“Gender within Gender”: Zanele Muholi’s Images of Trans Being and Becoming

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“Before I knew about transgender, I called it gender within gender.”
Zanele Muholi, 2011.

In her keynote address to the “African Same-Sex Sexualities and Gender Diversity” conference in February 2011, Desiree Lewis pointed to Zanele Muholi’s photograph Ms D’vine I (2007) as exemplifying the utopian possibilities of queer liberation. Observing the complex and playful textures of Ms. D’vine’s self-possessed performance, her waist draped in beads woven in the colors of the South African flag, a brightly decorative yet slightly stiff necklace around her neck, the sole of one of her bright red shoes worn through, in a setting that first recalls then unsettles an image of rural Africa, its long grass marked by the discarded plastic bags that testify to the continent’s urban realities, Lewis notes that this vivid and “emphatically queer” image “blurs markers of tradition and modernity … and defies the usual emphasis on violence, on health, on statistics” that reduces African sexuality to an instrumental litany of deficits and disease. In the photograph, Ms. D’vine observes no requirements of authenticity and no strictures on self-expression and, therefore, to Lewis, appears “entirely free, dethron[ing] normality, heteronormativity and homonormativity.” In her camp persona, Ms D’vine consciously inhabits a marginal and original space rather than a pragmatic and respectable one, and thereby embodies the promise of freely imagined possibilities.

This possibility of a radical playfulness and the utopian promise of pleasure and self-invention in Muholi’s photography takes up a strong theme in recent African feminist and queer of color writing on sexuality (McFadden, 2007 and Munoz, 2009). It is particularly striking because of the pall cast over debates about sexuality in Africa by the charge that “homosexuality is unAfrican.” No matter how often historians, sociologists, and other scholars show convincing evidence to the contrary, the trope that same-sex sexualities in Africa are a corrupt practice imported from the West is stubbornly invoked by conservative politicians, religious and civic leaders who use it to strategic effect, often to deflect attention from issues of governance by invoking the claim to authentic African culture (Epprecht 2004, Dankwa 2009).

The debate about authenticity means that much is at stake around questions of representation, including the very language for talking about sexuality in Africa. The use of the word “queer” in this essay, for instance, signals a choice in a difficult
debate. Muholi points to the ambiguities of the choice. She notes that “queer language is so foreign here. The West is speaking its own language. Are we using our own language? What is queer in Zulu?” In a panel discussion of LGBTI activists and scholars titled “Who Are We?” held in August 2010 at the Institute for the Humanities in Africa at the University of Cape Town, I asked Zethu Matebeni, who researches black lesbian identities in South Africa, what the implications were of using the terms l, g, b, t and i in an African context. In response, Matebeni pointed to ongoing attempts to reclaim often-compromised local terms such as stabane and moffie, yet Matebeni reported that the members of the communities she belongs to and the people she speaks with during her research consistently use the term “lesbian” to name themselves. As Muholi notes, “You want to contest the tradition that refuses or erases your existence. ... What is a lesbian in our own languages, in our own settings, in our own environments?” Despite such questions, LGBT is part of a common vocabulary in South Africa and one Muholi uses herself but is reflective about its implications. “We are using adopted languages in order for people to understand who we are. It’s dangerous because it goes along with perception of us being unAfrican. It means the homophobes get away with it.”

Muholi makes a thoughtful contribution to this debate, but declines to become entrapped in a reductive focus on authenticity. Instead, her photographs have taken us in a compelling new direction by conveying a politically meaningful vision of LGBTI intimacy and pleasure in private spaces. This is in clear contrast to the theme of trauma that has been used to give an easy legibility to black and queer bodies in much writing on African sexuality (also in the US, see Lim 2010). Muholi feels that countless histories were left unrecorded by this. “How do you speak to people who don’t understand how a black lesbian face looks like not raped and bruised.” Reflecting on her own approach, Muholi says, “I have the choice to portray my community in a manner that will turn us once again into a commodity to be consumed by the outside world, or to create a body of meaning that is welcomed by us as a community.” For her, the route to this self-generated, more complex view has been to convey “the visual pleasures and erotica of my community so that our being comes into focus, into community and national consciousness” (Mapping our visual history).

