African spirituality, where the human body is not confined to a western understanding of flesh and mind. Rather Emezi offers a rich story of the various gods that sit on a marble floor with Ada who the body all belongs to and is of. Many of the collaborators spoke to this understanding of multiplicity; of an inward reflecting outward and how there is a serious urgency to crafting oneself in the way that gets to the most honest and representative reflection of you on a given day. I think to Cyan’s interview when they described their style and how clothing was a part of the becoming process.

“So through conversations with Dianne, I got a better sense of what my gender identity is; I mean it will probably change, it is always changing, and I know now that I’m gender non conforming because I feel extremely masculine and extremely feminine at the same time and I love both equally. I am not trying to hide the one or amp up the one, they literally both exist at the same time. It's not like when I go to the club, I feel feminine, and when I’m in the street, I’m more masculine; when I’m walking down the road, I literally feel both at the same time. So it's not like a non-existence of gender but it's both existing at the same time, and equally. So for me that as a really important part of the journey. Becoming is continuous, it never stops.”

In this way, Cyan is acknowledging the limits of choosing one definitive end of a spectrum to identify. The expansiveness of gender and expression opens up ideas and understanding in the ways of being. Additionally, Cyan notes that visualizing the naked body was also a means

through which for them to become. In getting comfortable and sensual in their own nude self photography, Cyan notes that this was a means through which for them to practice self love, to really look at oneself and ask “what do you see?”, and from there, answers tend to spill out, even if they are stuck and unmolded at the moment of their birth.

Allison’s interview also touched upon the importance of clothing as a means through which to become. Allison recalled in her interview that she used to hate shopping for clothes out a sense of discomfort informed by a few different things. When shopping, Allison noted that her masculine style (specifically she noted a Che Guevara t-shirt and khaki shorts) was drawing negative attention to her from her family members, “I remember one time my aunts bringing my mom aside and saying “Yhu, Allison is going to be a lesbian if you don’t watch out, with her clothes, you know?” And my mom was like “no no, she’s not a lesbian!” Allison followed this up with, “that’s why it took so long to come out because from there I just saw the negatives about being yourself”. Allison then began to describe the discomfort of others sexualizing her body during puberty times and it was through experimentation of clothing that she felt she could own and express her body.

“I knew I needed to express myself creatively through clothing, but the stores my mom was taking me to of course only had certain styles. You know I have a very masculine side of myself or the pink pretty dress side and I was like, “well I’m somewhere in between”. I don’t have the words for it, but eventually I started experimenting more, and I think in that experimentation I started feeling more comfortable even going out to get clothes. It became more exciting- “oou I can match that with that” and “oo my all stars with my dress” I don’t have to wear my all stars with my khakis anymore! I can mix it up.”

Cyan and Allison’s reflections move through white supremacist binary thinking by acknowledging the body as a source of knowledge and dynamics. Emezi’s work of centering an Igbo spirituality as the guiding understanding of life, which is malleable and dynamic, is

underpinned by what Cyan and Allison express, which is a sense of acceptance of the ever changing nature of life and the forces that (can) govern.

Capturing Becoming

Lastly, I am concluding this section of analysis with reflection on what it meant to curate and visually direct the five series of portraits of *Becoming*. In interviewing each collaborator, I was able to build a relationship with each person, learning a little more about them and the nature of their engagement with the world. These interviews were imperative to informing how I would visually direct and shoot each series. Someone like Allison for example was a delight to work with as she is a creative who is comfortable in front of the camera in the way that she embraces and honors the art of making art. In understanding her interview, Allison talked extensively about the various life experiences she has had and where her art, primarily poetry, has taken her. I found that Allison's interview and her poetry take me through worlds. In this case, her photo-shoot had 3 outfit changes and different backgrounds, shot in her home, to represent and reflect what I think Allison does: creates worlds.

Thabile's shoot was also intimate and taken in the sunlight of her home. Thabile's interview was the longest of the five and reads much more like a conversation. In learning Thabile, I felt a great sense of self ownership and peace. Her shots therefore came with a sense of ease to take; we continued to talk for an hour as I was taking her photos. We shared stories about our families and what it meant for us to choose new ones and negotiate what home means; how things feel to move in stages where you are constantly entering into and shedding ignorance. Her beading work was an idea she suggested as it helped calm and focus her. What came out of this shoot were tender and detail oriented portraits.

Neo's shoot and interview were incredibly succinct and powerful. Neo's interview is poignant to me for several reasons, but I found his maturity and the seriousness with which he took

empathy to be striking. In talking about his family and his queerness, he said “I mean my dad said to me years ago, “your grandmother would readily embrace a rapist in the family before she accepts your gayness” which was him basically saying “pick yourself dude, we’re not going to be here forever”. When Neo said this, I was just struck by his interpretation; that he found and understood love in a reality that could have easily induced heartbreak or a sense of rejection. Neo being a photographer himself made the shoot semi-intimidating. I pick Neo’s outfits and directed the shots and in turn tried to capture the mature essence of Neo as well as a few detail shots of buttoning a white shirt to portray or affirm his masculine dress.

Cyan’s shoot was probably the shoot I was most nervous about in regards to getting the shots “right”. In learning Cyan and their love and interest in the visual, we began talking about the body. It came out through their interview that roping and BDSM was an interest of theirs and we agreed that the visuals of bondage would be a great choice for the shoot. Cyan kindly agreed to arrange for a friend and bondage artist Tapiwa to do the roping work for the session on a hot Saturday morning in Woodstock. My nervousness was underpinned by the reality that we really only had one shot; there was no doing-over of this kind of work. However, the shoot to my relief became pushed by eagerness and an ardent desire to create and capture the best moments we could. Cyan, Tapiwa and me all had a sense of wonder, not knowing what each other's next moves would be- that being Tapiwa freestyling a harness, Cyan being open to different positioning, and me directing and moving around to get the best and most intimate shots. I was happy that I was able to catch what I do think is a moment of the ongoing becoming process.

Lastly, Qondiswa. Qondiswa is someone you meet that you never come across again. When I hear Qondiswas voice, I am reminded of James Baldwin or Maya Angelou. I am reminded of them because of how their distinct voice seems tie a rope around you and pull you in close. When I watch Qondiswa perform, I am reminded of Stacey Ann Chin, I am reminded of the talent of storytelling with such unbridled and deeply human energy that equally ties you up and then leaves you undone, more conscious of life and its politics, but more able to look it in the

face to try to change something about it whether it be that it or yourself. Work pours out of Qondiswa, she is an endlessly committed reservoir to a more dignified and collectively owned future; I would say Qondi's urgency is underpinned by an inability to swallow this reality for its too ugly- Qondi loves, deeply. In this way, I wanted to capture her in the theatre as writing and creating in that space is an integral part of becoming for her. What came out of her shoot were movement shots of her during a rehearsal and captured portraits of her. I was happy to get some still shots that have a sense of stillness about them as Qondi is often moving.

Becoming was a joy. *Becoming* made me proud of creating something like this. *Becoming* reaffirmed the importance of looking people in the eyes and asking them for their stories; the importance of making people feel special and making this life special. *Becoming* undid me, challenged me in ways I couldn't have anticipated and showed me how unresolved I still feel in areas of my life. *Becoming* taught me so much and made me cry with gratitude to know such brilliant people and trust that Black queer people can indeed find each other and cultivate a sense of love amongst ourselves. *Becoming* made me more confident in building meaningful relationships; taught me about how I practice empathy and community building.
Becoming helped me become.

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"You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding, it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has perfect memory and is forever trying to get back where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory–where the nerves and the skin remember how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our 'flooding'…"
Toni Morrison, Sites of Memory

They don't know we need each other critically. They expect us to call in sick, watch television all night, die by our own hands. They don't know we are becoming powerful. Every time we kiss we confirm the new world coming.
Essex Hemphill, American Wedding

"There are years that ask questions and years that answer."
Zora Neale Hurston

This work was a work of my momentary poisoning, inspired by a point on what I hope is a long life line. I have attempted to trace the 'teeth of destruction' as I call them that render Black queer bodies to problem zones. Through this tracing hopefully comes both a sense of honoring Black feminist literature that seeks to visibilize the disposability of Black womxns bodies, which is bound up in femme-ness or stepping outside of the cis-straight binary, as well as highlight the necessity Cyan notes, which is to 'write our own histories' so "people like me can be remembered". Further, this work also takes note from Black feminist scholars who uphold that literature and knowledge production outside of the academy is valuable, truthful, and part of the liberatory path. As such, briefly reviewing the work of Zanele Muholi, Lola Flash, Burnice Mulenga and Marsha P. Johnson as well as acknowledging people like James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and the many other names mentioned attempts to pull out that embodied knowledge and use that work as a means of upholding a theoretical base that can be considered Black, queer, feminist, and anti-capitalist. This reveals that the work in seemingly separate silos speak to each other around the importance of asking the question who are we outside of this gaze, who have we had to become at the expense of ourselves, and with what we have, in the teeth of a world geared against us, who do we want to be. Interviewing five Black queer people about their becoming process adds to this work in creating space for Black queer people to speak, and speak loudly. Resoundingly, the recurring thoughts and ideas from each person was the importance of finding one another; that being

listening and thinking expansively. All five collaborators touched upon this in their interviews, about the importance to talk to other people who don't think like you, underpinned by an orientation towards justice and humanity. Overarching, each collaborator emphasized that becoming is an unending process, that figuring one's space and body and politics is an ongoing project, but it is one that must be done or as Allison notes, "everything ugly about this world wins".

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Appendix 1- One complete transcript

Neo Baepi Full Transcript

Can you introduce yourself for me?

My name is Neo Baepi. I am 28 years old- I don't look it [smiles warmly]. I have quite a long geographical history in South Africa. I was born in a small town called Klerksdorp in the North West and I grew up in a town about the same size 45 minutes away called Potchefstroom until I was about 6 and then I moved to Johannesburg with my dad and we lived in Yeoville which is in the CBD and you don't want to live there now. And I lived in places like Soweto, PE, Cape Town, Texas and yeah and grew up with most of my formative life in Johannesburg. And I identify myself probably 6 different times a day or an hour, but I would say that I'm a gender non conforming boy, and I like girls.... who also bend genders. I'm a photographer, I really like taking photographs, and I feel a lot more human when I have a camera in my hand cause things are so bleak, things are so sad, but when I get to take photos of people who want me to take photos of them, I feel like we can work on this mess of a world we've got.

Why photography?

So the story goes that when I was growing up I had a family friend, an uncle, who took photos his whole life, but he also drank himself to a stupor every night so he died quite young. And the way he funded his drinking habit was with taking photos of weddings and graduations and birthday parties in the hood. And I would go with him and I really liked the way the equipment looked. I'm quite obsessed with guns and ammunition and cameras look a lot like guns,

shooting and all of that. And so after he died, people still needed photos, so he taught me and passed the skill down to me and I was about 9 or 10 when I took over from him, and so I also taught myself. But I went to school, I studied photojournalism, which I hated. I kind of hate that I'm a trained journalist cause it makes me so pessimistic of the work, you know? But yeah, the ability to tell stories and not just make money is important to me. My mentor [in varsity] was quite mean, he was a mean man, but was incredibly nice to me, took me under his wing and all that, but he actually was a mean drunk who wanted to make money; I don't think he cared about taking photos. And I said, "fuck this, there's something beautiful about taking photos". The act of making a portrait- there's something really fulfilling about it. It's not just about what the photo looks like, it's the process.

What does becoming mean to you?