Such images of domestic intimacy and rarely seen lesbian eroticism follow the call to African women by Zimbabwean scholar Patricia McFadden in her essay “Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice” (2007) to pursue the power of bodily pleasure and the self-affirmation and resilience that can issue from this. Lewis’s keynote speech, alluded to above, in which she draws on Jose Munoz’s germinal study, Cruising Utopia (2009), deepens this critique of the developmental model of African sexuality, which asserts that Africans need to be helped to achieve a Northern vision of sexual identities and rights, and reaches instead for a self-confident and ecstatic, though not insular, vision of African sexuality.

Embodying this new vision of African sexuality, Muholi mobilizes a vision of queer privacy through an intimate, collective autobiographical project through which she
makes a powerful claim on public visibility for queer lives. This move into a public privacy around the theme of sexuality can also be seen in other recent collective queer autobiographies in South Africa, including Hijab: Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives (2009), Myriam Dancing (2009), a collection of Christian lesbian writing, and Yes, I Am (2009), an anthology of autobiographical pieces by gay South African men. Of all the recent autobiographies published in South Africa, however, it is Native Nostalgia (2009), Jacob Dlamini’s riveting memoir of growing up in a black township under apartheid, that is the most apt model for Muholi’s work. In Native Nostalgia Dlamini dares to remember the complexity, fullness and even pleasures of life for black people even during the worst days of state oppression and violence. This complex view unsettles the official national narrative that portrays black life during this period as uniformly empty and characterized solely by political oppression. In contrast, the visionary world that Muholi inhabits sees the private as the arena of a dissident memory that questions the exclusions of national narratives and finds in art a utopian imagining of “the country we want to live in” (Mkhize, et al, 2010). In her photographs in this issue of Feminist Studies, we therefore see dream selves, dream bodies, dream communities and dream spaces as a consistent theme.

How do Muholi’s trans images do their liberatory work? To understand this, we first have to follow the trajectory of her earlier work as a photographer. Muholi was born in Umlazi, South Africa in 1972 and first trained as a photographer at Market Photo Workshop, in Johannesburg in 2001 – 2003. She sees herself as a visual activist whose role is to reverse the absence of African lgbti lives in public space and to “ensur[e] that our collective visual narratives and imageries as black queers — especially those of us who come from marginalized spaces — form part of South Africa’s national collective memory” (“Mapping our histories”). Her approach is both intensely personal and multi-layered – her definition of lgbti life includes economic, racial and gendered exclusions. Through her projects, she enters difficult spaces. Muholi first became known in 2004 for photographs of lesbian lives devastated by a plague of sexual violence that was worsened by an ineffective state and civil response. “When I produced my early photos I was angry. I had no language. I was just angry. I took photos at the height of hate crime. I thought, people are raped but you can’t erase this image.” The reverberating effect of sexual violence was to drive an already neglected community even further from public attention. “Basically we were just erased. There were no images anymore. Women did not like to be photographed because they would be exposed.” Her insistent recovery of suppressed stories was expressed in her first book, Only Half the Picture (2006). Even then, images testifying to violation were accompanied by photographs that conveyed a strong aesthetic exploration and accomplishment. Her photographs are works of commemoration and celebration, especially of ordinary people, “those without big names, who don’t count.”

Muholi’s work is deeply conscious of its antecedents. Looking at her photographs, one immediately thinks of other photographs, even when they do not exist. By this, I mean that Muholi is driven both by the absence and a certain compromised presence of lgbti lives in the visual archive, therefore one can discern a
simultaneous assertion of presence and a sense of mourning in the photographs. Muholi pays careful attention to time in her work. She wants to create narratives with depth, with a past and a future. In 2010, while in London for an exhibition at the Autograph gallery, Muholi happened to see an exhibition of 200 images from W. E. B. Dubois’s “Paris Albums,” the collection of images of Black American life he commissioned for the Paris Exposition of 1900. Stepping into the gallery and feeling a sense of recognition, Muholi recalled, “I just wanted to cry. What I’m doing is what has already happened. There is a line of black women in photographs taken back to the nineteenth century.” Muholi is very conscious of finding a history in which she can claim part and which would also allow her to envisage a future. That sustaining claim can emerge from the contingency of the art world. This sense of a visual past of which she is a part also gestures hopefully toward the future. “It makes me think of the last community. Let’s say 50 years from now, lesbianism (black lives) won’t be an issue anymore and people won’t feel the need to emphasize those identities. They will be looking back and then they will be referencing us, people who used to be called lesbians. This is art in a hundred years.” In her review of *Faces and Phases*, the historian and feminist activist Yvette Abrahams also perceived a connection to this future, saying the book “creates for me a sense of love we can take for granted. It brings me a foretaste of a future when we are truly free” (2010).