So up until very recently, I identified as a lesbian, but even when I did, I didn't feel like one and I couldn't relate to other lesbians and I really didn't know why but I just went with it because labels right? It's a way to move through society. And then I met my partner and what she made me realize was that I was given space by her and her thinking and our relationship to explore my gender and my sexuality and my sexual orientation. The things that have stayed consistent are my sexuality and my sexual orientation, but my gender is always transforming. So becoming to me is that transformation. It's about accepting and embracing that I'm never going to be one thing, or a set of things, and I shouldn't fixate on those things. So the reason I like talking about my queerness is because I sometimes forget I'm queer, its not something I fixate on, its not a thing that makes me who I am. And I realize its getting trendier and its getting cuter to be gay, and I appreciate that, but I also interrogate that. I'm very conscious of gay for play ass niggas, because I've always been this way. And growing up, I was never forced to accept it as my entire destiny; I am so many things before and after I'm gay. So becoming means constantly making the world adaptable to you as opposed to the other way around. I am tired of bending and crouching for this ugly planet. I'm going to expand it so I can walk tall. So yeah, that's what becoming looks like to me, it's making the world bigger so I can breathe and be. I'm tired of being small, **and becoming is the process, it's a very active process of not being small.**

How has photography helped you be who you are?

I'm really good at it, and I really like being good at stuff. I've had a lot of skills in my life that I've long put away. I used to be an athlete, now I smoke like 20 cigarettes a day. I swam midmar

mile, I did track, I did provincial soccer, football, I was gonna swim the English Channel at some point, but I gave up on that dream, so yah I was a pretty serious athlete, and then I wasn't anymore because it wasn't me. I was just good at it. So photography has helped me in becoming because of the cheesy storytelling, and documenting, and archiving, and all of that and more than anything I'm good at it, and I enjoy being good at it, superficial as it may sound. And I'm also really in awe of how democratized the media has become. So there's a *Time Magazine 100* issue in which there are 100 most influential photos of all time. So it's spread out across four issues, 25 photos each, and one of those photos is the first cellphone camera photo of a baby just being born. That never happened before; photography was mostly inaccessible, primarily for rich people, and it wasn't fast, it wasn't instantaneous. The cell phone crushed all

of that. Fast forward to a couple of years later where social media and Instagram come into play where everyone can Now be a photographer. Fast-forward to digital photography where you don't have to send your negatives to someone anymore unless you wanna be a hipster-but you don't have to get your negatives developed by a professional anymore. You can process them yourself with your own camera, there's an automatic setting. And that's not because Nikon or Canon want you to be able to be a photographer, they just want to sell cameras. So I just like how democratized the media has become.

I meet a lot of people in my job- older people, younger people, straight people, racist people, homophobic people, people who aren't those things-and what I've learned being a photographer is that it's very important to have dialogues with people you don't agree with, otherwise it's just echo chambers and circle jerks. That was cool in 2014 when we were all giving each other language on how to face issues; now we've got the language and now we need to face things head on. We realize racism is wrong, what are we going to do about it? Talk to a racist, find out why they're racist, because we don't know everything just because we're Black and I don't know everything about being good just because I'm gay - there are bad gay people out there! So I suppose having a camera is like being the humans of New York guy in which there is a buffer between me and this person, which is this image we can make if we just work on ourselves for just a little bit. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but it's made me a lot more confident. And it's not like I wasn't, but I have anxieties, I have my own worries, but they seem to suspend when I have the potential to make a good photo. I stop worrying about it, and I'm grateful for that. And there's also time when I never take photos for months when I'm not working or not shooting, and that's not because I don't want to or

because I can't but because the drive and the motivation to shoot isn't there. I was so fixated on inspiration... ughhh... and sometimes I'm not shooting and that's fine because I'm not just a photographer. I want to learn how to DJ, I'm learning how to be DJ, actively.

Why is it important to choose to be who you are, to choose to work on the things that make you feel human?

I've never been anything other than this, even at my worst. My worst memories are high school, I hated high school because teenagers are very vicious and it's like a herd mentality, its very group thinking. And if you steer from the group, you're ostracized, pariah right? And now when you're an individual, you are praised for that shit- imagine that. I now look at all my

schoolmates and they're all literally stepford wives, like married with children at 28. It's not a condemnation, but I'm so grateful for going out of my way to be different.

I matriculated in PE, if you know anything about PE, its the armpit of South Africa, its 17 years behind the rest of the country and my schoolmates have not left PE. Just like people have not left Ohio. I don't get that. I have very good parents; me and my dad have a contentious history but we are very good friends now, we're really really strongly bonded now. My mom and my dad and my step mother have never discouraged me from choosing myself and choosing myself meant letting me wear what I want to wear, eat what I want to eat, watch the TV I want to watch, read the books I want to, listen to the music I want to. They'd always challenge me on it, they'd ask "do you pants have to sag *that* low?" [laughs] but it was never "stop wearing pants". And as I grow up, it's an even more open conversation-I'm working on coming out to them as trans or non binary or both- I don't know yet- and its frightening because you know they've given me all this space to be this person, but how much can they take? And why am I thinking of myself like an event that happens to people, how much of me can you take? I'm your kid you know? But they've shown me they're willing to work on it, so they're willing to understand it. I mean my dad said to me years ago, "your grandmother would readily embrace a rapist in the family before she accepts your gayness" which was him basically saying "pick yourself dude, we're not going to be here forever". So yeah, I'm always trying to get the people that I love to be mindful and thoughtful cause that shit is sexy, it will get you laid, I promise you. Because once you've become empathetic, you don't have to absorb things, but you become a blank canvas for other people all the time. Not like a therapist or anything, but you understand why people have problems, and you understand that your own problems matter, that your own

issues are valid. Which is why I can tell when someone isn't empathetic, I can just tell by the way that they think about me and the way they move in the world.

Why is it important to choose yourself?

It's important to pick yourself, not in the cheesy way, like "choose yourself" as a sticker on a wall in white woman's home, but picking yourself is important particularly as a queer person, because nobody else is going to do it for you. Most recycling has to happen more rigorously; when you throw away cardboard, you have to clean it, you have to separate it from colours, you know what I mean? When you throw away your milk carton you have to make sure its clean and you might as well not recycle - bad recycling is just as bad as pollution. So if I pick

myself at the expense of others then you're not really choosing yourself, but if you pick yourself empathetically, then it's community based and you do it for everybody else, including yourself. It's very rewarding to do it that way. There's no point in picking yourself selfishly. No, there's nothing wrong with being selfish, but there's no point in picking yourself at the expense of other people which is what racism is, which is what whiteness is. But choosing yourself mindfully and empathetically is different.

What were pivotal moments of becoming?

When I was younger, I convinced myself that I had a rare disease where I grew female, femme parts. That's not a mistake, that's very intelligent for like a 10 year old to imagine. So that was really pivotal, that's when I realized I'm beyond just gay, there's something and its not a dysphoric thing, I've never been dysphoric, I just accepted it as just a difference which is why it's probably easy for me to empathetically pick myself. I didn't say I was in the wrong body, I was like "I'm in this body and we have to deal with it".

Another pivotal moment was the death of my uncle. I was 12 when he died and he committed suicide and he was really depressed. I was 12 so I didn't know and you know the family barely talks about it, but I lost my best friend, he was 23 years old and that's when I discovered mental illness as something that's not really explored for Black people and I might have to say we are the most depressed people out here and we don't really confront that.

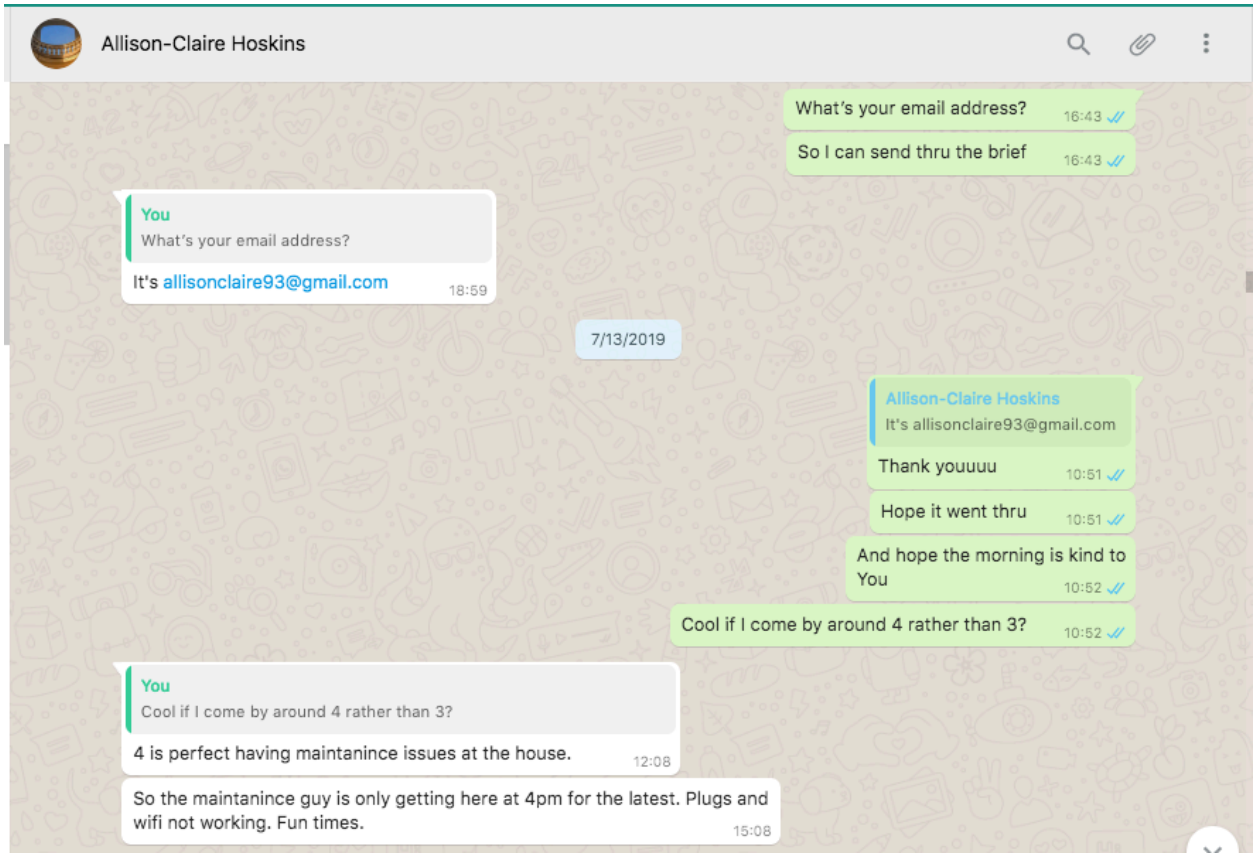
And I think the third pivotal moment was when I slept with a woman for the first time...[laughs] yeah, I don't think I need to say more about that [laughs once more].

All of those things I suppose in some way consciously, unconsciously, subconsciously, have made me who I am and who I'm trying to be. If someone had to ask me if I'm a good person I could say absolutely, without a fucking doubt. I am a very good person. But that's not the same as asking "Do you like Neo?". You don't have to like me, but you can't challenge my character. I know I'm a good person. And it's very gratifying to know that.

Appendix 2

Evidence of written consent from all collaborators

Allison- Claire Hoskins



Project proposal

Kim M Reynolds <kmreynolds18@gmail.com>
to allisonclaire93

Fri, Jul 12, 7:11 PM

Hey sis,
Below is the full project description for my project, *Becoming*

The theme of *Becoming* derives from a few different Black queer authors.