The past recalled by this utopian vision is evident in the history of the identity photograph. South Africa has a tradition dating from the colonial period under the Dutch, of using identity documents to stifle enslaved and indigenous people’s movement. This is the history of the image as capture, as arrest. Under apartheid, the most intrusive and damaging form of state control was the enforcement of the pass laws, through which Black people were forced to carry an identity document known as the hated “pass book” or *dompas*. If you were black, the lack of a pass could get you arrested and removed to one of several invented countries or “homelands”. The passbook, with its identity photograph, was therefore the state’s instrument of disenfranchisement, racial division and restriction of movement. These laws were abolished when South Africa became a democratic state, but even today, our national identity books and their ubiquitous ID photos govern our lives. In order to open a bank account, get a driver’s license, or buy a cell phone, the little green identity book, once tellingly called the Book of Life, is a non-negotiable requirement. The ID book also indicates your gender, and thus is one of the points of contact for transgender people with the state.

In her photographs for the *Faces and Phases* project, Muholi alludes to these past uses of the photographic image to capture and constrain. These photographs gesture toward the images taken for identity books and their painful history, famously conveyed in Ernest Cole’s photographs of pass book arrests in *House of Bondage*. [That … how townships become that confinement space …] But there is another dimension to this allusion. ID photos draw on the idea of the image as fact, as proof of existence, and this declaration of existence is also what Muholi’s images do. As she notes, “the power of naming means to put something into existence.”
To achieve her complex project to redefine not only the content of images about LGBTI lives in Africa but the very form of such images, Muholi’s works convey complexity and fluidity. “Being,” the title of one of the titles of series is a gerund, a noun of perpetual becoming. However, Muholi’s photographs also play with the allure of capture, of assertion, of identity. This, after all, is also the work of the ID photo. Muholi shoots series of photographs, showing the relationship between the images, and between the photographer and the people she is photographing. She plays with visuality itself, for instance, the idea that taking a photograph means to ‘capture’ a moment. And beyond the watchful gaze of the state, Muholi draws on other traditions for this body of work – for instance, the portrait, with its directness and intimacy, as well as the ghost image that haunt the portrait - the mug shot, the carceral photograph.

The photographs we are looking are therefore dense with visual histories. They are identity documents not created by the state, and we feel the push and pull of the images. The identities within them soften around several points. Some of the photographs are limpid to the point of transparency. We become absorbed within them, rather than acting upon them. How do we orient our bodies to these photographs? For one thing, we learn a certain comportment and discretion in looking at them. Some show us the careful construction of the codes of the body.

Muholi acknowledges the complexity of the relationship between photographer and subject, between photograph and viewer. She was trained in one of the premier photographic schools in South Africa, the Market Photography Workshop, and she is represented by the prestigious Michael Stevenson gallery. Yet, even with the imprimatur of the art world and her activist work, she is very careful about the license that photography gives to artists. For instance, to photograph someone at the height of the sexual violence against black lesbians carried the real risk of appropriation. To avoid this, Muholi says she took photographs “in a reportage style. [Through this method,] I relate to someone’s story. I record stories.” It was very important to her to convey the distinctiveness of voices that were not her own. “If I had captured it, it would have been like appropriating because where are their voices. It would have been Zanele’s story rather than people’s stories.”