In writing to his nephew, James Baldwin tells younger James about his father, and how he was long destroyed before he ever died because "at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him".

Audre Lorde tells us that she had to define herself or else she would be "crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive."

Zora Neale Hurston said "if you are silent about your pain, they will kill you and say you enjoyed it"

All of these things beg the question, how do we "become"? How do we become our selves in the teeth of a world that is very heavily invested in our destruction? In a world that is anti black, anti poor, anti queer, and so much more, all which stem from a white colonial power structure. To be human in the eyes of the world as Spivak tells us is to be a white, christian, straight male of property, and those of us who are "unhuman" by means of being a combination of Black and womxn and queer face an extraordinary amount of violence. In this case in a world that demonstrates its contempt to for these bodies, what is the cost of becoming? Why must we become ourselves, and how do we engage in this process everyday? This photo series seeks to center the narratives and lives of those who have set out on the path of becoming. Through portraiture of everyday life and in-depth interviews, experiences of becoming will be excavated and explored, honored, and complicated.

The end project is a published website that contains the profile of each interviewee, pictures and interviews included.

Thanks for taking the time to read and consider this and I hope you have a good day.

Cyan Peppah

Kim M Reynolds <kmreynolds18@gmail.com>
to artcyanpeppah

Wed, Aug 14, 10:02 AM

Hello love,
Hoping you're doing alright these days. Below is the project brief:

Project Title: Becoming
Description: Becoming is a photo series of self identifying Black queer creatives. The theme of Becoming derives from a few different Black authors, two of whom were openly queer.

Background:
In writing to his nephew, James Baldwin tells younger James about his father, and how he was long destroyed before he ever died because "at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him".

Audre Lorde tells us that she had to define herself or else she would be "crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive" as she she routinely introduced herself as a "Black lesbian feminist mother warrior poet"

And lasty,

Zora Neale Hurston said "if you are silent about your pain, they will kill you and say you enjoyed it"

All of these statements beg the question, how do we "become"? How do we become ourselves in the teeth of a world that is very heavily invested in our destruction? How do we create knowledge that is relevant to us, disengaged from the gaze that both overdetermines us while simultaneously erasing us? Why must we become ourselves, and how do we engage in this process everyday?

This photo series seeks to center the narratives and lives of those who have set out on the path of becoming. Through portraiture of everyday life and in-depth interviews, experiences of becoming will be excavated and explored, honored, and complicated.

The portraits are to be either staged portraits or capturing the creative in their process of becoming and creating, whether that be working on a visual art piece, beading work, photography, dance, etc.

The portraits are to be either staged portraits or capturing the creative in their process of becoming and creating, whether that be working on a visual art piece, beading work, photography, dance, etc.

Each interview is brief and centers the experiences of the creative: What does becoming mean to you? How do you become? What were some of those pivotal moments?

The end project is a published website that contains the profile of each interviewee, pictures and excerpts from the interviews included.

If this all sounds good to you, the next steps would be to arrange for the interview and shoot. The interview is pretty short- usually 30 mins- I can always come thru to woodstock for this. As for the shoot, I remember you mentioning that it may work to shoot you in a mirrored environment with a dancer you will be shooting? Ideally, I would like to have the photos done no later than mid September. I can also come up with a few ideas for portraits that feature you and your camera.

Maybe we can do the interview next Monday? In the morning? My schedule is pretty flexible (i might be able t do the weekend but I'm unsure)
As for the shoot, I'll hear from you for what works best.

Much love and much peace,
Kim

Cyan Peppah <artcyanpeppah@gmail.com> Wed, Aug 14, 11:04 AM
to me

Thanks for the mail Kim,

I saw many things while reading the brief, so if you don't mind, can I get back to you later today so we can talk about scheduling and ideas. I am on board though.

Thanks for reaching out to me, this sounds like a beautiful and important project and I'd be honored to be a part of it.

Kim M Reynolds <kmreynolds18@gmail.com> Mon, Oct 7, 9:52 AM
to Cyan

Hey Cyan,
How are you? Hoping you're well.

Attached/linked are two things for the project, which will be published on the 31st of October:

1. Here is the transcript of your interview and the text that is on the site. Figured a google doc would be best if you want to leave comments on anything. This is mostly for you to know whats going to be on the site and if you're comfortable with all of that- I will let you know of any further edits as I may have to trim some of your interview for space things- people don't like to read in these streets you know. I also don't want more text than visual entirely. https://docs.google.com/document/d/10cU_hj18rk5Hw_m2mUAlfmrVZ_Sgn87BiJqCgBBvoKI/edit?usp=sharing

2. Screen recording of the site and your page specifically. I would have just given you access to the site for you to poke around in, but it would also give you access to other peoples' pages and I want to ensure privacy/respect of each persons text prior to publishing.

If you could feedback by the end of next week on anything that is a concern for you, **October 18th,** that would be great.

Lastly, I am trying to find some funding at the moment to print and exhibit the work- if that becomes a reality, we can chat again about permission and all that.

Love! always.

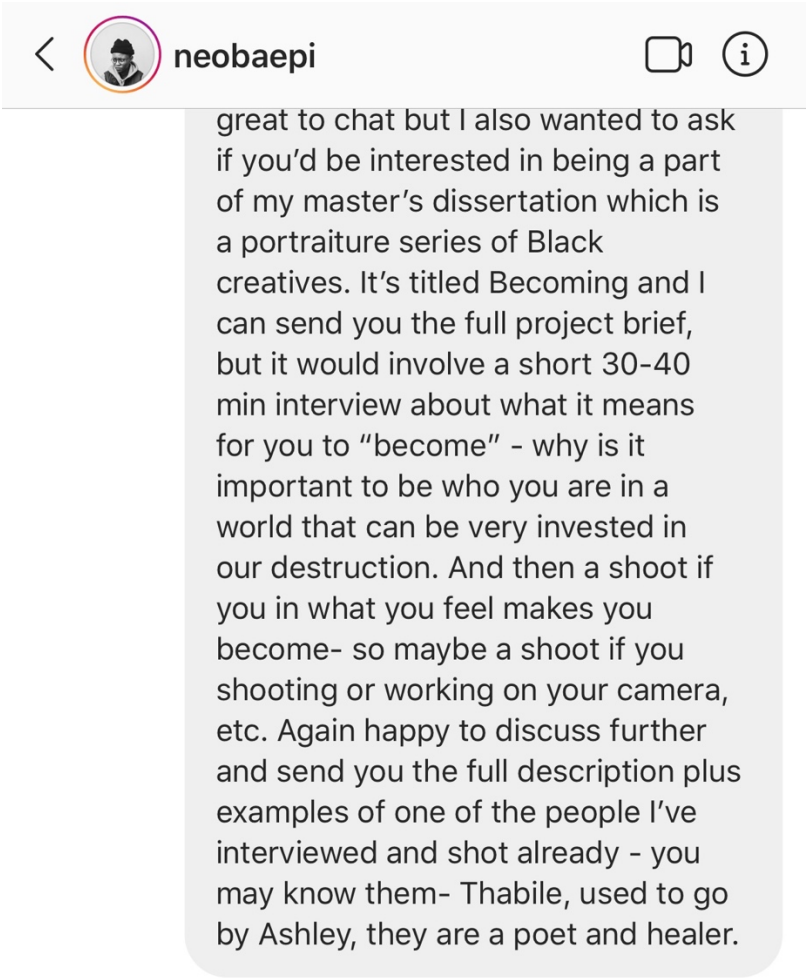
Cyan Peppah Mon, Oct 7, 10:20 AM
to me

Hey Kim!

Thanks for sending these, and I get why you can't share the weblink just yet. I looked at the preview video and visually it's looking good :)

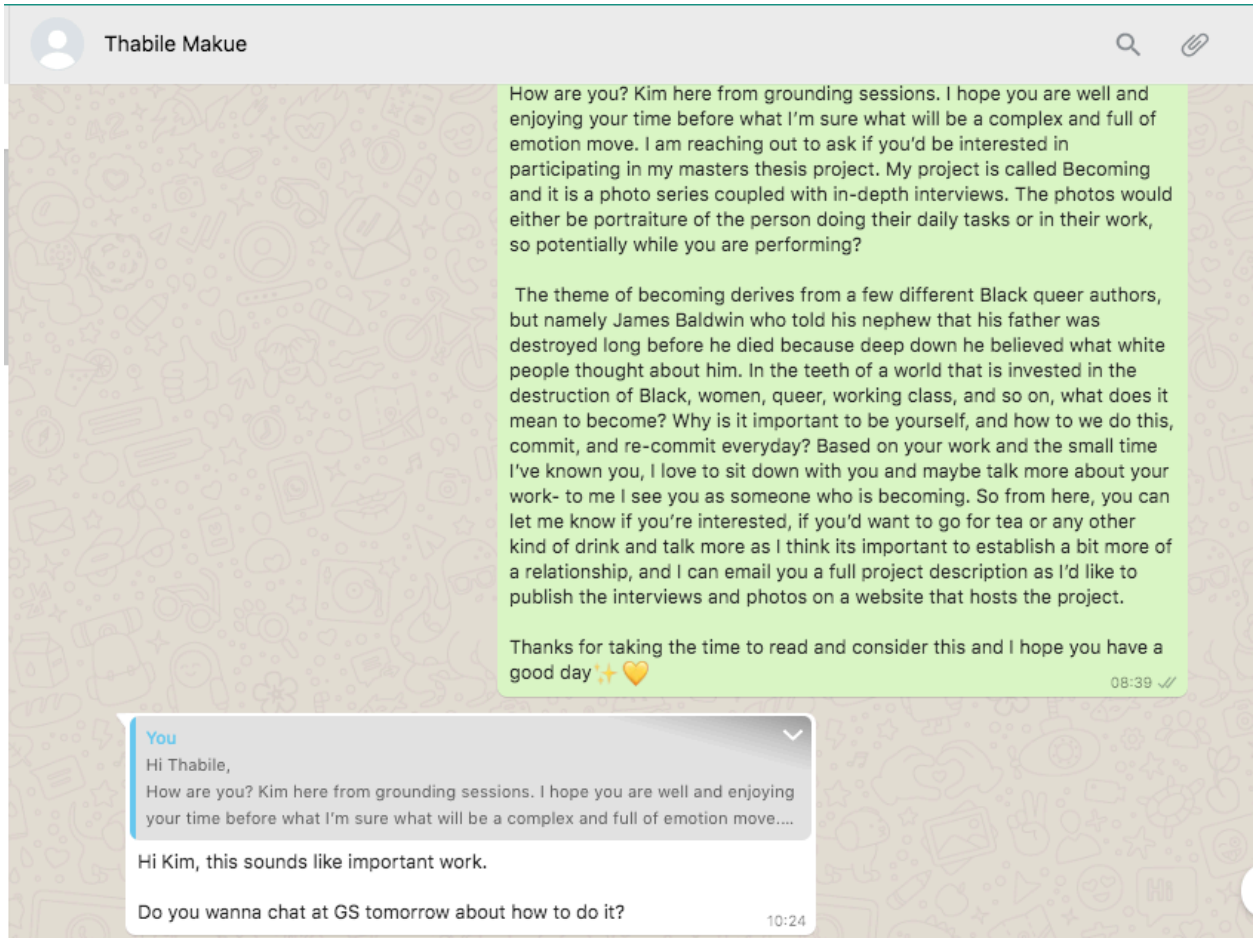
I'll go through the transcript and will aim to have something for you by the end of the week. Are you ok with me doing edits to the text, and then perhaps just changing the text colour of those edits so you can see where I've made changes?