Yet Muholi was undoubtedly present in the exchanges and her method reaches toward autobiography. The relationship she worked out then was a subtle expression of mutuality in the face of violence and the possibility of further violation through being made visible. In this context, she felt that a photographic relation of mutual presence and co-production between photographer and subject (a term she does not use) could be a powerfully collective and carefully navigated space. “If the space is negotiated between photographer and the person photographed, if people are given a space to write themselves, they have ownership over their own voices.” Are her works autobiographical? “Yes and no,” she clarifies, “in most of my projects I put myself. It’s an autobiographical project because it involves a lot of us.”
In the year that we speak about the hundred photographs she has published in this project Muholi never once mistakes one person for another, never once confuses a photograph with another. She knows everyone individually; she knows their narratives, and also the history and shifts that have brought them to the present. In these accounts and in her relationship to her work, Muholi is as invested, as present, as exposed as the people in the photograph. Empathy and mutual sustenance, I find, are part of the motivation for her work on transgender issues. “For each and every face, it’s more about me as much as it is about the people. For each and every one I’ve captured, I see myself in them. It doesn’t matter if that person is trans, the face that is a living, breathing being says something about me. It confirms my family, which I’ve never had. These are immediate families or connections I have made over time. You are a queer family, you’re sharing the same struggle.”

Through her *Faces and Phases* (2006-2010) project, Muholi has produced images and concepts about transgender lives of immense subtlety and complexity, yet which also touch on a nerve both within the LGBTI community and broader South African society. Muholi acknowledges that the topic of transgender lives in Africa is a tense one. “It’s complicated, it’s complicated, it’s complicated.” Yet, as with her earlier work, Muholi is motivated by an unjust and weighted absence. “People whom I know have transitioned in front of me, and I cannot say I’m not interested in them, we are one family. If we say gender is fluid, what does that fluidity mean to me as a person who is taking photographs of people who are LGBTI. Will I be making a claim just like everyone and say we are serving LGBTI people. I’m saying here are the trans people in front of me. So what do I do now with all these transitions and all these images that are not recorded?”

While her concern with invisibility of trans lives sound similar to her earlier focus on black lesbian and gay lives, the political context of transgender issues within the broader LGBTI movement is edgy/contested. Being lesbian, Muholi acknowledges that some in the lesbian community has complicated and often strained relations with transgender identity and politics. She ascribes this partly to fear of the unknown. “For so long we knew about lesbianism and who we are. Trans is fresh and delicate.” More significantly, she explains that “we live in a heterosexually dominated space, as though there is nothing other than being lesbian and gay, and then here comes the transgender people claiming their rights. In a way, the homosexual culture vanishes, because you thought that was the only thing that was there after heterosexuality or heterosexualism. Because we think this notion of men, women, equals to straight, and anything else leads to homophobia.” Furthermore, there is the question of what being male means. “What do we think of men and what men are supposed to be to us, and why do some people want to be men when men rape lesbians. Hearing what other feminists and lesbians say, forced me to do the work [on transgender issues].” Presenting perhaps the most intractable problem, there are understandable concerns among queer feminists about the continuing problem of patriarchy, which does not go away when people change genders. Muholi herself has experienced dominating behavior from trans men. “I don’t like to be feminized by a trans man. Sometimes they push it harder.”
Sometimes they look at lesbians as ‘lezzi,’ as something less because you’ve graduated/ cross gendered.” So, part of the complication that trans identities pose to some feminists and the lgbti community is the ongoing challenge of patriarchy.

In this context, Muholi has thought very carefully about what it means to photograph trans people. Her primary feeling is empathy about being marginalized. “I know what it means to be othered. I know what it’s like when people think that I am diseased. I was invited to an African feminist forum in 2006, and some feminists didn’t feel comfortable to be in the same space as lesbians. So I can imagine how people feel with the trans issue and the lesbian issue.” In both Trans(figures) and Faces and Phases, Muholi found herself translating empathy into a specifically visual question: how to photograph people who signal themselves in certain ways and are read in different ways. “How do you communicate that in a photograph?” she asked.

**Reading the photographs:**

The images reproduced here give a sense of abundance. This is not a mechanically reproduced set of portraits, but a choreography of presence. In the images, Muholi not only wanted to make visible what is usually unrecorded, but asked difficult questions about the nature of visibility. To create the impression of an instrumental transformation would be unfitting, “like using a skin product, before and after.” Instead, she wanted to convey that there is not simply one way of being transgendered. The photographs are therefore not static, but neither do they evade their duality – eliciting a recognition of identity even as they testify to its flux. This is an exercise of the photograph as becoming, drawing its own making into its surface.

The word “phase” in the title of the series is an illuminating one. It recalls the label “fashionable,” which is one of the ways in which homophobes attack the authenticity of lgbti identities. It’s “fashionable,” meaning superficially popular, or transient, or just a phase. In these photographs, however, a phase is part of an organic history through which one passes or where one lingers. These are Muholi’s trans images of being and becoming, both at ease and in process.