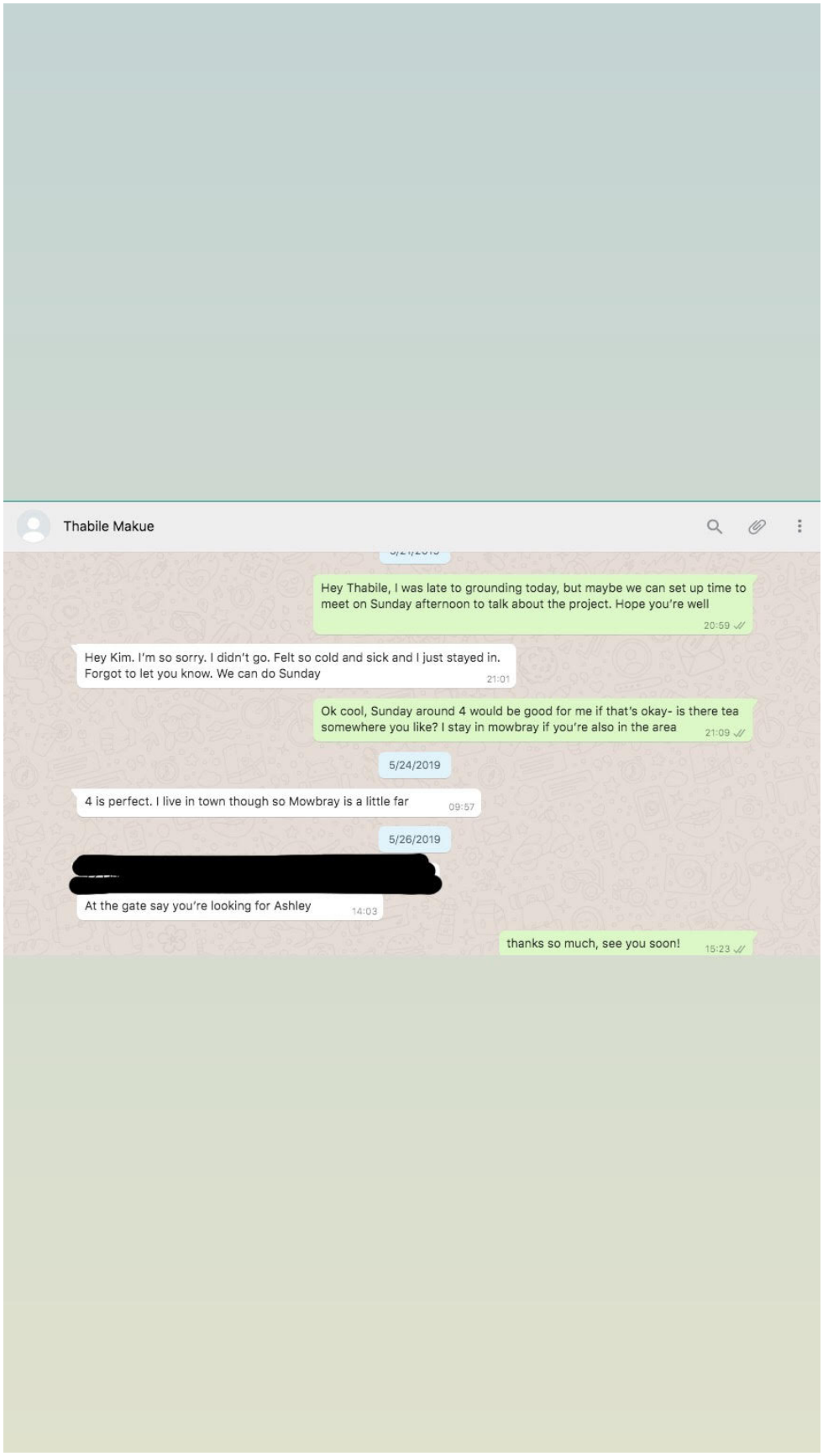
Neo Baepi


neobaepi
great to chat but I also wanted to ask if you'd be interested in being a part of my master's dissertation which is a portraiture series of Black creatives. It's titled Becoming and I can send you the full project brief, but it would involve a short 30-40 min interview about what it means for you to "become" - why is it important to be who you are in a world that can be very invested in our destruction. And then a shoot if you in what you feel makes you become- so maybe a shoot if you shooting or working on your camera, etc. Again happy to discuss further and send you the full description plus examples of one of the people I've interviewed and shot already - you may know them- Thabile, used to go by Ashley, they are a poet and healer.


Vodacom
14:57
neobaepi
July 25, 10:43 AM
Also, quick clarification : the project is focusing on Black queer creatives- not sure how I missed typing that in the first message, and the final product is a website that has the portraits and the short interviews- not sure about exhibiting the work as of yet, but could also be a possibility with People's permission. Again if you have capacity and want to- thanks again Neo
Hey Kim. Thanks for the texts and always reaching out, appreciate it a lot. I'd be happy to help you with your work. Let me know how to get the ball rolling. ❤️
July 25, 4:01 PM
Hey Neo, cool and thanks so much 💛 what does your schedule look like next weekend either Saturday or Sunday? I'm thinking coffee + the
Message...

Thabile Makue




Thabile Makue
Hey Thabile, I was late to grounding today, but maybe we can set up time to meet on Sunday afternoon to talk about the project. Hope you're well
20:59
Hey Kim. I'm so sorry. I didn't go. Felt so cold and sick and I just stayed in. Forgot to let you know. We can do Sunday
21:01
Ok cool, Sunday around 4 would be good for me if that's okay- is there tea somewhere you like? I stay in mowbray if you're also in the area
21:09
5/24/2019
4 is perfect. I live in town though so Mowbray is a little far
09:57
5/26/2019
[redacted]
At the gate say you're looking for Ashley
14:03
thanks so much, see you soon!
15:23

Project proof

Inbox ×

Kim M Reynolds <kmreynolds18@gmail.com> Wed, Oct 9, 4:28 PM
to thabilemakue

Hey Thabile,
How are you? Hoping you're well.

Sending through a screen recording of the site for becoming and your page specifically so you can have eyes on it and know what it is all looking like- the site will be live on October 31st. I would have just given you access to the site for you to poke around in, but it would also give you access to other peoples' pages and I want to ensure privacy/respect of each persons text prior to publishing. Your transcript/text is also attached.

If you could feedback on the transcript and this visual by the end of next week on anything that is a concern for you, **October 18th,** that would be great.

Thabile Proof.mov
thabile transcript.docx

Love! Always

Best,

Thabile Makue Sun, Oct 20, 7:43 AM
to me

Hey Kim,

Omg, so sorry for missing your deadline. It completely skipped my mind.

I'm happy with the text and site!

About me:

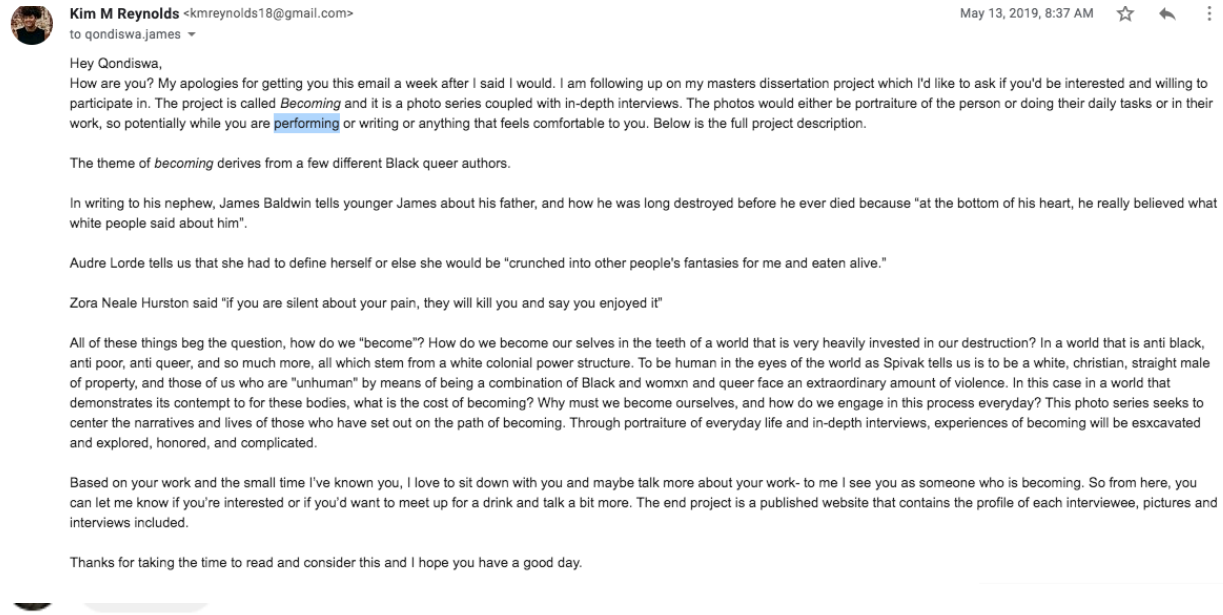
I am a healer and writer. I love poetry and classical art – unfortunately, because it's so Eurocentric. I love the ocean and mountains. And love, and loving and eating.

Kind regards,

Thabile Makue

Tel: 424-426-9400
Email: thabilemakue@gmail.com

Qondiswa James



Kim M Reynolds <kmreynolds18@gmail.com> May 13, 2019, 8:37 AM
to qondiswa.james

Hey Qondiswa,
How are you? My apologies for getting you this email a week after I said I would. I am following up on my masters dissertation project which I'd like to ask if you'd be interested and willing to participate in. The project is called *Becoming* and it is a photo series coupled with in-depth interviews. The photos would either be portraiture of the person or doing their daily tasks or in their work, so potentially while you are performing or writing or anything that feels comfortable to you. Below is the full project description.

The theme of *becoming* derives from a few different Black queer authors.

In writing to his nephew, James Baldwin tells younger James about his father, and how he was long destroyed before he ever died because "at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him".

Audre Lorde tells us that she had to define herself or else she would be "crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive."

Zora Neale Hurston said "if you are silent about your pain, they will kill you and say you enjoyed it"

All of these things beg the question, how do we "become"? How do we become our selves in the teeth of a world that is very heavily invested in our destruction? In a world that is anti black, anti poor, anti queer, and so much more, all which stem from a white colonial power structure. To be human in the eyes of the world as Spivak tells us is to be a white, christian, straight male of property, and those of us who are "unhuman" by means of being a combination of Black and womxn and queer face an extraordinary amount of violence. In this case in a world that demonstrates its contempt to for these bodies, what is the cost of becoming? Why must we become ourselves, and how do we engage in this process everyday? This photo series seeks to center the narratives and lives of those who have set out on the path of becoming. Through portraiture of everyday life and in-depth interviews, experiences of becoming will be esxcavated and explored, honored, and complicated.

Based on your work and the small time I've known you, I love to sit down with you and maybe talk more about your work- to me I see you as someone who is becoming. So from here, you can let me know if you're interested or if you'd want to meet up for a drink and talk a bit more. The end project is a published website that contains the profile of each interviewee, pictures and interviews included.

Thanks for taking the time to read and consider this and I hope you have a good day.