In the photographs, we learn to read the posture and orientation of the body and reflect on who is presenting themselves to us. The clean lines and strong contrasts of Victor Mukasa’s suit, Skipper’s upright posture, and Betesta’s slightly angled shoulder create a deliberately poised impression of the trans men in Muholi’s portraits. She reveals the reason. “I see them like Obama, like those big guys, because they are politicians, pushing the queer struggle, the transgender struggle.”

Muholi’s deep affection for trans women is evident in her photographs. “If there is one human body that really makes me comfortable, it’s trans women. How careful they are. They won’t push any finger in my eye.” In return for the care she discerns in them, Muholi responds with an infinitely hospitable camera. The pattern of salt and sand on Tingy’s skin elicits a gaze that resembles touch. Muholi says wonderingly, “She brought her own bathing costume. This is a not a drag queen at
the beach. This person is saying, I am a woman.” In the evocative texture of black plastic against Revelation’s skin, we may read a fashionable recycling of discarded material, but actually she is signaling what it means to own nothing, to be banished by one’s family, to have their rejection made concrete by burning all one’s clothes.

As always, Muholi’s affect also serves a political purpose. To assert the beauty and belonging of trans women’s bodies subverts the expected view of women’s bodies in a public space. For trans people in Africa, Cape Town is a dream city, the place where most realignment surgeries and therapies take place, where there is a thriving queer scene (though one that is distinctly class- and race-divided), and where a respected non-governmental organization called Gender Dynamix is entirely devoted to transgender issues. On the other hand, Muholi points out, “living and visiting are two different things.” After reassignment, trans people have to find jobs, accommodation and hospitable communities, and Cape Town suffers from the common South African condition of xenophobia toward Africans from north of its border. Nonetheless, Cape Town remains a place in which to dream of freedom and community. And in that dream, Muholi is interested in pushing the boundaries of where trans people belong. They may be welcome in safe spaces, but “you don’t expect the trans woman at the beach, in nature, in the public space. But we are part and parcel of this nature. We come out of those spaces. If you want people to understand that you exist, be in that space. The beach is a space. Be in that space.”

Muholi feels that the body is a platform for resistance, but beyond that lies the imagination, an infinitely capacious space. She manifests her imaginative hold on the city’s space through aesthetically complex images. The black and white photograph of a lush Ms. Christina in a striped dress among discarded tyres lays claim to an apocalyptic but also a textured and richly visual space. Tingy showed Muholi the scars on her back where she had been stabbed. “But I wasn’t interested in showing that. I was shooting a beautiful woman on the beach. I would be sensationalizing if I shot if what you and I know.” Discretion – the fine judgement of what you show and what you do not – marks Muholi’s trans photography.

While shooting her *Faces and Phases* images, Muholi was obsessively careful about not pathologizing the people she was photographing. Once again, discretion was central. In some cases, this had to do with rules of comportment and composition that would not be immediately evident to an outsider. “When you shoot trans men or when you shoot butch lesbians you have to be careful of the breast. So I have to be careful that a person slightly gives me her shoulder to divert from the actual image that will greet the viewer when they see it. You don’t want to show the private parts of a trans woman. You don’t want to show the big bust of a trans man, if he is not comfortable with it. You don’t want to project the big bust of a butch lesbian, if she is not comfortable. It confirms and takes you back to where you’ve been and you don’t want to be.”

For Muholi, just as the body has rules of comportment and discretion, the face holds a central meaning. The medium close-up portrait is the primary mode that unifies
the *Faces and Phases* project. Muholi believes deeply in the meaning that resides in the human visage. “The face speaks to me. The face presents what I am that I am not able to confirm or confront. The face has a voice. The face means a presence and an existence. When you are alone, in a space of solitude, your face says something even if you don’t see it, and a portrait says something even if you don’t say it.” This concept of a palpable presence in the gestures and expression of the face, even when it appears impassive, or unknown to itself, means that the face is uniquely revealing. Moreover, the act of looking at a face is potentially a genuine form of exchange, both an encounter and a gift. In these images, Muholi says, “I want you to be confronted by the face of a person as your face is looking at that face. ... I want you to see the person.”

One of the most radical aspects of trans life for Muholi comes from her reading of trans men’s bodies. There is an enormous amount to learn from trans men, Muholi feels. As a lesbian and as a feminist, Muholi recounts, “I kept on asking trans people, do you really have to be masculine to confirm your manhood? Do you really have to feminize yourself to say you are a trans woman? Is there a way to be, just be, just in-between without going to the extreme?” She found an answer through a trans man named Gerald. “He’s a black guy. He’s not binding his breasts, which I thought was the most advanced and comfortable way of presenting oneself in a public space. That really touched me.” Gerald’s comfort with the multiplicity of what his body signaled, for Muholi, conveys a moving and supple mode of being. But it is also a sensitive one. “Other people beg to differ. They say if you’re a trans man, it comes with binding, with packing, you have to stand and pee.” And yet, difficult as it is, *in-between* is where Muholi finds a truly liberated path. “In-between is not a comfortable position. You don’t belong, you can easily be rejected by both sides. You must be willing to lose a lot. You are negotiating a space internally. There is also a space with friends. How to deal with this new being. To say you are an in-between gendered person. Those you have left behind, they feel betrayed by you. Those who are looking for you on the other side, they are waiting. It destabilizes the whole notion of gender. I’m comfortable with that. If I were to transition, I don’t want to be an extreme of everything, I want to live and love and negotiate my space.”

**In-between**

I want to end this essay by occupying this delicate and original place, the in-between, and reflect on Muholi’s phrase ‘gender within gender’ with which this essay began. The phrase invites a perpetual state of reflection, both inside the self and more collective spaces, and it acknowledges and welcomes multiplicity. Muholi explains that this was her phrase “before [she] knew” about transgender, demonstrating that people create concepts for what they know in the absence of authorized terms. ‘Gender within gender’ signals a reflectiveness and scholarship that might otherwise remain in private and marginal spaces. After all, Muholi is an intellectual as well as an artist and activist, and she has always included the generation of “histories, knowledges and subjectivities” within her aims (“Mapping
In-betweenness may also be an apt description of the formal character of Muholi’s photographs. In their attention to play, invention and pleasure, they draw the viewer toward a yet-unimagined space. In them, the body and the imagination become platforms for invention. This is part of the appeal of trans images for Muholi. “Trans people invent new things in order to survive.” During one of our long conversations, she recalled a beauty pageant in a small town she recently visited, far from the glitter of Johannesburg or the dream city of Cape Town. “In Mafeking where I was taking images for a new Faces and Phases, instead of Ms. Butch Lesbian they had Mr. Lesbian. Do you understand that naming? They are butch but they are beyond that. You are not a lesbian, not a stone butch, not a soft butch – but Ms. Femme Lesbian, Ms. Butch, a lesbian over the top, Mr Gay even though their genitalia is still of a woman.” As Muholi points out, in these forms of self-expression and play that take place far from the centers of authority over queer language and identity, confident new concepts of the self are emerging. These names mark the body as a utopian space. And indeed, Muholi sees the trans body as “a body of rights, from head to toe, how you breathe, your head, your heart, your toes, your legs, how you walk, you talk, the toilet you use, the language you use. It’s psychological, it’s art, it’s the language. It starts with the body, the mind, the face, the presentation. The presentation is everything.”

On this note of invention, play and performance, I turn to Ms. D’vine V.

A sheer black sheet forms a curtain that discreetly but incompletely divides the yard with its lines of drying clothes from the stage on which Ms. D’Vine faces the camera. She is kneeling on sandy ground, her legs clothed in stockings more sheer than the sheet, lending a faint sheen to her skin. Her hands are delicately folded cross over the apex of her legs, curtaining what Muholi says cannot be revealed. Continuing the theme of what is hidden and what is revealed, Ms. D’vine’s is clad in a strapless black bra and panties. Most ambiguous of all is her face, her expression half-startled, half-rebuffing, half-questioning, her mood compelling but indefinable before the eye of the camera. Something like in-betweenness, before and afterness, a penumbra of possibilities surrounds the instant of this photograph. Looking at her face, I recall that the missing letter in Ms. D’Vine’s name is “I.”

Notes
Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Muholi are from a series of interviews with the author, conducted between 2010 and 2011.

Biography